

STUDENT WORK, STUDENT WORK, WHAT DO WE REALLY SEE? By Kaethe Perez, NSRF National Facilitator, CFG Coach in Florida, kaethe_p@msn.com

In my role as National School Reform Faculty facilitator, I work with a number of elementary schools in the University of Florida Lastinger Center project. School Leadership teams participate in a three day summer institute intended to build capacity and sustain Communities of Practice. During the school year we offer two follow-up sessions where conversations around felt dilemmas are addressed and action plans generated. At the invitation of the building principals, I am available to work at specific school sites with groups of educators that are studying their practice.

The principal of a particular elementary school and I had a conversation concerning some comments made in a state visit of her school. The state official wondered aloud what percentage of the staff gave independent work to students that could be considered 'meaningful,' with rigor and relevance to their learning. The principal agreed that during her daily walk-throughs, she and her assistant principals also observed that much of the student work lacked rigor and relevance.

At the same time, this school was poised to begin lesson study with some of the grade level teams. In our conversation, the principal and I discussed developing a series of PLC sessions focused on Looking at Student Work (LSW), as a passageway to lesson study. We agreed that looking at common definitions, using protocols to allow for equity of voice at the table, and experiencing student work protocols might give the staff a space of moderate risk to reflect both individually and collectively on the choices of student work made on a daily basis. Rather than undertaking lesson study due to a requirement, could this series 'soften' the stance of staff members, allowing them to design a cycle of inquiry springing from curiosity about their current and future student work? Could "Looking at Student Work" be a vestibule, or a passage, into the structure of formal "Lesson Study?"

Relevant questions to explore might be:

What are the majority of students doing when teachers work in small groups?

How do teachers select independent work?

What can we learn from the work assigned to students throughout the day?

On balance, what percentage of daily work informs instruction, and what percentage of daily work might be considered 'busy' work?

I wondered if a series of PLC meetings centered around "Looking at Student Work" might sharpen our professional lens when selecting student work.

What impact will a series of PD sessions focused on looking at student work have on teacher attitudes towards and selection of student work?

As a facilitator, can I develop a replicable professional development series that engages participants, allowing for reflective thinking, dialog, and ultimately action while at the same time adding strategies to their professional repertoire?

After our meeting, I drafted a framework of meetings with the staff, about 40



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For a complete packet of the protocols referenced in this article send an email request to nsrf@nsrfharmony.org.

minutes per session over a period of six weeks. The first few meetings would be with the total group. The final meetings would be in their own grade level location, with smaller groups working with selected student samples brought from their colleagues.

I relied upon documents and protocols developed by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) in building these agendas. One of my main objectives was to gain the trust of the group, help them realize the answers lie amongst them, not in my presentation. The framework I introduce and the staff experiences need to be internalized and transfer in some fashion to their regular planning and work time together. I felt the importance of remembering my responsibility as a facilitator: that less is more. Don't over-plan the agenda, or people will not remember anything!

I worked with one of the Assistant Principals to develop an exit slip we used at the three group sessions: *What do I want to remember about "Looking at Student Work?" What questions do I have about LSW?*

Agenda 1

Engagement activity – Dyad listening (link) – two rounds: 1) something positive that occurred today, 2) something that I might have changed in my lessons today

Review School Norms / Frame the LSW sessions

Text Rendering Protocol (link) using the NSRF document **Guide for Bringing Student Work** (link)

Debrief the session: *Why would we begin our time together with this article? What type of student work is currently being used, what would be good for our professional learning? How might you use the text rendering protocol in your classroom work?*

Agenda 2

Engagement activity – Continuum Dialogue (link) Staff members line up along the media cen-

ter wall to respond to various prompts:

1) Think about your classroom desk, put yourself on the continuum from tidy, moderately cluttered, or big mess! (humor in the first prompt is essential)

2) Since we met last Monday, I noticed something about the work my students are doing. (continuum from I did not think about it, I noticed something, I really got excited/upset at the work I was giving)

Then I split the line in the middle and had dyad listening, where the side that had done some of the work spoke first to their partner, to prime the pump and recall what we had done last week.

Review School Norms/ Frame the session

Experiential activity:

The total group worked on a third grade math non-routine problem individually, then discussed as a table their strategies and possible answers. I passed out three samples of actual student responses to this problem and the tables compared their thinking to what they thought the students were thinking in the problem. I used a variation on the **Making Mean-**

ing Protocol (link), leading the group through four prompts: *What do you notice? What questions does this raise for you? What is significant about this work and the objective of the mathematics thinking? What implications for the teaching and learning of this class of students?*

Agenda 3

(This meeting took place in grade level areas, due to the Book Fair using the media center.)

The Assistant Principal and instructional coaches looked on the Florida PALMS website and gave each team a math assessment set of problems, and the specialist team used art samples. This was their first solo attempt using the Making Meaning Protocol from last week.

One of my main objectives was to gain the trust of the group, help them realize the answers lie amongst them, not in my presentation.

The Principal and I sat in on two grade levels. One issue was there were too many samples, everyone brought everything and the focus kept shifting – however, there was wonderful conversation. Possible this overload led to the need for a more structured protocol with one person’s samples in the following weeks.

Agenda 4

(This meeting took place the Monday after Thanksgiving break, at the end of the day of a state visit – whole staff session. Determined this is a time for professional connections and conversation – explicitly connect LSW to the work already happening – this is not something ELSE, it IS THE work!)

Review Norms/ Frame the session

[Microlabs Protocol](#) (link to [protocol](#), [guidelines](#), and [suggestions](#)) Moved the grade level teams into triads. Triad listening used to return the focus to “Looking at Student Work” with three prompts:

- 1) *How has/can LSW inform my teaching practice and student learning in my class this school year?*
- 2) *What specific content area and/or students can I focus on to inform teaching and learning in my class this school year?*
- 3) *What connections can I make between LWS, my IPDP, or my inquiry this year? How could LSW be data or evidence of an intentional study of my practice?*

Quick Write: Something significant you heard or said in the microlabs, that you want to remember.

Push the grade level team back together and each member shares/ paraphrases what they wrote.

Debrief questions: *As a team, what did you hear this afternoon to focus your time together?*

How did the Microlabs Protocol ensure a risk-free, yet accountable process?

Can you see a use for this protocol in your classroom or in your PLC work?

Final Task: Huddle as a team, team leader make a four square graphic organizer. Mark one row 12/5 and the next row 12/12. Decide on two volunteers to bring student work samples, and two volunteers to facilitate the LSW protocol.

Agenda 5 & 6

Grade level teams met in their areas, using the [Making Meaning](#) (link) or [Collaborative Assessment Protocol](#). (link)

Findings

I reviewed the exit slips from the three group meetings. I interviewed the assistant principal about spill-over effects either individual teachers or in the grade level teams that moved into lesson study.

After the first session, there were comments like the following:

I felt the importance of remembering my responsibility as a facilitator: that less is more. Don't over-plan the agenda or people will not remember anything!

When do we
get time—
not before
or after
school—
to discuss
student
work with
teammates?

- *I want to remember to bring work that challenges the way I teach. Work that confuses me & how to approach different skills.*

- *Student work is the way you get your evidence for what you are doing. Bring work you'd like to forget or keeps you up at night.*

- *How will this help beyond what I already do when reflecting? The lesson is already over. When do you have time for do overs?*

- *When do we get time - not before or after school - to discuss student work with teammates?*

While there was interest and agreement, the question of time to reflect, and how can this help were evident.

After the second session, the comments began to morph – they had experienced the mathematics problem then looked at the student work:

- *I will remember to pay attention to my students' work and how does it reflect my teaching.*

- *Going through the process of looking at the text and not just jumping to speculation. Put yourself on the line of activity.*

- *I would like to remember about today's PLC is that the way I teach my class falls along my own teaching MISTAKES or error if 80% or better is not successful!*

- *I want to know that I am not being biased when reviewing my students work.*

- *What to do when you get student work that needs to be re-taught or the student needs further instruction?*

After the third group session – week 4, where we had professional conversations using the Micro Lab protocol, the comments were about informing practice, using colleagues as sounding boards and mentors, looking carefully at choices for student work, and how the resulting work can inform our day-to-day instruction:

- *To look at how students connect what they are asked to perform to what they actually provide (answers).*

- *Did I miss something that would allow me to better reteach?*

- *Looking at student's work I want to remember to try to see where my students are, what they're thinking, and how they came up with their answer.*

I believe that week 4 was a real turning point in the group beginning to 'see' the value of this work, understanding the importance of connecting student work to the intended instruction outcomes. Giving the staff time for conversation around their beliefs and actions build a sense of camaraderie which I think began to move the team members towards more collegial conversations. This is still not collaborative since the teams were not constructing common lessons (yet).

In a late spring interview with the Assistant Principal, she stated that this col-

laborative work impacted each grade level team, although in different ways. Every team became more intentional about the work selected and reviewed. Two grade levels began the formal lesson study process with instructional coaches. Another grade level came to the realization that in order to get the most out of the student work review they might develop a common lesson so they all are working within the same context – a desired outcome that was a bottom-up decision owned by the grade level team. In another state visit, the principal brought the team leaders together to share the impact of this work on the team collaboration. The Assistant Principal stated the series planted seeds that will continue to blossom into the next school year.

Reflection and Future Practice

This series of professional development reaffirms my decision this year NOT to develop and implement one-shot PD events. Over six weeks' time, this staff had some movement in their thinking about the work their students do and what it shows about THEIR instruction. A major objective of mine was met: to establish an environment of moderate risk, participant engagement, and respond to the feedback. This occurred by using intentionally chosen engagement strategies involving the participants emotionally at each session, determining appropriate NSRF protocols to give equity of voice to the groups, and offering time for reflection both orally and in writing after each session.

As David Sousa states in his article on Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers:

Professional development leaders should ask themselves the following questions to determine whether the format and content of their programs connect to positive emotions in most teachers and avoid triggering negative ones:

- *Does the program offer learning experiences associated with moderate challenge, excitement, creativity, and joy so teachers will be more likely to remember what they learn and implement it in the classroom?*
- *Does the program speak to a problem that teachers identified rather than some outside entity? If not, can we connect this content to teachers' concerns?*
- *Are teachers excited about this initiative?*
- *Have we included opportunities for hands-on participation and activities that address a variety of learning styles?*
- *Will participants give leaders feedback on the program—and receive regular feedback?*

Resources

National School Reform Faculty www.nsrffharmony.org “Looking At Student Work”

Dana, N., Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2008). *The Reflective Educator's guide to Professional Development: Coaching Inquiry-Oriented Learning Communities*. Corwin Press.

Sousa, D. (Online June 2009, Vol. 66) *Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers*. Educational Leadership [On-line], ASCD.org. 

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