

Protocols in Practice

A Different Kind of Classroom: Using Protocols to Increase Student Understanding

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Sixteen biology students sit in a circle with their teacher working to gain a better understanding of an article on memory. Today the teacher is using a Rich Text Protocol and taking on the role of a facilitator. She is not sure where the discussion will go, but trusts in the process and the students' ability to thoughtfully explore complex ideas. Nicole makes a strong case for the group to explore the idea of confabulation, or how the brain makes up things when there is a void in the memory. Other students listen to Nicole's case, but they want to discuss the idea of rehearsal when trying to memorize different ideas or facts. Nicole concedes, but the facilitator, sensing her strong desire to explore this idea, promises to return later to confabulation. Students return to the section on rehearsal in the text, knowing they will present their perspective and how it applies to their own learning. Each student interprets the text, although not everyone agrees with what is written. Justin presents a different point of view and Anisa challenges his interpretation. There is further discussion (including some time on confabulation) and the students recommend ways teachers can apply some of the concepts from today's class to enhance their instructional practice. The teacher asks students to write about rehearsal from their perspective and share the ideas from their writing in pairs. Even though there is not enough time for the last step of the protocol, it is obvious that the students now have a greater understanding of the complexities of memory and how it relates to their own learning.

Protocols can be used to create a different type of classroom that impacts students' learning. In a classroom, such as the biology class we described, that values the use of protocols, students are grappling with difficult and abstract ideas. They are asking each other questions, referring to quotes and figures in the text. They

are digging deeply into the content and connecting it both to their prior learning and to their own experiences. Students are engaged because they have a desire and a need to understand the content. Students are aware of what they do and do not understand and they ask specific questions to complete their understanding. At the end of the period, the students are fatigued, but excited



about what they have learned, and will ponder questions after the class is over. The questions naturally recur throughout the unit of study and the students know there is not just one correct answer.

In this classroom there exists a community of learners: they work in pairs, triads, small groups, and as an entire class. Students are respected for their unique insights and strengths. Each member of the class encourages others to take intellectual risks. Students feel safe, respected, listened to and cared for as individuals. They value each other's diverse backgrounds. They are interested in each other's lives beyond the classroom and share in each other's successes and disappointments. They are learners - individually and collectively grappling with the content and its implications. They work to improve not only their understanding of the content, but their skills as scholars. They are learning the art of

thinking and reflecting. The teacher is a part of this community and is learning along with the students.

In this classroom, the students are the workers. They have prepared carefully before class because they are fully aware of their individual responsibility for the success of the class. Their role is that of a scholar. Their responsibility is to push their own thinking and that of their classmates to a deeper level. They monitor their own learning and their interactions with others. They reflect on both the content and the process of learning. They challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others. All information, regardless of its source - from teacher, textbook, media inside and outside of the classroom - is critically examined for inaccuracies and bias.

The teacher in this classroom does the hard work of teaching long before the class begins. She has studied to obtain a rich understanding of the content. The teacher has identified the understanding that she wants students to construct - understanding which will endure long after the course has ended. Each lesson's protocol has been carefully chosen to meet the learning goals of the lesson and individual needs. The teacher becomes the facilitator, allowing students to construct their own learning. This means that the teacher must be willing to give a large degree of control to the students and trust in the process of the group. The teacher does not guide the conversation to a specific outcome. Because the teacher has been thoughtful and purposeful about the understandings of the unit, and has communicated the desired learning to the students, the teacher in this different kind of classroom

(continued on page 19)

allows students to find their own path to understanding.

To create a culture of conversation there must be guidelines for engaging in respectful conversation. This is the role of protocols in both Critical Friends Groups and the classroom. Using protocols in the classroom supports much of what we know about effective teaching strategies: they allow time for students to think about their responses before engaging in conversation, and they create practices of thoughtful listening. They provide a guideline for critical thinking, problem solving and inquiry.

This kind of classroom involves a different way of going about the daily rituals of school and learning. It requires practice and empathy for individual differences. It requires the creation of a safe, trusting and respectful culture where all voices are heard. This type of classroom mirrors the culture that is the vision of Critical Friends Groups. In this type of classroom, as in CFGs, participants think at higher levels and dig more deeply into the work at hand. In both, a culture of respectful conversation promotes greater learning and understanding through the synergism of working collaboratively. Can using protocols help to create a different type of classroom that really impacts student learning? Here is what the experts say:

“Using protocols helps your understanding.

Instead of just listening passively you have to actively think and be prepared to share your thoughts, and this enhances understanding.” - Justin, 12th grade biology student at Steamboat Springs High School

“A protocol helps students delve beyond mere surface details, allowing the participants to become immersed in the subject at hand. This allows more meaningful connections to be established and with them, the content.” - Patrick, 12th grade biology student at Steamboat Springs High School

“A protocol keeps the class on track and focused. It helps the group hit the important points of the article. It is a different way of doing things.” - Jessie, 12th grade biology student at Steamboat Springs High School ■

Cindy Gay and Dave Schmid both work at Steamboat Springs High School in Colorado. Cindy is a science teacher and coordinator of staff development and Dave is the principal. Together they have been training school staffs and administrators across the state on how to use CFGs to promote conversations. You can reach Cindy at cgay@sssd.k12.co.us and Dave at dschmid@springsips.com

Rich Text Seminar

Purpose

This protocol is useful for dealing with a text that is particularly dense or ambiguous in meaning, complex in discourse or complicated in structure. It enables a group to unpack the text (written, video, or still visual) that is, to take it apart slowly, element by element and layer by layer.

Details

The protocol is designed for use by groups of 5 to 15 participants. It can run in variable amounts of time, but generally takes about an hour and a half. The facilitator must be deeply familiar with the text.

Steps

1. Introduction/Review Text – (15 minutes)
2. Noticing (Go Around) – Each participant will identify one to three things they noticed in the text. (15 minutes)
3. Checking Out – The group will come to agreement on 2 or 3 items that need further discussion and exploration. (5 minutes)
4. Interpreting (Go Around) – Participants are given an opportunity to review the areas that need further discussion. Participants will present alternative interpretations in a go around. (10 minutes)
5. Perspective - Select one idea from the text under study and write about it from your unique perspective. You should define the perspective as an overarching idea that you bring to any text you read. (15 minutes)
6. Sharing in Triads – Share writing with partners, challenging each other as appropriate. (10 minutes)
7. Final Go Around – Participants will say one thing about the text based on their experience with the protocol. (10 minutes)
8. Reflection on Protocol (10 minutes)

This protocol was developed by Joe and Beth McDonald and comes from the book Power of Protocols by Joe McDonald, Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter and Elizabeth C. McDonald.