

CONNECTIONS

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Report from the Directors

Gene Thompson-Grove, Co-Director

*Foreward to the book A Facilitators
Book of Questions by Tina Blythe and
David Allen*

I love to facilitate—be it a protocol-guided conversation or some other kind of meeting or session—and I appreciate the work of really skilled facilitators when I am a participant in a group. However, I admit to being a bit skeptical of the value of books on facilitation, since most seem to focus on new sets of techniques, tricks, and recipes. This book is a much-needed departure from that approach to facilitation—and should be useful to experienced and beginning facilitators alike.

What makes it so different, and so useful? First, it avoids a generic discussion of facilitation and instead places facilitation in a particular context, that of facilitating protocol guided conversations. In so doing, the authors are able to ask facilitators to consider their own assumptions and beliefs — about their role as facilitators, about the purpose of the work they are facilitating, and about the group with whom they are working. Secondly, it avoids giving pat answers for potentially complex situations, and instead invites readers to consider the consequences — intentional or not — of the various “moves” they make as facilitators. Finally, it addresses the important question of facilitator stance, or disposition.

The book challenges those of us who facilitate to ask ourselves: How am I

reading this group, and how do I know I am right? What should I do, and how do I decide this is the best course of action? Do I really believe these people have the capacity to do the learning they say they want to do — and if I do, how do I best serve them and their learning? Certainly,

in reading this book, facilitators will expand their repertoire, and will walk away with ideas and tips for responding to the wide range of facilitation issues that invariably come up in protocols. More importantly, however, the reader will be pushed to think about her stance as a facilitator, as all of the ideas about “how” to respond are linked to discussions of “why” one might want to respond in that way.

Facilitating protocols can be a tricky proposition.

The task requires the facilitator not only to “show up,” but to be fully present and completely attentive to the group and its learning. The protocols can help, acting, as the authors say, as a kind of co-facilitator. Protocols help build equity into the conversation; they help group members build new skills and habits; they help make efficient use of time; and they help build a useful agenda for almost any kind of meeting. However, they don't stand on their own, and they require a firm, yet gentle hand on the part of the facilitator. A skillfully facilitated protocol not only creates the possibility of a group doing new, significant learning together — learning that will ultimately benefit students. It also can help a group build the kind of trust that allows it to tackle the really important

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Director's Report

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questions about teaching and learning. Addressing such questions requires individuals' willingness to share and, often, reconsider their own privately held beliefs.

I think about this kind of facilitation as being full of tensions — tensions that as a facilitator I want to, in the spirit of this book, manage, rather than resolve. I want to be an advocate for the presenter's success, yet also be in service to the whole group and its learning. I want to facilitate with a light hand, yet be firm in helping the group stick to the agreements it has made about how group members will talk together. I want to honor the steps and intention of the protocol, yet not feel by the end of the session as if the protocol has somehow used us. I know the protocol will demand a certain rhythm by its very structure, yet I want to tap into the natural rhythm of the group. I want to be an active facilitator — one

that group members can count on to keep the process safe so they can have potentially risky conversations with each other. Yet I know that sometimes the best thing I can do or say as the facilitator is nothing, because sometimes it has to be uncomfortable for group members to learn and grow. I want to be a fully contributing member of the group, yet I know that good facilitation sometimes demands that I give my full attention to that aspect of the work.

I remember the day I turned the corner in my thinking about myself as a facilitator. The conversation that day had been challenging, and the group confronted some deeply held beliefs about expectations for students. I knew that individuals in the group had moved to a new, more productive place in their thinking. As I read the reflections about the session written by group members, I was struck by how all of them talked about their

learning, about their students, about their practice, about how other group members had challenged them to see the student work and their assumptions differently. There was not one mention about the role I had played as facilitator. That is when I understood what is for me now the most important maxim about facilitating protocol conversations: "This is not about me." Facilitators with a broad repertoire of responses and sophisticated ways of thinking about their craft are critical to the collaborative work of teachers. But, in the end, the work is not about the facilitator, or the facilitation, or the protocol. It is, first and foremost, about the learning the presenter and the group do together on behalf of students. ■

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Coaching Lessons...

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game when you make the perfect play. So many skills are critical that there is always a way to help while we develop new skills.

Field Notes for CFG coaching: There are so many skills that support clear communication. We all make mistakes along the way. Over a whole year (or more) as we practice protocols together we have many opportunities to improve and support our own toolbox of skills.

Who's Coach?

Our last game was a make-up for a rained-out game early in the season. The other team didn't show up. We were all there and ready to play. With little prompting, we split up into small teams and had our own game — filled with closed fields, pinch hitters and

guest runners from the bleachers. We were relaxed and enjoying ourselves — not only comfortable with the rules and tools of the game, but also creating new rules (our scoring system was especially unique that game). We were all coaches.

Field Notes for CFG coaching: Ultimately a team becomes a self-propelling, synergistic group of potential coaches. The final meeting is the one you remember most during the summer vacation.

The Off Season

Working well together carries over into enjoying and valuing each other's skills. Shared moments of success help clear the way for all kinds of day-to-day interactions. The pattern of positive feedback and gentle

kidding helps to keep communication channels open for the important and sometimes difficult work of teaching.

Field Notes for CFG coaching — It's clear to me that my CFG group has helped me look more insightfully than I could by myself at my own teaching practice -- in that sense it is much more than a game. Still, I find that most of my effort as a CFG coach is in helping to create and keep an environment where people are relaxed and ready for the unexpected — requirements for thinking out of their comfort zone. ■

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