CONNECTIONS

Director's Report
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What processes best support collegial dialogue and enhance collaborative learning? What characterizes an effective protocol? How can we tell when we have a process that we're ready to try with other educators? These were some of the questions that members of my CFG and I started wrestling with, even though we didn't know at the outset that we'd be going in this direction.

I've been a member of the same CFG for nearly three years now. Our membership has changed slightly; we've lost some of our original members when major career moves made getting together really tough, we've gained some new members who've added new facets to the group's work, and we've struggled to overcome challenges in scheduling. In other words, we're a very typical group of critical friends.

When we convened at the beginning of the school year, we began – as usual – by brainstorming goals for our work. As we tossed out several questions that we might want to pursue, one area for study kept coming up over and over, worded in different ways: What do we know about looking at hard data about student performance? Schools we're working with are generating so much data, and people keep saying the data is supposed to inform instruction, but how can the data inform instruction if we aren't really analyzing the data? We have lots of protocols for looking at student work – written products and other artifacts – but how do we look at the hard data, the numbers and graphs, in ways that are productive?

We agreed that we wanted to put forth a concerted effort to develop a protocol that would encourage teachers to see data as nonthreatening, non-evaluative, informative, and worthwhile. Since the members of our group were all in some way connected to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), either as teachers or administrators or as consultants from the UCLA School Management Program, we decided to focus our development efforts on the LAUSD Periodic Assessment Program for English/Language Arts.

Through this district-wide program for secondary schools, the LAUSD

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has undertaken to ensure that the California State Standards for English/Language Arts are made accessible to middle and high school students throughout the district by reorganizing the standards into a more manageable, coherent format. Rather than continuing to work from the state's list of anywhere from 46 to 63 standards for each grade level, LAUSD has organized the standards into separate components, such as narrative, exposition, literary response and analysis, and persuasion. The standards most relevant to each component are addressed during a given period of instruction, and those standards are assessed periodically (roughly quarterly), hence the name – Periodic Assessments.

Each of these Periodic Assessments can provide educators with, literally, tons of data about student progress. Our CFG spent one of our early meetings simply getting acquainted with all the different types of data from these assessments. We were truly amazed, maybe even a bit overwhelmed, by all the data in front of us!

The data are available as broadly or as specifically as the person examining might like: individual student, individual teacher, period by period, grade level at a single school, grade level per local district, aggregated or disaggregated, with individual item responses, with information by specific content standard, and on and on. The district has remained true to its commitment that these assessments are not high-stakes; the purpose of the assessments and the data is to inform instructional practice and enhance student learning.

The dilemma that our CFG saw was this: the data were, at least in schools where we worked, rarely being used effectively, if at all. Most teachers were as overwhelmed as we were by the sheer magnitude of the data. Even more daunting, because most teachers had had previous experiences that had taught them that "data are not our friends," there was widespread distrust of how the data would be used.

As we continued to plow through mountains of data reports, we became clear about a few principles that guided our protocol development. We wanted to be sure to:
• think about ways to help teachers, individually and collaboratively, reflect on these data reports so that they are not viewed as threatening or as a basis for evaluation;
• keep the focus on evidence of what students are learning, not on how teachers are teaching;
• set up conditions so that teachers approach the data analysis in a spirit of inquiry, bringing to the process their own questions. We connected to our own experiences in using protocols to learn from student work. We knew that there were road maps to guide us in both the ATLAS Protocol and the Collaborative Assessment Conference. Our first attempt to use a protocol-like approach to analyzing the data went something like this:

1. We were clear that the data analysis should not be a "fishing expedition." There were just too many reports for us to go in without questions to guide our inquiry. So, before we looked at the data, we did a two-minute quick write in response to the question, "What information do I hope to find out by looking at these data? Or, what do I hope to learn by looking at these data?" We shared our thoughts and generated some guiding questions for our group.

2. We agreed on one type of report, and made sure we all had copies of the same report type for one grade level. We then asked the following questions, in rounds:
• What do you see/notice/observe?
• What surprises you? What makes it surprising?
• What questions do the data raise for you? OR What else do you want to know?
• Where might you go to get that information?

This got us started, and helped us to see where we were stuck in the process. Some of the new questions that came up were:
• Should we identify standards that will recur from one component to the next?
• Should we provide this information to group members up front, or is it important for participants to seek out this information and make sense of it for themselves?
• Once we've identified an area where students aren't doing well on the assessment, what is the bridge between what they know and how they perform in the classroom to how they perform on the test? How do we make the connection between evidence of understanding in the classroom and performance on the assessment?
• How can we tell if students' struggles are more related to the construction of the test item than to the students' mastery of the content?
• When is it important to look at disaggregated data? When is it important to examine individual students' scores?

We managed to sustain our focus on this development over five of our monthly meetings. We ended up with two protocol drafts. One protocol is for individual teacher reflection, called "Learning from Student Data Protocol – Individual Teacher Self-Reflection." The other is for a grade level or team of teachers, the "Learning from Student Data Protocol." I recently shared these protocols with literacy coaches in my local district, who have agreed

to pilot them with teachers and give me feedback. The feedback that I've received so far has underscored the importance of setting the stage for the data analysis and reflection. To frame the conversation, we used an article titled "Using Student Performance Data Humanely," by Carl K. Chafin for the American Association of School Administrators. (The article is available at www.aasa.org. The

> *Read the Learning from Student Data Protocol at www.nsrfharmony.org/ connections.html*

protocols are available at www.nsrfharmony.org/protocols.)

A colleague recently shared The Data Dialogue with me and we may merge this process with our own newly designed protocols in the future.

Through the individual and collaborative versions of the "Learning from Student Data Protocols," our CFG has the sense that we have begun to address the questions we knew were guiding our inquiry: "What do we know about looking at hard data about student performance?" and "How do we look at this data in ways that are productive?" We'll be able to gather evidence about these questions when we have more feedback about the protocols as they're being used.

However, the unexpected bonus that I'm seeing, for myself and for other members of our CFG, is the learning that we're gaining about those underlying questions about protocol development, the questions we didn't even know we were asking: What processes best support collegial dialogue and enhance collaborative learning? What characterizes an effective protocol? How do we know we have a process that we're ready to try with other educators? Here are a few

of our emerging understandings:

What processes best support collegial dialogue and enhance collaborative learning?

• Framing the whole process as an inquiry the group engages in together is important. Nowadays many people feel that data can be manipulated in a variety of ways to prove any point. It is essential that participants understand and even trust how the data is generated to engage in a data protocol. Additionally, concerns about how the data may be used are never far from the surface. If anyone in the group (especially a facilitator or an administrator) appears to already have reached some foregone conclusions which the group now needs to reach, the process is likely to backfire. This is one of the realities that led us to set the context for the data analysis by reading the text mentioned earlier.

What characterizes an effective protocol?

• It is important for us to remember the context in which we expect these protocols to be used: in grade-level or department-level groups, with educators who have not necessarily signed on to work together collegially in a CFG and who, therefore, have probably not developed the culture of trust needed to look at these issues straightforwardly in the early stages of this work. (In our desire to push the envelope regarding issues of equity, it was tempting to want to design the process so that the issues that can be revealed by disaggregating the data are confronted head-on.
• Creating a protocol because there is a need we feel driven to fill, a set of questions that we need to explore was key for us. I don't think this would have been meaningful if we had simply said, "Why don't we see if we can create some kind of a protocol?"
• Allowing room for the individual's and the group's own inquiry questions, and not feeling tied to the

questions that we've suggested, is an important point to remember. With respect to the protocols, the "Querying Data" process can be overwhelming. We came up with some very good questions to pose, but for someone who is getting started in analyzing the data, the sheer volume of questions (not to mention all the materials that are required for the protocol) might seem daunting.

How do we know we have a process that we're ready to try with other educators?

• We may never know that we're ready. There came a point when we decided, "It's good enough. Let's do it." In our case, I sought out a school site literacy coach who is also a CFG coach at her site. I knew she'd be willing to take risks, and would set a tone within the group that would support reflective dialogue in an atmosphere where it would be safe for the educators to take risks and learn together.

As our CFG worked our way through this creation process, we gained new insights and we reinforced something that we already knew about collaborative learning: holding real questions, and being willing to seek answers together, lies at the heart of this work. The following quote, by Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman, describes the spirit that sustained us through the months of our inquiry and characterizes how we've learned to view data:

"All scientific knowledge is uncertain. This experience with doubt and uncertainty is important. I believe that it is of very great value, and one that extends beyond the sciences. You have to permit the possibility that you do not have it exactly right . . . So what we call scientific knowledge today is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty. Some of them are most unsure; some of them are nearly sure; but none of them is absolutely certain." ∎

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