

Protocols in the classroom

Scaffolding deep thinking in seventh graders

by CFG Coach in Washington, D.C.. Laura Merrill lmerrill@sheridanschool.org



Laura Merrill is a seventh grade homeroom teacher at the Sheridan School in Washington, D.C. After experiencing the  Chalk Talk Protocol during her CFG Coaches' Training last summer, she shared with us this story of a similar process she's used in her classrooms, and how she encouraged her students to think more deeply in response to "silent conversations."

My 7th grade American History class was studying the Columbian Exchange. In order to assess their knowledge as well as their ideas and responses, I asked students to engage in a silent conversation in which the prompt was: The Columbian Exchange led to dramatic cultural changes.

Our silent conversation began with students writing this prompt at the top of a sheet of paper and then silently writing about specific historical information they'd learned relating to this statement, or writing a response to the statement.

After students had a few moments to do their initial writing, they drew a line under their ideas and passed their paper to their neighbor. (Sometimes when following this process, or protocol in NSRF terms, I have the students move to their neighbor's desk — leaving their sheet of paper at their own desk — rather than having them pass the paper. This bit of physical activity is often welcome after having sat for a length of time.) After the change of papers or positions, students were instructed to carefully read what their neighbor had written on this newly acquired piece of paper, and then thoughtfully respond.

The cycle of passing, silent reading, and then responding went on for several rounds so that each student had the opportunity to read and respond to the ideas of three or four of their classmates.

To wrap up the silent conversation, I asked several students to share out the most interesting/surprising/powerful/important thing they read over the course of the silent conversation.

When I read over these silent conversations later, I noticed that a number of students were doing little more than writing, "I agree" or "I think this is right" in response to the ideas of their peers. I wanted to help students come up with strategies that they could turn to in order to push themselves to think more deeply.

In order to do this, I began by identifying some of the most interesting and powerful student-generated statements in the silent conversation. Then I made myself an example by following the same protocol: Copying each student-generated statement into a new document (in bold), I tried to think deeply in response to each (in bullet points below). Here are a few examples:

"Overall, the Columbian Exchange has helped — for the better — the life of the average American family."

- When I see the phrase "the average American family," I tend to see in my mind a family that looks like my own. But then I remember that my family is Euro-American. Many American families don't look much like my family at all. Are they not "average?" What does "average" mean in this statement?

- What does/should "average" mean when one is studying American history?

- Did Native Americans consider themselves "average" until Europeans and Africans arrived? How did Native Americans come to see themselves as they came to grips with the arrival of Europeans and Africans?

"Not everything about the Columbian Exchange was good. Maybe more efficient farming (iron tools), hunting (guns) and travel (horses) actually turned out to have some drawbacks. Maybe the introduction of these new things resulted in the destruction of some Native American groups at the hands of other Native Americans who now had guns and horses."

- This reminds me that I shouldn't believe the "myth/misconception" that there was only one group of Native Americans in the New World when Europeans arrived.

- Why is this idea that Native Americans were all the same such a powerful idea? Why do so many people believe it?

- This statement makes me think about how much we value or appreciate efficiency and "progress." When someone invents a new way to do something that involves less work and less effort, I tend to think that's a good thing. But is this always true?

- This statement also makes me think about how there are often unintended consequences when new technologies are introduced. Sometimes when human beings try to do good things, bad things happen as well. How can we better plan for "unintended consequences?"

To better illustrate the kind of "deeper thinking" I was asking of the students, I shared the complete document

(with five student-created statements and multiple responses from me to each). We read the document aloud as a class and then students were instructed to share their ideas about what I had been doing as I responded to the statements in bold. Together, we distilled a list of strategies for thinking deeply that grew out of that discussion. (See sidebar.) We reviewed this list of strategies regularly throughout the year, considering whether we had new tips to use in the future, and as a refresher, to remind ourselves how to move toward deeper, more thoughtful conversations.

My class and I welcome other educators picking up this list or our variation on Chalk Talk, to generate deeper thought in your own classroom. If you have other suggestions we might add to this list, please do email lmerrill@sheridanschool.org. 

LINKS:   [Chalk Talk Protocol](#)

[The Danger of a Single Story TEDTalk](#)

Ms. Merrill's 7th Grade Class's suggestions on How to think deeply about ideas and information

- » **Connect ideas to other important ideas.**
- » **Connect ideas from history to ideas and events that are important today.**
- » **Ask important questions.**
- » **Relate ideas to your own life.**
- » **Be skeptical/doubtful (but do this respectfully if you're responding to the ideas of others!)**
- » **Let your thoughts lead you to more thoughts. Give your thinking time to develop.**
- » **Notice and question your own responses/perspectives/biases.**
- » **Ask yourself if you have "dangerous single stories" about something.**
- » **For more on "The Danger of a Single Story," see the TED talk linked above.**
- » **Break an idea down into its important parts and zero in on those.**
- » **Focus on details (in an idea and in your response).**
- » **Concentrate on finding something interesting in the idea.**
- » **Let images and mental pictures move your thoughts forward.**

CFG work spreads to Israel

In April 2016, NSRF director Michele Mattoon visited Israel to lead a workshop training for 30 Darca Schools teachers. Darca Network consists of more than 27 high schools in Israel's geo-social periphery. The network strengthens the schools on their way to becoming high quality institutions. Darca is supported and encouraged by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and its affiliates are Rashi Foundation, Yitzhak Rabin Foundation (YRF), and AIU (Alliance Israelite Universelle).

A year ago, in July 2015, some of Darca's officials and teachers attended an open training for new CFG coaches in Indiana, USA. In this workshop, they were exposed to the Critical Friends Group work, to the NSRF protocols, and to the importance of teachers working together as a professional learning community.

After returning to Israel, the new CFG coaches created CFG communities in five Darca high schools. The teachers in these communities met weekly with the aim of improving their professional practice through collaborative learning. The use of protocols was spread and the success was great: the staff meetings were more productive and efficient and the teachers worked collaboratively to give each other honest feedback and ideas about how to improve their practice, how problems can be solved or new content created.

Due to this success, Dr. Mor Deshen, Senior VP in

Darca, decided to invite Ms Mattoon to Israel in order to train more Israeli CFG coaches in other schools throughout the country.

Thirty teachers from Darca schools in many cities in Israel arrived to a three-day workshop in Ashdod. All participating teachers were committed to positive school culture change. The training included many structured tools and protocols that promote meaningful communication, problem-solving, and learning. The participants learned how to analyze dilemmas, analyze data, look at student work, and give and receive feedback. Most importantly, the participants in the workshop learned how to use protocols in a way that gives time for active listening and reflections so that all voices in the room are heard and honored.

The implementation of NSRF protocols was seen immediately, as participants used them in professional days as a preparation for the new school year. Moreover, the plan is to activate at least ten more CFG communities throughout the network in this upcoming school year.

Darca management is certain that the contribution of the CFG work in Darca schools will be meaningful and will create a stronger working environment, a significant improvement in collaborative learning and eventually a better education for our pupils.

— *Revital Levgoren, Mor Deshen, and Boaz Ozery*