Protocols in Practice: Houston High School Students Reflect on Reform

MichaelAnn Kelley and Paul Gray, Houston, Texas

"Being a part of this school is helping me to be more of a leader, because when I see the school doing new things and being the trendsetters for the rest of the nation in a lot of different initiatives, then it makes me not afraid to try something new."
-Eisenhower student, *Peer Review: A Case Study, 2002*. The Houston Annenberg Challenge.

As the reform grant programs drew to a close, the Houston Annenberg Challenge posed the following task to all of the participating schools: …develop a reflective portrait of changes in teaching and learning as a result of this grant. The design of the portrait must be interactive.

Members of the reform team pondered the best way to meet the challenge of developing a reflective portrait that could adequately describe five years of reform work at a large urban comprehensive high school. How could we even begin to summarize a process that has impacted 2,300 students and 180 teachers during each year of the work? And how could we do all of this in a 60-minute interactive presentation?

After our initial amazement about the task passed, we decided to let the students speak for themselves. How had the reform work made a difference in their schooling? What changes had their school seen over the past five years?

Two students, Patrick and Warren, accepted the challenge of producing the school's reflective portrait. They chose to develop, write, and produce a video to document the changes they have seen in the school. Prior to production, both students had to do research to find out what the school was like before the grant was awarded and during the earliest reform work.

They turned to the school portfolio to find out about the history of their school.

The Eisenhower school portfolio has been compiled annually over the past five years. What began as a thin compliance document to meet the requirements of grant funders has evolved into a multi-layered reflective tool that captures brief moments in the life of our school-wide reform work.

During the video production process everyone learned several lessons. We learned the school portfolio told the story of our work in a way that people from different perspectives can all understand. Patrick and Warren were able to see the impact the reform had on their peers and therefore felt they needed to honor the other students' experiences. The students were able to determine what they felt was important, not necessarily what their teachers or members of the reform team felt was important, in their own school context. This realization led to another epiphany – that the real importance of school comes not from what the school can give us, but how we, the Eisenhower Learning Community, can support each other.

Once the students presented us with the first cut of their video, we decided to use a Tuning Protocol to strengthen the quality of the work. There were two foci for the protocol: content and technical skills. The dual focus was chosen because in a multimedia presentation, people are sometimes wowed by the "bells and whistles" and overlook important aspects of the content. We began with an introduction of the work by the students, followed by clarifying and probing questions. During the warm/cool feedback section, the feedback was divided into warm and cool for content and warm and cool for technical issues. After the feedback, the students reflected on what they learned from the protocol and what changes they could make in the reflective portrait.

Presenter Responses:

Warren (technical): "This was the first time that this program and a video of this length had been produced here at our school. The amount of technical skills that I learned has been overshadowed by the flaws. People are more apt to criticize what is wrong rather than praise what is good."

Patrick (content): "Trying to narrow six weeks of research of over five years of hard work down into 20+ minutes of script was very difficult. To show growth, learning, and change in a story was hard. I found that the best way to tell the story was to use actual quotes from the portfolio by the people involved in the different programs."

Warren: "Even though I've done the tuning protocol before, each time it helps me to step back from my work and re-evaluate and reflect on where I want to go with it."

Participant Responses:

Patrise: "I was in a new position this year as portfolio coordinator. It

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supporting students' projects. Using CFG protocols and practices we were able to examine, reflect on and inspire students' efforts.

Even though not all agency representatives experienced the benefits of the students' projects in their work, they felt that their contribution to the students' efforts was worthwhile. We do want to stress that the agency members who felt most connected to the work of the CFG were those working directly with students on their service projects.

Reflecting back on the experience we see that more effort should have been devoted to outreach efforts with people of color and the poorer members of our community. Although

we tried from the beginning to recruit CFG members from the Latino and African-American communities, we were not successful in doing so. We need to closely examine our past efforts and come up with a new plan for next year.

Creating and coaching this CFG was not an easy task to undertake, however it turned out to be quite rewarding in the end. It was probably most satisfying to see the students interact with the agencies, share their work, and brainstorm new ways of impacting on poverty with professionals. Keeping this collaboration alive and bringing about positive change in our school and community remains our goal and we

look forward to the coming school year.

We hope that this broad-based approach to CFGs will be developed in other schools so that we can learn with others as we stretch the potential of the CFG within the school and in the greater community.   ❖

If you would like more information about this CFG and its work, e-mail Gina at gweir@bloomington.in.us. Editor's note – if you'd like more information about the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project please contact Heidi Vosekas at hvosekas@harmonyschool.org

Protocols in Practice

was my job to facilitate the organization of Year 5's work. I found it very difficult to step into a position in the last year, as I did not feel that I had a broad picture of the work that had been done previously. This reflective portrait helped me to see the beginning, the middle, and the present."

Jackie: "I've worked with both students before, and I've also presented with Warren at a conference. I am not only amazed by his technical growth, but also by his perceptions of the work at Eisenhower. I feel that Patrick and Warren have captured Eisenhower and what we are about."

Facilitator Response:

MichaelAnn: "It's sometimes difficult to facilitate something that is so close and personal, yet I am always amazed by the professionalism of both teachers and students when given an opportunity to present their work."

How did this help us grow?

Having students more involved has allowed the adults/coordinators to step away and see the parts of the systemic structure and their relationships, as opposed to focusing only on the happenings of their programs. As

the Critical Friends experience of the faculty and students deepened over time, aspects of the "Critical Friends Group culture" became embedded into the school landscape. Formal and informal signs are present throughout the school. Informally, the language of Critical Friends—"clarifying questions", "warm and cool feedback", and other terms, peppers our everyday conversations. Formally, you can walk into classrooms across the campus and see Connections being done in a social studies classroom, a Tuning Protocol being done on an AP Art Studio portfolio, or students presenting and facilitating discussions in a biology classroom.

Rather than looking at individual groups and programs or evaluating test scores, the reflective portrait/ video gave us a chance to achieve a holistic view of the reform work that is being done by our school community. The reflective portrait, like the portfolio, tells our story and shows the learning that has occurred among students, teachers, and administrators. We've learned how interrelated our learning is when we're committed to creating a school community that

seeks to be the best for all of its students.

"Woah! You didn't think we were going to close the book with that, now did you? No. We're starting a new chapter. That was only the beginning." –an Eisenhower student, "Dwight D. Eisenhower Houston Annenberg Challenge Peer Review Reflective Portrait", 2002, Eisenhower High School.   ❖

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