Using Protocols with Students in a Writing Workshop

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

I am extraordinarily lucky to work with a small group of student writers every day in a room with schlumpy old sofas and Barcaloungers. We operate in exactly the same way my adult writing group has for the past twelve years. We learn some new skills, we read short texts, we give and receive feedback, and sometimes we explore publishing options. Establishing a culture of writing is the most important aspect of this workshop. The first few days are often filled with awkward silences, but my first goal is to have everyone read a piece aloud. We need to hear each other’s writing, voices, and I need to protect those fragile new voices from thoughtless or hurtful responses. Boundaries can be very vague and blunt, so I spend a lot of time establishing rules of how we will respond to each other, and I underline that I mean rules, not guidelines. My only absolute in this class is that we will not say “should.” A word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle. When I shared my very new essay, “White Privilege DNA” (see sidebar), I told them that it was a finished piece, sometimes a work in progress, sometimes an idea. It is hard to ask students initially to help me with an idea I am wrestling with because their inclination is to offer a lot of “shoulds,” a word I never want to hear in our writing circle.

My students liked that I had not taken much time to get to the meat of the story. They thought the title hooked the reader. They disagreed as to whether to widen the lens and to spend more time on my conclusion. They asked me to put in a couple of words that cemented the concept of place, and they wondered if I should—and then they criticized what they realized they had used that dreaded word—and the assumption that all Whites were members of the same club, and they wanted the word “club” to appear with quotation marks. When they finished I told them that I had held my breath as they read because I had never written anything like this piece and I wondered what readers would think of me as they read. Their reading and discussion had helped me learn from my own writing. I talked about someone using the word “should.” We talked about a simple change in phrasing, something like asking if I had considered introducing the concept of white privilege as a club. That took away the “should” and pushed my thinking, and how that subtle shift made a difference in the way I heard the feedback.

After modeling a feedback session, I turn them loose to listen to each other in small groups. I do not join these groups, not wanting my teacher voice to interfere with their own learning. I reserve the right to overhear them, and sometimes issue a time-out when I hear something that needs to be restated. In an early session, a student stated that the middle section of a peer’s writing was “boring,” and I asked the group to think about feedback that would be more actionable for the writer. They wrestled with it for a few minutes, and then were able to say that as readers the few sentences provided good information and they were satisfied with it, but wondered whether it needed more exposition—a wider lens. I wondered whether the writing flowed, or whether they had questions as they read. I wondered whether the title worked. A friend had told me he didn’t “get” the title. For this first round, I facilitated my own session, although we eventually ask for someone else to facilitate for us. I asked for fifteen minutes of time.

(continued on page 15)
As we prepare to come together for the 12th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting in Tampa Bay, Florida this December, we want to provide you with a brief snapshot of the work of the Florida Center of Activity. We were fortunate to have gotten an early start with the work of the NSRF in 1995 and by the time funding for NSRF Coaches training ran out, we had built a small cadre of trained coaches working in a cluster of schools. To this day, most of these individuals are still actively engaged in CFG work—work that, in a multitude of ways, has transformed our personal and professional lives.

Like many other “Centers” of Activity, we formed from a network of colleagues who strongly believed in a new way of working and learning together that had not yet been embraced by the prevailing culture of our district. Indeed, some saw us as a band of subversives whose methods were so radical that our true motives had to be suspect. Still, like Jim Collins’ Hedgehog in Good to Great, we remained focused on our “one big thing.” With the support of key individuals in the district—our “embodied champions,”—we grew in numbers.

Five years ago, we had the good fortune to meet Don Pemberton, Director of the Lastinger Center for Learning of the College of Education. We met Don Pemberton, Director of the Lastinger Center, the NSRF Center of Activity in Florida, is currently working in 39 schools in 5 different districts (Alachua, Collier, Duval, Miami-Dade and Pinellas). We have about eleven university faculty and doctoral students, along with a growing number of NSRF National Facilitators and school-level coaches, working with us in our center. We have 3 levels of measurement to assess center effectiveness (internal team, external team, and grant-sponsored evaluation) which will help us to determine the impact of our work on teachers, schools, principals, and of course STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT. Preliminary research results indicate that our Lastinger Schools, when compared with matched control-group schools, show significant differences in student achievement scores on Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in math and reading.

We are especially proud of the fact that we actively seek to work with under-resourced schools and communities. Although Linda and I primarily focus on training coaches and providing follow-up support, the work of the Lastinger Center actively seeks partnerships with organizations that provide a wide array of critical services for the students. For example, we are proud to work with the following organizations:

- **Florida Children’s Foundation**
- **The Naples Children and Education Foundation**
- **The Community Foundation of Collier County**

The Education Foundation of Collier County, the Naples Children and Education Foundation, the Immokalee Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Collier County, are collaborating in a broad effort to improve student achievement and child well-being in Collier County. This effort is multi-faceted and includes intensive work in Immokalee elementa-

Using Protocols with Students...

Peggy Silva can be reached at psilva@sprise.com

White Privilege DNA

(continued from page 10)

Center of Activity: Florida

(continued from page 6)

For more information about the work of the NSRF Florida Center of Activity visit www.coe.ufl.edu/centers/lastinger/index.html. Pedro Bermudez may be contacted at pbermudez@dadeschools.net, and Linda Emm at lemm@dadeschools.net