Promoting academic collaboration in Mexico using NSRF protocols

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Last summer, I had the opportunity to provide professional development to middle school teachers in a populous school district just outside Mexico City in collaboration with the Centro de Enseñanza de Inglés Texcoco. This interdisciplinary partnership between US and Mexican educators is part of the U.S. State Department Fulbright Program, specifically its short-term teacher exchange program. It seemed an obvious match to me to connect the Fulbright Program’s goals to promote academic collaboration and “to build relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries to solve global challenges,” paired with NSRF’s mission to tackle educational challenges of equity and student achievement. I was eager to try using some NSRF protocols in a new environment!

Texcoco is a large district in the State of Mexico that includes the urban, concrete center of Texcoco de Mora, as well more rural towns in the surrounding hillsides and agave fields.

The district encompasses 921 public schools, crowded with 358,000 students aged 5-15 (preK-grade 9). Middle schools (escuelas secundarias) usually have between 40 and 50 students per classroom, often barely leaving room to walk between the rows of desks crammed with teenagers in uniforms. With 3,740 teachers to serve, creating an intimate Critical Friends Group community was a drastic shift in scale for administrators. However, we were able to bring together two groups of twenty interested teachers for collaborative workshops on science and English instruction.

While not resistant to the idea of collaboration, interdisciplinary group work and meeting protocols were completely (literally!) foreign to the Mexican teachers. Invited to our workshops because of their dedication to teaching, these educators have relied on their own ingenuity, endless Google searches, and personal time to generate engaging lessons and to become beloved English and science teachers. The federally-mandated, standardized and exam-focused secondary school curriculum could easily leave teachers feeling very powerless to innovate and make profound changes in their instructional practices.

However, these dedicated teachers were eager for space to work together. They were open to new ideas and experimenting with different approaches. They were also creative in finding time and space for innovation in their rigid schedules (in the days between state exams and the end of the term, or in the shifting calendars around holidays or festival assemblies).

One of my first observations in Mexican middle schools was that classrooms containing 50 chatty adolescents and windows open to noisy courtyards, even “silent” activities (like exams) are not quiet! Students and teachers alike must be able to focus on their work inside the classroom, despite all the distractions happening just outside the open door: guidance counselors borrowing students, parents chatting in the hallway, folkloric dance practices, traffic noises, and even firecrackers! I realized that I needed to adjust my own expectations based on the school environment, and would need to create an agenda with protocols that did not rely heavily on meditative silence.

As a coach, another of my challenges was to choose protocols that allowed for meaningful collaboration in subdivided smaller groups, while providing enough guidance to engage active, equitable participation. While I strive to practice adaptive facilitation with all the groups I have the opportunity to coach or train, these challenges highlighted for me the importance of surveying teachers before the meetings, and then carefully reading participant reflections after each session to adapt our agendas. While the groups of hard-working teachers were highly motivated to improve, I quickly discerned from their feedback they were not very eager to share imperfect pieces of work with their colleagues. Most had never had an opportunity to learn from their peers.

Because some of the workshop sessions were conducted in English, while others were in Spanish, another
coaching challenge was to choose protocols that were accessible in a second language, either for me as a non-native Spanish speaker, or for the participants as English language learners. NSRF has been partnering with CFG Coaches at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala who are also native Spanish speakers to translate protocols contained in our Coaches’ Handbook, and I was grateful for the opportunity to use some of those early drafts.

Based on these challenges, I put together the following agenda to scaffold trust and to build group collaboration skills, while periodically circling back to the needs and issues raised by the group over the multi-day workshops.

- Picture Metaphors Activity
- Compass Points Activity
- Agenda Planning Protocol
- Chalk Talk Protocol
- Success Analysis Protocol
- Reflections Review
- Zones of Comfort, Risk & Danger
- Feedback Carousel Protocol

In the final workshop evaluations, teachers indicated that the foundational activities like Compass Points and Comfort Zones were most useful: “I liked the activities because they required creativity and reflection.” By using the Chalk Talk protocol to tackle issues raised by the group during the Agenda Planning activity, teachers were able to discover and to discuss some of their commonalities: “I learned that we all confront similar situations, with different resources.” The valuable warm and cool feedback that each teacher received during the Feedback Carousel activity left many teachers eager for more opportunities to collaborate: “I learned that I miss having more communication among teachers.”

The Mexican teachers’ feedback underscored the importance and value of scaffolding and trust-building protocols, regardless of our wide variety of school settings and cultural contexts. We learned that translations are tricky when the original content includes common colloquialisms and idioms. (NSRF will be taking extra care in future versions of our materials to remove those for better clarity.)

I am grateful for the opportunity to have used the NSRF collaboration tools that we English-speaking CFG Coaches have at our fingertips, and the opportunity to use translations. They truly helped me fulfill the objectives of the Fulbright Program to build international relationships.

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