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Introduction

The authors of this book—individually, together, and with other colleagues—have for years worked with groups of teachers in using discussion protocols to support teachers’ professional learning. Our work has taken place in schools, professional development workshops and institutes, conferences, and university classrooms. Whenever we do this work, one or more of the teachers in the group will say, “I use something exactly like this with my students . . .” or “I am going try this protocol with my kids . . .”

We have written extensively about the use of protocols to support *teachers’* professional learning, in books including *The Power of Protocols*, *Looking Together at Student Work*, and *The Facilitator’s Book of Questions* (see the Resources section at the end of the book). Here, we focus on how teachers use some of the same protocols described in those books to support their *students’* learning. To do so, we draw on our own experiences working with schools and teachers and, more importantly, on the experiences of many teachers who have shared with us their stories of using protocols with their students.

In this introductory chapter, we consider these questions:

- What is a protocol?
- Why use protocols with students?
- How is this book organized?
- How might you use this book?

WHAT IS A PROTOCOL?

Protocols are pervasive in daily life. Some are unspoken, such as the protocol for giving up your seat on a bus or subway to an older person or a person using a cane. Others are more explicit and formalized, such as the set of questions a doctor asks a patient who shows up with a cough or a stomachache. Protocols guide diplomats from different countries

and cultures in greeting and conversing with each other, and protocols determine how different computer systems work together productively.

For the purposes of this book, a protocol is simply a way to structure a discussion so that it supports the learning of all participants. Usually the discussions take place orally, but some may be conducted through writing, for example, in a Chalk Talk protocol (Chapter 7) or a Gallery Walk protocol (Chapter 12). The protocols described in this book share four core features:

- A clear purpose that is made explicit for all participants
- An established sequence of steps
- A focus on supporting a group's collaborative thinking and learning as well as the thinking and learning of the individuals within the group
- The cultivation of habits of thinking and learning that are useful in contexts beyond the protocol itself

Clear Purpose

Many people have had the experience of taking part in a lively and interesting discussion only to find later that they were hard pressed to say what its purpose or outcome had been. Protocols, by definition, make the purpose for a discussion transparent to the entire group—without sacrificing the liveliness and interest. That purpose is recognized by the entire group from the very beginning of the discussion through to its completion, which, in protocols, generally includes a reflection on how the discussion achieved its purpose—and how it might do so more effectively.

Some of the common purposes for protocols include:

- Entering and engaging with texts of different types (for example, Save the Last Word for Me, Chapter 10)
- Sharing perspectives on a question, issue, or topic (for example, the Microlab, Chapter 6)
- Giving and getting feedback on a work-in-progress (for example, the Ladder of Feedback, Chapter 13)
- Exploring one's own learning style and expectations for a group's work (for example, Compass Points, Chapter 4)

In Chapter 1, we describe the purposes for each of the protocols in the book and offer suggestions for selecting a protocol that meets the goals you have for your students.

Steps and Sequence

To achieve its specific purposes, each protocol is composed of a set of steps that build upon one another to promote a disciplined thinking process for individual participants and for the entire group. For example, the main purpose of the Tuning Protocol (Chapter 14) is to help a group provide informed feedback on a work-in-progress. It begins with one student (or a team of students) presenting a piece of work (an essay, an outline, a project, a model, etc.) and providing some context for it (including what the presenter[s] wanted to accomplish, what she [or they] would like feedback on, etc.). This step is followed by clarifying questions from the group, which is followed by a close examination of the student work sample(s), which in turn is followed by “warm” (affirming) and “cool” (more challenging) feedback for the presenter. Each step involves a specific kind of thinking and provides a foundation for the steps that follow. For example, the presentation and the clarifying questions provide students in the group with the important context they need to develop relevant and useful feedback.

Group and Individual Learning

Protocols foster the learning of the group, as well as that of the individuals in it. They do so through establishing a shared sense of purpose and a commitment to including all participants’ perspectives. Even in a protocol such as the Tuning Protocol described previously, whose purpose is to provide feedback to (typically) just one student on her work, the goal is always to challenge and support the entire group’s thinking and learning.

Other protocols, such as Compass Points (Chapter 4) and Three Levels of Text (Chapter 11), ask everyone in the group to respond to the same prompts or to a common text. In doing so, the group builds a deeper *collective* understanding of the issue or the text being discussed. Because protocols emphasize group learning, the omnipresent “debrief” step asks individuals to reflect not only on their own individual experience of the protocol but also on the group’s shared experience.

Habits of Mind

Protocols give students the chance to practice the habits of mind that generate powerful thinking and learning. Some of the habits of mind, as described by Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick (Costa, 2008), that protocols emphasize are listening with understanding and empathy,

questioning and problem posing, thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, clarifying one's thinking and presentation, remaining open to continuous learning, and managing impulsivity. These are the competencies and skills that teachers hope their students develop and carry with them into college, the workplace, and the larger society in which they participate.

Exercising these habits contributes to a purposeful, engaging, and substantive discussion for all participants. Just as importantly, students can transfer the habits practiced in one protocol to other contexts—not only other protocols but also class discussions and group work of many kinds, as well as individual reading, writing, problem solving, and research.

WHY USE PROTOCOLS?

Using protocols with students is supported by an expanding research literature that demonstrates how students learn through various forms of dialogue, discussion, and debate (for example, Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015; Wells & Arauz, 2006; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Equally importantly, the use of protocols is validated through teachers' day-to-day observations of the students within their classrooms. In this section, we highlight key reasons for using protocols and also share some observations from teachers.

Building an Instructional Repertoire

Teachers can draw upon protocols' flexibility to help students achieve important learning objectives and standards. Protocols allow teachers to address specific learning objectives and curriculum content by providing students with opportunities to engage actively with that content. For example, the Microlab (Chapter 6) can be used to help students dig more deeply into the core concepts of a science class. Save the Last Word for Me (Chapter 10) can give students the chance to articulate their own interpretations of a primary source and to build on their peers' interpretations. (In Chapter 1, we offer suggestions for matching learning objectives to the protocols included in the book.)

Developing 21st-Century Skills

Sometimes framed as “the four C’s”—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity—these skills are increasingly

recognized as essential for success in school, college, the workplace, and society. Such skills are the stock-in-trade of protocols, which push students to articulate their thinking, listen carefully to the ideas of others, and work collaboratively to address key questions and challenges. They foster students' understanding of key aspects of collaboration, such as presenting their work to their peers, asking thoughtful questions of others, providing feedback to one another, etc. Protocols also give students the opportunity to cultivate their own facilitation skills—an essential element of leadership. As Emily Rossi, an English teacher at East Hartford High School in Connecticut, observes, "Once students are familiar with the protocol, they feel confident about how to run the discussion, which frees them up to be bold in what they choose to contribute."

Creating Authentic Opportunities to Assess Student Learning

Because protocols require students to articulate their thinking and understanding of important content, they are rich in opportunities for both students and teachers to observe and document students' learning. Protocols become particularly powerful as assessment tools when used in conjunction with other techniques such as rubrics and students' written or oral self-reflection.

Supporting Focused, Purposeful, and Inclusive Discussion

Protocols provide teachers and students with clear purposes for their collaborative work and a structure to keep the group's discussion focused in relation to those purposes. This is especially important in contexts in which the learning is focused not just on acquiring information but also on grappling with complex concepts that require thoughtful discussion. Open-ended conversation, especially with students who have little experience with it, can feel unfocused or "all over the map." Sometimes a few vocal students dominate while others sit quietly through the whole thing. Protocols "get everyone's voice in the room," says Cynthia Elkins, an arts instructional specialist at Eagle Rock School in Estes Park, Colorado.

Nurturing a Positive Classroom Learning Environment

Protocols provide students with safe and supportive spaces to find their own voice in the classroom—as thinkers, writers, speakers, collaborators, critics, and creators. While protocols may not prevent all

disruptions (as if anything could!), the clarity they provide about purposes, steps, and roles helps students become engaged in and focused on the work. Students respond positively to discussions in which their own perspectives are heard and respected, and in which each participant responds thoughtfully and respectfully to others in the group. Working together in these ways increases trust among students and improves the classroom learning environment for everyone. Michael Eppolito, curriculum coordinator for Two Rivers Supervisory Union in Ludlow, Vermont, puts it this way: “Protocols allow students safe spaces to try out ideas, challenge each other in respectful ways, and play different roles in a conversation.”

HOW IS THIS BOOK ORGANIZED?

Part I, “Getting Going with Protocols,” provides an introduction—or refresher course—in the use of protocols with students. In this Introduction, we have defined protocols and considered some of the reasons teachers use them. Chapter 1 offers guidance and resources for choosing the right protocol for your goals and the needs of your students. Chapter 2 addresses key practices for effectively facilitating protocols, whether you or your students do the facilitation. Chapter 3 describes brief and flexible activities that are useful in preparing students for the kinds of discussions protocols entail. Part I also includes two additional resources:

- Figure 1.1: Protocol Features summarizes key features of the protocols included in Part II
- Figure 2.1: Introducing and Using Protocols includes tips for helping your students get started with protocols

These figures are located at the ends of their respective chapters.

In Part II, “The Protocols,” we describe 11 well-known protocols, organized by four larger categories according to their purposes:

- Reflecting on styles, preferences, and expectations (Chapters 4–5)
- Exploring questions (Chapters 6–8)
- Entering and engaging with texts (Chapters 9–12)
- Giving and receiving feedback (Chapters 13–14)