The POWER of PROTOCOLS

An Educator's Guide to Better Practice

THIRD EDITION

Joseph P. McDonald
Nancy Mohr
Alan Dichter
Elizabeth C. McDonald

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Preface to the Third Edition

It has been a decade since our coauthor, the late Nancy Mohr, took the photo on the cover. Residents and visitors to New York may recognize the two buildings depicted in this photo. Both are part of the landscape of the Twin Towers attacked on September 11, 2001. The buildings are now just across the street from the Memorial. The one in the background of the photo has the boxy windows that seemed to Nancy an apt image of the kind of work life our book aimed to disrupt—teachers, for example, working largely within cells, separated in time and space from all the colleagues on whom their own success ultimately depends. The cells in this case are viewed from inside the curvilinear building next door. Called the Winter Garden, it is built of glass supported by gracefully arcing steel. One might have considered the Winter Garden for all its glass to be the most vulnerable structure at the foot of its once-giant neighbors. But its steel withstood the attack, and the building became the first structure following 9/11 to be restored and to reopen. Nancy's photo celebrates this reopening. As a book cover, the photo also captures metaphorically the underlying power of protocol: strength in the service of transparency, discovery, and expression. In the protocols we describe in this book, the strength derives (as in all other kinds of protocols) from the constraints they impose. We would say that they constrain participation in order to heighten its effect. Here Nancy's image is also telling: The curvilinear trumps the cellular. The curving steel and all that glass seem not just counterpoint to the stony boxes next door, but provocation.

So it is with protocols too. Their artifice sets them apart from ordinary activity and implicitly raises questions: What if ordinary activity were more like this? What if people stopped to listen to other people's takes on the important educational problems at hand? What if the problems were deliberately unpeeled layer by layer? What if we took time to read student work closely? What if everyone's voice were heard at the meeting, everyone's perspective valued? What if lots of people in every educational organization were as skillful in facilitating genuine conversation as so many now are at avoiding it, suppressing it, or smothering it with self-centered talk?

Ah, you may think, another book about process, when what educators really need is to focus on product. But we think that good product is the

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outcome of thoughtful process. Indeed, education is first of all process, though it always deals in content and aims to produce worthy outcomes. There is no way, for example, to solve a complex educational problem without listening to the perspectives on the problem of all those affected by it. There is no way to gain the full value of outside expertise without subjecting it to dialogical encounters with internal expertise. And there is no way to engage in productive conflict without expressing it in ways that clarify its dimensions. The protocols we present here help with these and many other processes crucial to educational success in the 21st century: learning from data, analyzing needs, honing theories of action, giving and receiving effective criticism, and making the most of others' ideas.

This third edition of our book has eleven new protocols, a whole new chapter on working for change, and a new one as well on working toward equity. Both previous editions referred to equity as a principle of good facilitation, as it certainly is. But it can be a goal of protocols too. Thus our colleagues around the world who have designed protocols have often done so in the interest of illuminating and confronting inequities in educational institutions, practices, and outcomes. In the new equity chapter, we draw on this work. Also in this third edition, we address more fully than before the role of protocols in teaching. It turns out that educators who use protocols use them today as much in their teaching as they do in their meetings. This is the result of a predictable migration of practice: Educators introduced to protocols at professional meetings quickly surmise their suitability for lesson planning. This migration has so escalated recently that we think it reasonable today to speak of a "protocol pedagogy." This provides an often elusive (from the perspective of more traditional pedagogies) mix of participation, individualization, and structure. The mix is hugely valuable at a time when teachers at all levels are more attuned than before to the diversity of their students' learning backgrounds and skills. It's especially valuable in online teaching, since protocols help ameliorate the sense of isolation that online learners sometimes feel. If you would like to know more about protocol pedagogy and protocols online, check out another book that three of us coauthored (with Janet Mannheimer Zydney) called *Going Online with Protocols: New Tools for Teaching and Learning* (2012). It's a great companion for this book.

Indeed, there are other great companions which we cite throughout the book. In the decade since this book was first published, protocol development and use have become widespread, and protocols themselves very diverse. The best we can do here is to capture some diverse types in sufficient detail, then tell our readers where to find others and, of course, invite them to create still more. Protocol work is, as they say in the online world, an open-source adventure.

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The book is organized by categories of use: protocols to work *on practice*, to work *for change*, to work *with texts*, and to work *toward equity*. But we encourage lots of cross-use, lots of improvisation, and lots of adaptation. Other authors with such intentions might say that their book is "not a cookbook." But we think of cookbooks differently, and the difference runs to the heart of what we mean by protocol. Nancy Mohr was a great cook—in fact, this book was conceived while its other authors (and our editor) sat in Alan and Nancy's kitchen as she chopped vegetables. She was also a connoisseur and collector of cookbooks, and especially liked the ones that not only empower the cook with good designs and reliable procedures, but also provide an explicit or implicit invitation to play. She liked, for example, James Haller's (1978) *The Blue Strawberry Cookbook: Cooking (Brilliantly) Without Recipes*. It proclaims—against all tradition—that pesto can be just as well made with any green, nut, and cheese. She also liked Judith Barrett and Norma Wasserman's (1987) *Risotto,* which firmly asserts the tradition of risotto's four distinct "movements"—*soffrito, riso, brodo,* and *condimenti*—but encourages as much variation within them as Beethoven or Mozart managed to obtain within other constraints. Nancy also liked Patricia Wells's (2001) *Paris Cookbook,* with the author's "What I learned" notes on each recipe—as if inviting dialogue between authors and cooks—though she also appreciated the occasional firm guidance in such dialogue, like Wells's advice on page 181: "This is one of those simplest dishes that must be followed to the letter." We have a couple of notes like that in our book too—generally ones that Nancy insisted upon.

Because we encourage improvisation, but also because we know that many facilitators (like cooks) find it helpful to have at hand a quick, at-a-glance guide to the steps of the protocols they facilitate, we have prepared abbreviated versions of all the protocols presented in this book. These are available at the Teachers College Press website (www.teacherscollegepress.com). Readers can download them to their own computers, print them out as needed for their own use (and the use of other protocol participants as they like), and later customize them in any way for future use.

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CHAPTER 1

Basic Practices

We begin this chapter with an overview of four practices that underlie all the protocols that we describe in the following chapters. Then we discuss what research has to say about protocols.

LEARNING THROUGH CONSTRAINTS

Protocols, as we use the term, were first developed by school reformers in the 1990s, based on some earlier prototypes. They share the name and certain features of the protocols long associated with experimental science, computer science, social science, medicine, and diplomacy. For example, they have built-in constraints. The idea is that under the right circumstances constraints are liberating. To demonstrate this benefit, we examine three seminal protocols here. They are seminal because considerable numbers of participants who have experienced them have pronounced the experience worthwhile—the constraints notwithstanding. Thus the protocols have been adapted countless times in many settings and for diverse purposes. They are popular too because each implicitly teaches one of three rare but important skills: the first, how to give and receive safe and honest feedback; the second, how to analyze complex problems carefully and without rushing to judgment; and the third, how to ground interpretations of complex texts—for example, student work or school data—in close "readings" of the texts.

The first of these protocols is the Tuning Protocol. A full description of it leads off Chapter 3. It was developed by Joe McDonald with colleagues at the Coalition of Essential Schools, and it is among the most constraining of protocols. So the protocol allots a constrained number of minutes to one participant's uninterrupted presentation—say, of a proposal to revamp a curriculum. This is followed by a constrained number of minutes for the other participants to *tune* the proposal. They do this by providing uninterrupted feedback in the form of separate *warm* and *cool* comments. The warm ones focus on strengths, and the cool ones on weaknesses. Ensuring what is perhaps the protocol's most significant constraint, the facilitator of a Tuning Protocol insists that the warm and cool feedback stay balanced but separate.

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Indeed, he or she may even cut off a reviewer in midsentence if the reviewer starts out warm and then turns cool within the same comment. "Give each your full attention," the facilitator may explain. "Otherwise, the presenter may think the warm is merely sugarcoating for the cool." The protocol ends with a chance for the presenter to reflect on the feedback and to respond to it (again in uninterrupted fashion). Typically, presenters reserve some parts of the feedback for further thought and later response (maybe by email or simply another draft), and the facilitator reminds everyone that the tuning is part of a longer process, not the concluding step (McDonald, Zydney, Dichter, & McDonald, 2012).

The second seminal protocol, called The Consultancy, features an entirely different set of equally rigorous constraints. It too is more fully described in Chapter 3. The Consultancy forces open-minded exploration to start, then speculation. It was developed by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans, and Faith Dunne in their work at the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (see www.schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/consultancy.pdf). On one level, its goal is to help participants manage dilemmas in their practice more effectively, but it aims to expand their question-posing skills too—and thus their perceptual capacity. In the process, it also constrains the kinds of questions they can ask. Thus a participant serving as a "presenter" asks a focusing question about a practice-based dilemma that they present to other participants serving as "consultants." Good focusing questions capture succinctly what the presenter hopes to learn from the consultants, and the tensions inherent in the dilemma. They also implicitly signal that the presenter's needs—not the consultants'—should take precedence. For their part, the consultants learn to ask clarifying questions meant to ferret out the elements of what may be for them a novel situation, but without imposing premature interpretive frames or pressing (yet) for deeper analysis. A good clarifying question might inquire about details not covered in the presentation but possibly important nonetheless. By definition, these are easy questions for the presenter to answer because they are factual from his or her perspective. If he or she hesitates to answer, then the facilitator quickly intervenes and rules out the question as not really a clarifying question and likely a probing one instead. Probing questions extend the discipline of the protocol beyond fact gathering into genuine client-centered consulting. They are designed to push the presenter's thinking without imposing the consultant's own interpretation or "solution." Once all clarifying questions are answered (or ruled out), the consultants may move on to probing ones—though only after a gentle warning from the facilitator to avoid any temptation they may feel to solve the presenter's problem or give advice by means of their questions. The facilitator might say that the role of probing questions is to press the presenter to think further and deeper without implying what he or she may find there (Allen & Blythe, 2004; McDonald et al., 2012).

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The third seminal protocol is the Collaborative Assessment Conference, developed by Steve Seidel and his colleagues at Harvard Project Zero. It is described more fully in Chapter 5. In this protocol participants describe student work in exclusively low-inference ways at first—a constraint that most newcomers to the protocol experience as a severe one. Thus in response to a typical first question for a Collaborative Assessment Conference, "What do you *see* in this child's drawing?" participants must not say things like "good hand coordination" or even "the stick figure of a child." The facilitator steers them instead to responses like "the color red" and "blue and green lines intersecting just off center on the paper." The point of starting and staying for some time with low-inference seeing is to prepare the group to see the unexpected. Next, the participants respond to the prompt, "What questions does this work raise for you?" Primed by the *seeing*, their *questioning* often goes deep into the work, the student's experience, and the learning context. Finally, they are asked to *speculate* about what a particular student is working on. Here they may discover that the student is not just working on the teacher's assignment, but on an implicit agenda of his or her own construction. All the while, the participant who has brought the work stays quiet—taking in what the others say. At the end, however, the facilitator asks, "Having heard all this, what are your thoughts?" Then the protocol turns into open conversation (McDonald et al., 2012; Seidel, 1998).

Although many protocols are less constraining than these three seminal ones, all feel nonetheless artificial to most novice protocol users—a function of the constraints they impose. "Why can't we just talk?" these novices may say. But their facilitators typically urge them instead to tolerate awhile the discomfort of the constraints. "It's like a game," they may say, echoing Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011), who write that the boundaries of a game are not just constraints but also potential catalysts for innovation. This is the allure of both games and protocols, and also part of their payoff. Besides, the facilitators might add, "just talking" can lead to talk full of obfuscation and indirection. By contrast, protocols tend to move things along—simply because they often structure in movement. For example, the protocols described above typically conclude with the presenter's reflections on possible next steps toward revising a proposal, resolving a dilemma, or working with a particular student.

Still, in some educational organizations protocols may be received as unwarranted interference in ordinary business. The more dysfunctional this business, the stronger the negative reaction may be. For example, schools or colleges mired in norms of private practice and used to ignoring the actual impact of the practice on students' learning, may not take easily to learning with protocols. Encouraged to try them anyway, however, and pressed to see them all the way through, even reluctant participants may find them refreshing. And urged to reflect on the nature of this refreshment, the participants

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may then find that the protocols help them imagine alternatives to ordinary habits of working together, learning, and leading.

On the other hand, protocols are not for all occasions, nor should their constraints be allowed to become straitjackets. We have seen some groups so attentive to "doing the protocol" that they lose sight of the purpose. We think that the forms and tones of all meetings for any purpose should always suit the purpose.

EDUCATING OURSELVES

The second basic practice that informs this book is self-education or what we refer to here in the first-person plural (for reasons we discuss below) as "educating ourselves." This is the only means by which professionals generally and educators in particular can direct their education toward the management of their real problems. It is also the only way we educators can direct our education toward meeting the real needs of our students. The main reason is that these problems and needs are vastly more complex than they typically appear to others. Inside perspectives are therefore crucial to understanding them (Lampert, 2001). Indeed, professional development activities for educators that are designed and conducted without benefit of inside perspectives are usually not worth the time and money they cost. Worse, they often involve a kind of de-skilling inasmuch as they discount or dismiss the subtleties of dealing with real complexity. On the other hand, saying that we need to educate ourselves does not mean that we should cut ourselves off from outside sources of learning. On the contrary, we desperately need what outside expertise can offer. It is just that we cannot effectively use it except in combination with our own intimate knowledge of practice.

Our use of the first-person plural in naming and discussing this basic practice acknowledges the fact that the work is necessarily collective. No educator works alone, although we sometimes seem to. Yes, we make lots of private moves, and our work demands an individual capacity for spontaneity, improvisation, and good judgment. But all our efforts, for better or worse, are mediated by the efforts of our colleagues. What they do matters as much to the learning of our students and the running of our programs as what we do. Thus our colleagues' values, standards, and methods are our business—as ours are their business—and the problems of practice are inescapably mutual ones. For this reason, we must give up a pervasive tendency in some educational settings to try to manage these problems alone. Indeed, we may even fail to see what our actual problems of practice are unless we dare to inquire about them together. This is because so much of our knowledge of practice is tacit and becomes subject to critique only when we reflect on it in the company of others (Schön, 1983).

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