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Reflections on Adapting/Creating Protocols

Adapted from A Facilitator's Book of Questions *by David Allen & Tina Blythe, New York: Teachers College Press.*

Before Adapting or Creating a New Protocol
As a facilitator of a group that is using protocols to learn from student work, you may find that you and/or your group experience some dissatisfaction with a protocol once it has been tried. In response, you (or others) might be inclined to change the protocol or make up a new one. While either of these options *could* be productive, our experience suggests that you and your group might want to try the following things first:

- **Talk to your group**
  Whether the group, or you, or all of you together are sensing a problem with the protocol being used, a candid conversation is an important step toward identifying possible issues. Almost every protocol has a built in "debriefing" step at the end of it. Be sure to leave enough time for this step!
- **Give the protocol some time**
  Protocols, by their nature, place restrictions on the natural flow of conversation. This is not always comfortable for participants, and this discomfort might be at the root of the group's dissatisfaction. If this is the case, getting familiar with a protocol by doing it a few times might be the best strategy. Furthermore, protocols, like any complex tool, take a bit of practice in order to be used effectively. So, it might take a few tries before you and your group are able to figure out just what your chosen protocol can really help you achieve and what it can't.
- **Try another "established" protocol**
  If lack of experience with protocols in general or with the particular protocol you've chosen, isn't the problem, it might be that you have chosen a protocol that doesn't match well with your group's needs or purposes. It might be worth revisiting (and perhaps revising) goals with the group, and then experimenting with some other protocols. Again, if the protocol is one that is new to your group, it might take a few tries before everyone can really determine how well it helps the group to achieve its objectives.
- **Talk to an experienced facilitator**
  A conversation with someone who has used the protocol frequently can help you pinpoint some possible areas of difficulty and come up with some strategies for dealing with them.

If you decide to adapt or create a new protocol
In adapting or creating a new protocol, there are two kinds of issues to consider: conceptual (having to do with how you construct the new protocol) and logistical (having to do with how you share the protocol with others).

Conceptual issues
Good protocols can take a long time to develop. Most of the protocols in popular use now have been through many rounds of experimentation and revision. Good protocols are designed to create particular kinds of balances among competing needs, interests, and inclinations. Different protocols create different kinds of balances, depending on their purposes. Because of these delicate balances, seemingly small

changes in a protocol's steps can create big changes in the kind of conversations people have and, therefore, in the kinds of things they can accomplish. As you adapt or create a protocol, here are some questions to think about:

What is your purpose? What do you and your group want to have come out of the protocol? Why is it important to the participants to talk about student work together? Are you seeking to open up and explore issues broadly? Or are you hoping to solve specific problems? (Or some mixture of the two?) *The other questions on this list should be considered in light of your answer to the "purpose" question.*

How will your protocol balance opportunities for people both to express their own perspectives and to consider the perspectives of others? Typically, this is done through a careful orchestration of who can talk when. Does the presenter or the group start the conversation? Does the presenter or the group have the "last word"? Is there a time when the presenter & group should talk together, or should one always be listening while the other is speaking?

How will your protocol balance the interests and needs of the presenting teacher with the interests and needs of the group? Does the presenting teacher get to identify a focus for the conversation? The group? Both together? Is the focus here on helping individual teachers improve their practice or on creating opportunities for the whole group to reflect collectively about their own educational practice? (Of course, to some extent, all protocols allow for both of these things. The question here is where you want the emphasis to be.)

How will your protocol balance free conversation and structured conversation? Protocols typically ask people to respond in specific ways to the work that is on the table: At what points will your protocol invite very focused conversation? At what points will it invite more open-ended, less-focused conversation and comment?

When (if at all) will context for the work be shared? In the beginning of the conversation? In the middle? Only at the end?

Note: Even though many of these questions raise the issue of how to balance various needs, all those needs don't have to be given equal time in every protocol. For example, depending on your purposes, you might construct a protocol that allows for lots of group talk and very little presenter talk, or vice versa. The point here isn't to tell you that the two needs must be met equally, but rather to encourage you to be deliberate in your choices about which needs you will foreground and how.

Logistical issues
There are now a dozen or more protocols that are used widely throughout this country, and hundreds more that are developed and used in specific groups, schools, or districts. We and others who do a lot of work with "looking at student work" groups have begun following some guidelines to help everyone easily distinguish one protocol from another. When you commit your adapted or brand new protocol to paper or website (even in draft form), we invite you to follow these guidelines, too:

1) *Give the protocol its own name*. Things can get confusing when two, three, or more very different protocols are all named the Tuning Protocol! When you make a significant* adaptation or create a new protocol, give it a name that will distinguish it from other protocols. (The name doesn't have to be entirely unique: for instance, the "California Tuning Protocol" is an adaptation of the Tuning Protocol.)

2) *Name the protocol you are adapting or deriving your protocol from*. For example, the Modified Collaborative Assessment Conference includes the attribution: "A variation of the Collaborative Assessment Conference developed by Steve Seidel"

3) *Include your own name and/or your group's name* on the new or adapted protocol. You never know where your protocol might end up once you've put it in writing or on the web. It can be helpful to let people know where it came from so that they can get in touch with you if they have questions about how to use it.

4) *Include with the protocol a statement of the purpose for the protocol* or the goals it is intended to achieve.

*Of course, "significant" is a judgment call. If, for example, you're tinkering with the amount of time to allow for warm and cool feedback in the Tuning Protocol, you probably don't need to worry about renaming it. However, if you are altering the purpose of the protocol, moving the protocol's steps around, eliminating steps, or adding steps, those are typically the kind of changes that warrant giving the resulting protocol a new name.