



Facilitation Scenarios Activity

Adapted from A Facilitator's Book of Questions by David Allen & Tina Blythe.

The scenarios provided below illustrate some key moments in fictional-but-plausible protocols. We offer them here as an opportunity for readers to reflect on facilitation challenges in a more contextualized way. Of course, just as in actual protocols, none of the scenarios below has a single “right” response. We hope these scenarios will serve as a departure point for considering a range of productive moves that a facilitator might make in a given situation, as well as the possible consequences of those moves.

This activity will be most useful to you after you have reviewed Chapters Three, Four, and Eight from *A Facilitator's Book of Questions*. The steps below describe a process for using the scenarios as the starting point for group discussion about facilitation. If your group is large, we suggest dividing into smaller groups of four to six.

Steps in the Activity

1. Choose a facilitator for the discussion of the first scenario.
2. Everybody reads the scenario silently. (The facilitator may also read the scenario aloud.)
3. The facilitator asks participants to put the problem(s) embedded in the scenario into their own words: “How do you read the situation? What might be the underlying issues or problems?”
Note: This third step is important. The group may want to dive immediately into deciding what the facilitator should do; however, resisting that temptation long enough to discuss the problems first will yield a richer conversation in the following steps.
4. When the group has reached a shared understanding of the problem(s), the facilitator asks, “How would you, as the facilitator, respond? What are some moves you might make? What are the likely consequences of each?”
Note: Often, at this point in the exercise, group members may be inclined to discuss all the things the facilitator in the scenario should have done before the protocol began in order to prevent the problem altogether. While generating these ideas can be useful, the group also should give real attention to the actual moment described in the scenario and how to deal with it. In real protocols, even when the facilitator is experienced and the presenting teacher and the participants are well prepared, things can veer away from the plan in mid-protocol. The point of these scenarios is to give everyone a chance to work on developing the insights and skills that are essential to addressing such situations in the moments when they arise.
5. Through discussion, the group may or may not come to agreement about a promising response (or several). The point is not to reach consensus but to seek out and consider different interpretations of the problem(s) found in the scenarios, as well as a range of moves that might be employed to address the problem(s) and their likely outcomes.
6. The group may choose to go on to another scenario (and take turns facilitating).

Scenario 1

In your third meeting as a group, you are feeling pretty good about the way things are going. Today, for example, Kurt is presenting some samples from his 6th graders' math portfolios. In the feedback discussion, the group seems eager to talk about the kinds of strategies students are using. In the first few protocols the group had gone through in previous meetings, most people appeared to be quite comfortable joining the conversation to make a comment or ask a question. Increasingly, the discussion in the protocols has felt like a more natural conversation, with people building on each other's comments, sometimes asking each other questions. In fact, lately you have been finding it a bit challenging to break in to ask a question or suggest moving to the next step of the protocol.

As you look around the table, you notice that Maria, a 4th grade bilingual teacher, has not said anything during this protocol. She seems engaged, looking at the work samples and listening to other's comments and questions. In thinking back on the previous protocols the group has done, you can't think of a specific instance in which she did speak, though you have a vague memory that she asked a clarifying question in the first protocol the group went through (the one people dubbed the "training wheels protocol" because everybody was so careful to follow the steps on the paper). As the feedback discussion continues, you find yourself losing track of the movement of the discussion. It will soon be time to move to the presenter's response to the feedback. How do you "read" this situation? What, if anything, should you do?

Scenario 2

In a Tuning Protocol, Jim is presenting a community service project his middle school students carried out with a local day care center. In the project, his students interviewed the children about their interests, heroes, and so on. Then, back in their own classroom, Jim's students wrote and illustrated books featuring the children they interviewed. Jim begins his presentation with an impassioned description of his students and the challenges he has faced in working with them. "This has been a real breakthrough in working with this group," he explains enthusiastically. He begins to tell an anecdote about one of his "toughest cases" sitting down with a little boy at the day care center. Glancing at your watch, you realize almost half the time for his presentation is already over, and he hasn't yet talked about the goals for the project, the assessment plan, or the student work; nor has he given his focusing question. You look around the table and see that the participants seem very interested in his story, but time is marching on . . .

Scenario 3

During the "warm/cool feedback" segment of a protocol (a step during which the presenter is not permitted to respond), Lena, a respected senior colleague in the group, begins to list the weaknesses, as she sees them, of the student work and the assignment. Lena is not negative in her tone and, in fact, frames her comments constructively, saying things like, "It will help a lot if you don't" The other participants listen attentively, though as Lena goes on, some begin to shift in their seats. The presenter, herself, is avidly taking notes on everything Lena says. As the "do's" and "don'ts" add up, you wonder whether to intervene and, if so, how . . .

Scenario 4

The Consultancy protocol you are facilitating has reached the step in which the participants ask the presenter clarifying questions. Jeanie, a 4th grade teacher, has presented a dilemma about preparing students for the state math and writing tests in spring (it's December) and continuing the project-based curriculum she has been developing with other 4th grade teachers for the last three years. One participant quickly raises her hand and asks, "How will the standardized tests and the mandated changes in curriculum affect the narrative report cards we've just implemented here at the school?" You suggest that might not be a strictly clarifying question. "Good," Jeanie says, "Because I have no idea." The next couple

of questions (“How much time do the kids have each day to work on projects?” and “Can you give a quick example of a project you have done with your class?”) are more typical clarifying questions. But then the questions again tilt toward addressing bigger issues of curriculum and assessment as they connect to the state testing—something that is clearly on everybody’s mind. You are feeling like the protocol is sliding away from Jeanie’s specific concerns into something larger the group really wants (even needs) to discuss. What is going on here, and what do you do?

Scenario 5

The “warm/cool feedback” portion of the protocol has been good and substantive. You are looking forward to hearing Laura, the presenting teacher, talk about some of the things that came up. She’s eager to start off, and thanks the group sincerely for their comments. Then she says, “Let me just explain a few things that I didn’t say before about my class and the assignment.” She seems to be going through all the feedback points she recorded and providing more background details for each. She keeps going, not exactly defending her work or the students’, but not really addressing the feedback that came up either. What can you do to help Laura take advantage of the feedback as a chance to genuinely reflect on (rather than explain or defend) her practice?

Scenario 6

Craig has presented an inquiry project that involves students working in teams to solve a “mystery story” he has written. In order to solve the mystery, which has to do with water levels in the local pond, students must complete a series of mathematical calculations, mostly having to do with volume. Craig has shared the work samples from two student groups. He rated one group’s work “distinguished” and the other “proficient.” During the period for examining student work, you realize that both samples contain a raft of errors in calculation. Craig’s rubric includes “make accurate calculations” as one of its main points. As the participants’ feedback begins, it seems clear to you that they are concentrating on the cleverness of the assignment and the positive interactions within the student groups and, intentionally or not, staying away from how Craig scored these groups. Do you step in? How?

Scenario 7

Your group is using a protocol that includes a step for asking “clarifying questions.” When you invite the group to ask clarifying questions, Dwight says, “I really like the way this assignment is set up. I did a similar thing with my class last year, and the results were great!” He goes on to describe a bit about the work his students did. When he pauses, you take the opportunity to gently remind the group that this is really a time simply to ask clarifying questions and that the time for deeper discussion happens a few steps later. Dwight sighs, rolls his eyes, and says, disparagingly, “Whatever. I’m not really sure why we need a ‘protocol’ to talk anyway.” No one says anything, and you are not sure whether to let this comment go or deal with it now . . .

Scenario 8

As part of the superintendent’s professional development day, you have been asked to facilitate a protocol for looking at student work for a group of district administrators who have expressed interest in this approach to professional development. You’ve asked Carolee, an 8th grade teacher from the teacher inquiry group you regularly facilitate, to present. She selects a sample of student writing from a boy in her class whose work she finds very creative in some ways, though quite limited in others. The group is looking at the work using the Collaborative Assessment Conference, so Carolee passes out the writing sample, a one-page story called “In the City,” without giving the group any context about the assignment or the student. After the group spends a few minutes looking at the work, you invite participants to share their descriptions of the piece. “In the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol,” you tell them, “we begin

by trying to describe what we see in the piece, as concretely as possible, and stay away from making interpretations of the work or judgments about it." A principal you don't know well raises his hand, and you call on him. "Well, I'm not sure if this is what you're looking for, but I'd use the word 'primitive' to describe this." Silence in the group. At this point, what might you do?

Scenario 9

You are facilitating a Tuning Protocol for a high school group new to using protocols. Alex presents a project in which students applied math skills to solve real world problems of height and volume, then presented their solutions and explained their process. Alex shares her focusing question with the group: "How can I help the students do better work in this assignment?" The presentation goes well, you think; however, you are concerned that during the period for looking at the student work, only a few participants seemed to be actually looking at the student work closely. As soon as you invite warm and cool feedback, one of the participants volunteers, "I just think it's wonderful to see students engaged in real world problems. I'd love to see this happening more in my school." As other participants join the discussion, you grow more and more uncomfortable with the feedback: It's all quite warm, and Alex seems to be enjoying hearing it. (She writes a few things down at the beginning and then just listens.) However, none of the comments relate very directly to the student work samples she has shared. The clock is ticking... What do you do?

Scenario 10

Barry has volunteered to present at the group's next meeting. In the few protocols the group has done so far, Barry has proven a bit of a challenge to facilitate. He is a very enthusiastic participant with lots to say, but tends to lose track of (or to disregard) what the protocol calls for at any given point. You have also noticed that most of what Barry says tends to come back to his own story or ideas. For example, in one recent protocol, during the period for questioning the presenter, Barry launched into a story about one of the "wild" projects he did with his students in his previous school. In another protocol, during the period for offering feedback, he began a mini-treatise on his own educational philosophy. As one of the other participants put it in a private conversation after the last protocol: "Barry's great, I'd love to go have a beer with him sometime, but he's 'out there.'"

You set up a pre-conference with Barry to talk about his presentation for the next meeting. He tells you he'll have no problem picking out samples of student work to present. He starts to talk about one possibility, a project his students are currently working on, but before he can describe its goals or what stage the students are at with it, he jumps to an idea he has for a new course he'd like to develop on political theory. When you say you need to get to your next class soon and it would be good to have an idea of what Barry will present, he says, "Don't worry, I have a couple of ideas I think the group is going to love." What are the issues here? How might you respond to Barry? What are some practical steps you can take to help Barry prepare and ensure that the protocol discussion will be a productive learning experience for the whole group?