Using protocols in online discussions

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Readers of ***NSRF Connections*** already know the benefits of using protocols to structure conversations during Critical Friends Group meetings, other meetings, in classrooms, and in other professional development opportunities. However, meetings can be short, and we may feel rushed or limited in our opportunities to really process and think deeply, even with the use of protocols.

To address some of these issues, I've started adapting NSRF protocols for use on online discussion boards to begin or extend conversations that occur in school-based professional development. In my work, we've used online discussions as part of the mandated hours for PD. Teachers were happy with the more flexible mode of online conversations rather than scheduling additional meetings. I facilitated "choice groups,"groups in which teachers choose to take part because they want to engage in the topic, which makes the participation go more smoothly

In addition, I have found that using protocols in other online communities, such as university classes or even informal teacher groups, brings together a wide variety of voices that may not have been be able to be heard in face-to-face meetings due to time or location constraints.

Research shows that online modalities offer the opportunity to extend the learning community beyond limited in-person interactions. Conversations that occur online offer the benefits of allowing discussion to continue asynchronously over time and distance, allowing educators from different schools to bring their expertise and experience to the learning community beyond regularly scheduled professional development sessions.

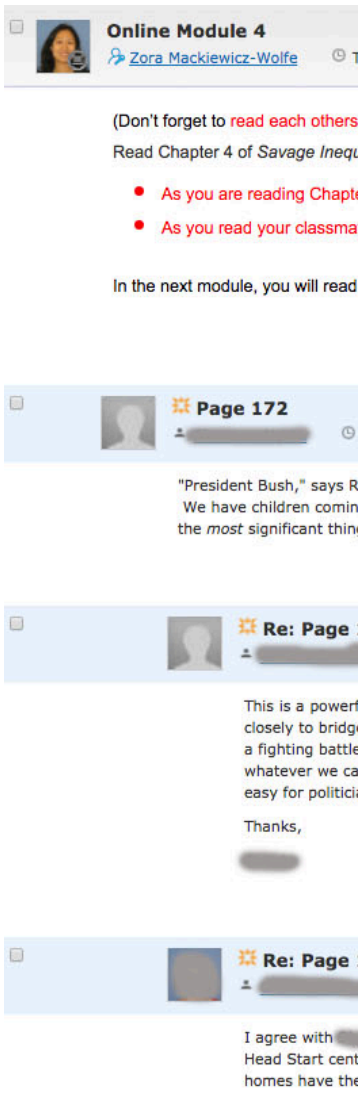
However, participants in online forums often comment on the lack of quality communication and activity. They note that they post infrequently on discussion boards, responding only to the required prompts, and they remain disconnected and isolated from each other. While frequent interaction is helpful to building a sense of community and lessening isolation, quality interactions are also important to help develop collaborative or critical inquiry stances towards leadership and teaching. This indicates that participating and leading conversations in online formats requires additional skills and expertise for effective online collaboration and inquiry to occur—skills and expertise NSRF coaches learned in training and through the use of protocols in in-person arenas!

In this article, I'll share how and why I've used online protocols and some of my "lessons learned" about adapting protocols for asynchronous online conversations.

Why protocols in online discussions?

One criticism of online discussion boards is that often there is no clear focus in a discussion. To counter this criticism, a facilitator can use a protocol to clearly identify the purpose, content, and how people can participate. For example, I've modified the Four A's protocol to introduce a specific reading before a meeting. About one week before our face-to-face meeting, I asked the participants to read a short text and follow the protocol by posting their Assumptions, Agreements, Arguments, and Aspirations to the board thread. Then each participant reads each others' posts so that we could jump right into our discussion when we arrive at the face-to-face meeting. This allows participants to clarify their own thinking as they write their posts, and to process what was written by others in the group before we met, which allowed for us to dive into a deeper discussion in a shorter amount of time.

Similarly, the Text Rendering protocol can be used to help participants focus on the text during a discussion about a topic, rather than just going off on tangents or stories. In the first round of the discussion, I gave participants a reasonable deadline, asking them to list their sentence, phrase, and word. Then I added a second round to the protocol, asking participants to respond to each others' posts after reviewing everyone's contribution. In their responses, participants were able consider the different perspectives, comment on themes that emerged and their reactions to what others had chosen, and consider questions raised from reading each other's writing.



I've also found that using protocols in online discussions, similar to face-to-face discussions, helps to facilitate participation, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate and helping people talk to each other, rather than just respond to a discussion board prompt. For example, using the Three

Levels of Text protocol, I've asked each participant in the group to select a passage, share a brief reflection about the passage, and then what they think are the implications to their work in their first discussion board post. Then after everyone has posted their initial thoughts, the group can go back and write their responses to each others' posts.

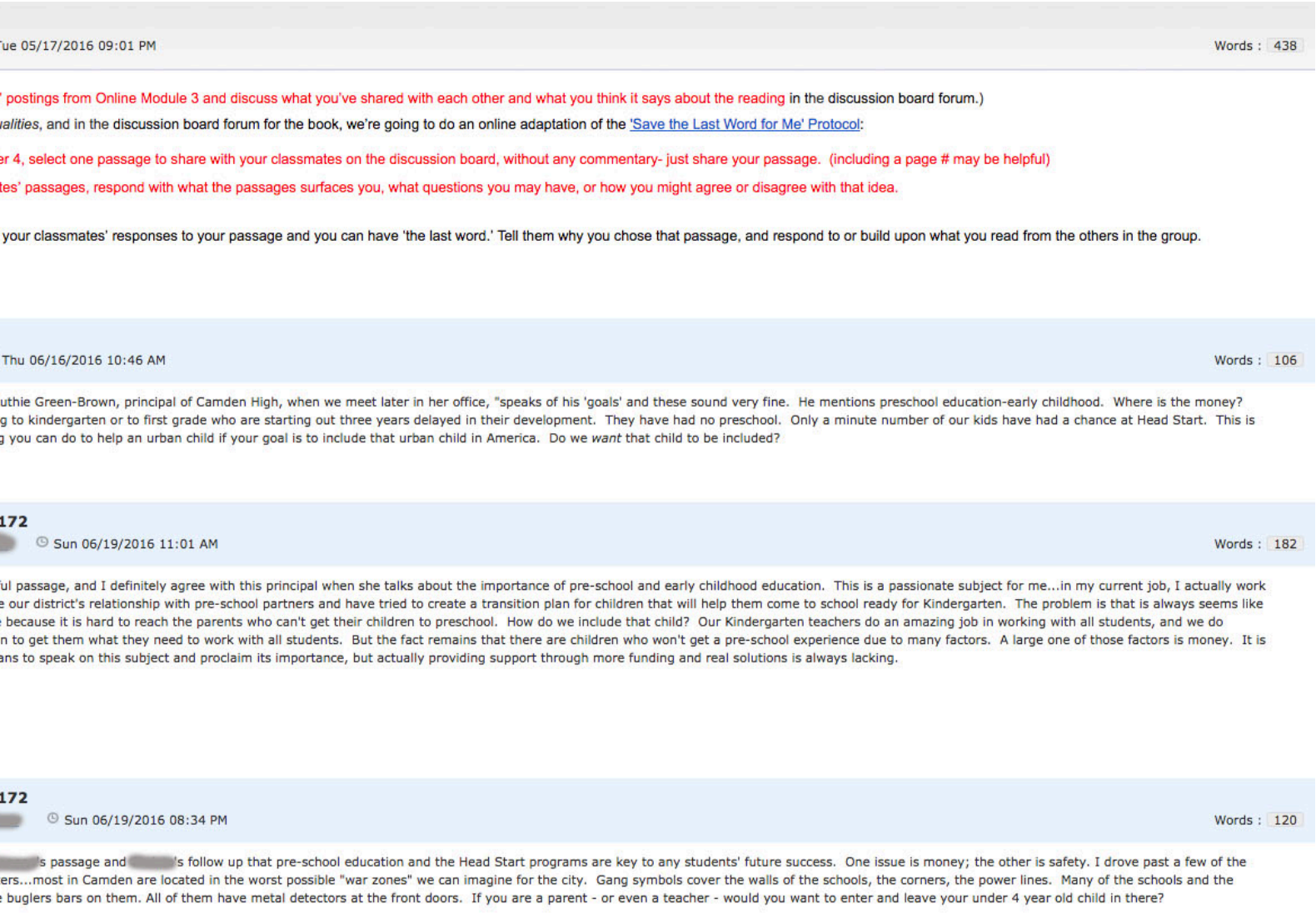
Save the Last Word for Me is another protocol that can be modified for online discussions. In this protocol, participants share a passage that is meaningful to them on the discussion board, and then other members post their response to the passage. After everyone has had a opportunity to add their responses, the "presenter" then has the opportunity to read everyone's responses and have the "last word" in a final response. This format has allowed for more substantive discussion board responses since the asynchronous nature of the posts allows participants to have more time to construct their responses and process the ideas that are raised by others.

Using online discussion boards can also extend the amount of time you have for a group to engage with each other. For example, a simple protocol such as the Closing Quotes activity can also be used to help reflect on a discussion after a meeting, particularly if you were rushed or limited by time at the end of a session. I often link to a list of quotes and then ask each participant to post the quote they picked and then share what it means to them in relation to the work we had just completed.

Important considerations

As you can see, protocols can be very helpful in structuring online discussions. However, here are some "lessons learned" and suggestions for how they can be facilitated to support the needs of the people in your group.

Agreements Just as in any community, it is important to establish trust and set Agreements for online participation. Perhaps this is even more important in online communities because of the potential for words to be misconstrued without the additional context and nonverbal cues present in face-to-face interactions. Sometimes it is possible to simply extend your existing Agreements and adapt them to online conversations, but in other situations, you may need to structure a separate conversation about what people want to have happen in your online spaces. Also,



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' postings from Online Module 3 and discuss what you've shared with each other and what you think it says about the reading in the discussion board forum.)
ualities, and in the discussion board forum for the book, we're going to do an online adaptation of the 'Save the Last Word for Me' Protocol:
er 4, select one passage to share with your classmates on the discussion board, without any commentary- just share your passage. (including a page # may be helpful)
tes' passages, respond with what the passages surfaces you, what questions you may have, or how you might agree or disagree with that idea.
your classmates' responses to your passage and you can have 'the last word.' Tell them why you chose that passage, and respond to or build upon what you read from the others in the group.

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uthie Green-Brown, principal of Camden High, when we meet later in her office, "speaks of his 'goals' and these sound very fine. He mentions preschool education-early childhood. Where is the money? g to kindergarten or to first grade who are starting out three years delayed in their development. They have had no preschool. Only a minute number of our kids have had a chance at Head Start. This is g you can do to help an urban child if your goal is to include that urban child in America. Do we *want* that child to be included?

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ul passage, and I definitely agree with this principal when she talks about the importance of pre-school and early childhood education. This is a passionate subject for me...in my current job, I actually work e our district's relationship with pre-school partners and have tried to create a transition plan for children that will help them come to school ready for Kindergarten. The problem is that is always seems like e because it is hard to reach the parents who can't get their children to preschool. How do we include that child? Our Kindergarten teachers do an amazing job in working with all students, and we do n to get them what they need to work with all students. But the fact remains that there are children who won't get a pre-school experience due to many factors. A large one of those factors is money. It is ans to speak on this subject and proclaim its importance, but actually providing support through more funding and real solutions is always lacking.

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's passage and 's follow up that pre-school education and the Head Start programs are key to any students' future success. One issue is money; the other is safety. I drove past a few of the ers...most in Camden are located in the worst possible "war zones" we can imagine for the city. Gang symbols cover the walls of the schools, the corners, the power lines. Many of the schools and the e buglers bars on them. All of them have metal detectors at the front doors. If you are a parent - or even a teacher - would you want to enter and leave your under 4 year old child in there?

just like in other communities, it is helpful to revisit your agreements regularly and examine your discussion threads to see the patterns of interaction. Are responses substantive? Do people respond to the ideas that are posted, or do they just add their own ideas? Do people tend to simply agree with each other without adding content, or to avoid conflict?

Timing Establish specific time frames for posting and when to respond. From the examples above, you can see that some protocols require that participants share an initial thought after which others can respond. If time frames are not specified, it would be difficult to respond: without a deadline, fewer people will post their initial ideas in time for collaboration. I found that it is helpful to ask everyone to complete their initial post by a specific date, and then ask everyone to go back to respond to the posts by a second date. Also, specifying an end date is helpful so that you can remind everyone to see how others responded, as well as to get a full picture of the conversation.

Group size Because it takes time to read and write substantive posts, you may find it necessary to consider the size of the online groups. Depending on your selected protocol, you may find that having only 4-5 people in a group is sufficient for a rich conversation. So, just as you manage group configurations in face-to-face discussions, you should also keep that in mind for online discussions. Perhaps you can use the online space for some small group discussions, and then have a larger shareout during your face-to-face meeting time.

Debrief Just as in "live" protocols, its important to debrief the protocol experience and ask for feedback. Asking participants to consider *"What were some aspects of the use of protocols that you found helpful to stimulate the discussion? How do you think the protocols helped you to be a better online participant? What suggestions do you have to make this experience better?"* gave me great, thoughtful responses and encouraged participants to use these protocols in their own work.

Conclusions

Online discussions provide an opportunity to extend and deepen the collaboration that occurs in our regular learning communities, which generally are limited by time, and sometimes geography. Adapting and using protocols in online spaces provides facilitators with structured formats that have set schedules and specific guidelines for communication among participants. Just as in face-to-face meetings, the use of protocols promotes a safe environment by providing frameworks for equitable participation and focused feedback.