

Protocols in Practice: Structures Support Special Education Students' Rigorous Practice

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Last fall I taught a graduate course for teachers enrolled in the National Board Certification process. In this "Protocols in Practice" I will share how my student, and her students, were given the opportunity to grow and learn with the support of some basic tools I shared from our NSRF repertoire.

Using CFG Tools in a Grad Class

A few weeks into the class, I shared the Connections protocol with my grad students. As usual, the first experience was characterized by a fair amount of silence and a little discomfort. At our next class, I reminded my students of our community agreements and asked one of them to facilitate. In our debrief I asked the class how they might use Connections with their students. Later in the same class, we used the Final Word to discuss a chapter from *At the Heart of Teaching: A Guide to Reflective Practice* by Grace Hall McEntee et al. The next week we began to share dilemmas and use the Consultancy protocol and probing questions to expand our thinking and practice.

A Consultancy Near Disaster

During the first class, when we shared dilemmas, my student "Denise" presented her struggles with her last period biology class. Denise was clearly at her wits' end with this small group of thirteen students. Her "problem" class was made up of all white students, some with IEPs, some who were repeating the class, others without IEPs and who struggled with reading and written expression, and one student with Asperger's Syndrome and a personal classroom support aide. Denise shared that the social nature of the class was becoming a disruption to the learning process. She contrasted this "problem" class with the rest of her high-achieving and honors level classes. She clearly resented feeling like a babysitter, marking time at the end of the day.

I was troubled by some of the low expectations for "these" students that were evidenced in the discussion section of the Consultancy. One participant suggested that Connections could be used to "kill" about 15 minutes each day. Another participant wondered if "these" kids could clean up the lab and set it up for the next morning's students. As a former hospital housekeeper, I was stung by the decision to assign "these" kids clean up crew duty so they could do something constructive. I was torn between my plan to teach the process of the pro-

cedure and my desire to interrupt the biased teacher expectations in my class.

Not either/or

I rejected the either/or approach and decided to use questions to both model the process and interrupt the clearly biased view of these "Gen Ed" students.

I was able to redirect the focus by reminding the group that Denise's framing question asked, "What can I do differently to support my last period class's learning of the required content?" I was also able to wonder aloud about the impact of low teacher expectations on low functioning students' behavior and learning. Denise took the question about her/our expectations to heart. I'm pleased to share a piece of Denise's successful change of practice with her last period class.

An Excerpt from Denise's' Portfolio

...I begin each class with a time for Connections. Through this process the class has developed a real sense of community. They show concern for each other and are learning to respect one another. They are better-able to focus on the content being covered in class; as a result student achievement has improved.

While only four of the twelve students in this class have an official IEP that designates their need for assistance with written expression, the majority of the class shares this problem. Written expression is a challenge but as shown in the class's daily connection time, verbal expression is not. In conducting this discussion on cancer, I wanted this verbal group of students to have an opportunity to excel.

Planning

The goal of this discussion was for students to understand the relevance of studying cancer to everyday life. The discussion on cancer was an extended thinking activity designed to link student knowledge of the cell cycle with an understanding of how cancer starts, spreads, is treated, and can be prevented. The discussion format was utilized to engage students in the content. Students were expected to gain knowledge by reading five articles from YOUR WORLD, Biotechnology & You, Volume 11, Issue Number 1...As students read they were expected to come up with at least 10 ideas, questions, and/or facts that interested them from the articles. The

day of the discussion, (continued on page 17)

each student was expected to present one idea, question, and/or fact to the class. Classmates were expected to respond to the presenter who then had the last word on the topic. At the completion of this activity, each student submitted their list of ideas and a written reflection on the content of the discussion.

Discussion preparation: I introduced the discussion by explaining my expectations, which were as follows: students will read five articles on the topic of cancer, students will record two ideas of interest from each article (2 points for each idea), students will present one idea to the class with an explanation as to the importance of said idea (10 points), students will comment on ideas presented by at least five of their classmates (5 points), students will conduct themselves in a respectful manner during the discussion (5 points) and students will submit a written summary of knowledge gained from the discussion (10 points). Students were given ample time to read the articles. In order to assist students with poor reading skills, I read the articles aloud to them. Other students, who were comfortable with reading, worked independently.

Reflection

Having students discuss the topic of cancer is much more effective than taking notes, completing worksheets, and/or taking a test on the subject. ... Students are to state educated opinions and share real life experiences with the class. This process allows for a more in-depth discussion of the topic on a more personal level than the textbook could ever provide. As I told my students when they wanted to know why we were having a discussion on cancer, "This is one topic that has great relevance to your lives, and knowledge of this topic could benefit you by extending your life."

Video Recording Analysis (Students in my grad class were responsible for videotaping their classes and analyzing the tapes as part of their NBCT portfolios.)

Proof of a student learning to reason can be seen in the fourth presenter's discussion. This student is trying to understand the point of medication in cancer treatment. She asks "If there isn't a cure, then what do the pills do?" Student respondents mention "stop the spread," "put cancer in remission," and "slow down the cancer." At that point we discuss the role of angiogenesis and angiogenesis inhibitors in the treatment of cancer. In her "last word, the presenter shows the thought she has invested in this idea as she contemplates the discussion. "You said if

you stop feeding the tumor, it will starve. If you do that, you can stop the cancer." She was able to use deductive reasoning to better understand the role of angiogenesis in the treatment of cancer.

I was able to help students further explore possible solutions to the concerns presented by each person by asking probing questions and directing students to the information found in the articles we read to prepare for the discussion. For example, the second presenter was concerned that removal of skin growths is not always a successful treatment for skin cancer. The first three respondents noted "cancer cells are still in the blood stream," "great grandmother had skin cancer removed in many locations on her face," and "cancer entered the blood stream." At this point I knew all students understood that removal of growths is not always successful because cancer cells enter the blood stream and show up at other points in the body. There was a pause in the conversation. So I asked probing questions to get students to think about why removal of skin growths is sometimes successful. I asked, "How can this be successful sometimes? What are the possibilities?" One student was then able to explain to the class that if you can catch the cancer before it spreads to the blood stream, then you can successfully treat the cancer.

One method to ensure fairness that I employed for this discussion was to make 100% participation a requirement. To ensure equity, I set up the discussion so that the presenter would have the right to the last word on the topic that they brought to the class. By doing this I allowed the presenter to clarify their understanding, restate their opinion, and/or simply acknowledge new information.

Closing Reflection

I was very impressed with the outcome of this discussion, and I made a point to let my students know how proud I was of them. One thing I did that made this process so successful was I stressed preparation for the discussion. I made sure that even my low level readers would be prepared by reading the articles to them.

I learned that my students, regardless of ability levels, are all capable of comprehending difficult scientific concepts.

I learned that discussion is the best method to actively engage this particular class of students in a topic related to biology. All of the students were listening and on task for the entire discussion. I (continued on page 19)



IEP meetings and try it out in a variety of states. If you are interested in being part of this collaborative effort, please contact me. ■

Azure Dee Smiley may be contacted at
asmiley@uindy.edu

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Fostering CFGs in a PLC Landscape

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and be explicit about the tensions regarding power and agency that inevitably surface when CFGs are introduced in a school. Our sustainability depends upon it. We must continue to set our own agendas and plans, and we must be accountable for revising and implementing those agendas and plans to meet the needs of our students. We cannot afford to settle for PLCs that are nothing more than grade or departmental groups with new names. Our students' success depends on our willingness to disturb the status quo, and CFGs are a big first step on the journey. ■

Donna Reid may be contacted at
cfgcoach@robreid.com

did not have one discipline problem. I did not have to remind students to complete an assignment. I could keep even the most talkative student in check by simply asking if his comment had anything to do with the discussion.

I learned that our daily Connection time has paid off in terms of student respectfulness. This is a rowdy, talkative bunch of students. But by following our expectation of respectful behavior while someone is talking, on a daily basis, this class has learned the concept of control. They were able to honor one another as they raised their hands to speak and waited to be called upon. I can't begin to say how proud I am of these students.

The final thing I learned from this discussion was that my students thoroughly enjoyed the process. One student wrote in his reflection, "I thought this discussion was a good idea because I learned a lot and had fun doing it. The fact that we had to come up with our own topics out of the magazine taught us how to pick important facts out of a group of information ... I really hope we do it again." Based on their performance and attitude, I intend to use discussion with this class as often as possible."

Denise's transformation from a teacher who was frustrated and unhappy about being "stuck" with a last period class of noisy, failing students, to a teacher working to differentiate instruction in support of each student's success was a pleasure to behold. Denise's "willingness to be disturbed" and challenge her assumptions about these students and their abilities reinforced my belief in student empowerment and our responsibility to personalize instruction. Denise's shift and success has also made me wonder about all of the students and teachers who continue to "mark time" in too many of our classrooms, with or without their IEPs. ■

Debbie Bambino can be reached at
dbambino@earthlink.net

Correction

In our last issue of *Connections*, we published the poem, "Race Matters" by John Patrick Moran. We mistakenly identified the author as being from California. In fact, Mr. Moran is a school coach with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. He wrote the poem during a weeklong Equity-Based Critical Friends Coaches training which was co-facilitated by Camilla Greene of Pennsylvania, Gregory Peters of San Francisco, and RoLesia Holman of North Carolina. - *Connections* Editorial Board

