

Various uses for the Futures Protocol By Luci McKean

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Instead of feeling stuck, disheartened, or worried, participants in a Futures Protocol get excited about the future that they want to build. The structure of this brainstorming protocol frees up energy and excitement to spur on creativity and empower the participants' visions, no matter the age of the participants or their current situation.

Purpose and setup

For those who have not experienced a Futures Protocol, its purpose is “to expand and clarify the vision of what the presenters are trying to accomplish, to identify opportunities and avenues for focused work or improvement, and/or to guide purposeful actions and reduce wasted efforts on any new plan or project.” This is one of NSRF’s most challenging protocols (rated 5/5 in facilitation difficulty), but when conducted successfully, it invigorates a group into actions to turbocharge the future they envision.

It’s a bit challenging to write about this protocol because, within it, we talk about and experience time differently than in our everyday lives. After the set up, the presenter briefly tells what they are trying to accomplish, and set a time-frame. For example, a relatively new CFG community might use this protocol to brainstorm ways that a thriving culture of CFG work might transform their environment within five years. Stating a specific “end date” allows participants to anchor their imagination in one particular timeframe, rather than some people thinking ahead only a few months and others thinking of a time further out.

After the setup and presentation of the central idea, the

participants can ask a few clarifying questions, and then the presenter shifts to a chair at the back of the room. At the front, at least two easels with chart paper are set up, with volunteers to help scribe this fast-moving protocol. The presenter being out of the field of vision of the rest of the group is an important aspect, as we do not want the participants to gauge the effect of their thoughts on the presenter, nor the presenter driving the direction of the ideas through body language or facial expression. Plus,

the presenter being at the back of the room gives them a unique viewpoint of how this particular group might “take the idea and run with it” that they would not necessarily experience if they were sitting within the group.

The future is now

The facilitator then explains that we’re removing ourselves from the current date and projecting ourselves to the date set by the presenter. Some facilitators find that physical movement helps participants with this shift in perspective: they may move to a different place at the front of the room to physically mark the shift, or they may invite the participants to get up, walk around the table, and “when we return to our seats, it will be 2021!” As the group settles back into their seats, the facilitator welcomes everyone “back” and adds to the illusion of time with verbal cues.

It’s vital that everyone knows to begin speaking from the perspective of 2021, using present-tense verbs rather than future tense, especially when used cautiously: “Every teacher, administrator, and staff member is supported with a CFG community” rather than “we might have more people doing CFG work.” Facilitators should warn participants that we must strictly follow this guideline and they may be requested to rephrase accordingly. This is part of the reason the protocol has 5/5 rating for facilitation: you must be prepared to gently but firmly redirect a participant whose words make the illusion of 2021 falter!

Also, we say “the word ‘no’ does not exist in this protocol.” This is not literally true, but we encourage partici-

pants to think of the bright futures rather than tempering their thoughts with negativity. Ideas that may today be considered impossible are now courageously spoken as truth in this future time. “All students pass the state-mandated test!” or “We no longer retain students!”

Once the group begins to dream positively about the future, things start happening very quickly, so you’ll need at least two scribes to keep up. If there’s a lag, the facilitator should have a few probing questions in mind to help: “What’s happening in the hallways between classes?” “How are the teachers interacting with one another?” “What do parents think about your school in 2021 and how do you know those things?” When the timer rings, it’s time to place the last of the charted results onto the wall and move to the next step.

What was it like “back in 2018”?

The next set of charted lists should be titled with today’s date. Still within the context of “2021” we now “look back” to what it was like in 2018. Our language use must keep with the perspective of being “in 2021” and thus we say “Back in 2018, our parking lot was full and not very safe” and “Our school had a D rating from the Department of Education.”

It’s surprising what looking “back” at what is actually happening now does to our thinking. From the context of the future, we can be sad, but already a bit detached from what currently feels like plaguing issues to us. After the almost-giddy imaginings of the previous step, participants might struggle a bit with this part of the protocol. After creating an exciting future one might expect this step to feel like a screeching stop. But as we create the list of what it was like “back then,” we find some clues for the next step in this protocol, “remembering” actions we took to move from “then” to “now” (2018 to 2021). Some 2018 practices are inhibiting the future we envision in 2021, and we might not have seen that fact were it not for this protocol. This step reminds us of why we needed to change and what some of those changes need to be.

How did we do that?

Finally, after posting the charted list of “back then” to the far left of our “future” charts on the wall, we analyze steps that “did” happen in the meantime.

In this step, participants connect what “was” and what “will be” and list specific actions in between. Again, it’s important to continue speaking from the time zone of 2021: “those CFG meetings we had back in 2018-2019 really began shifting our culture to ‘one school.’ And when we got more people involved, the teachers felt much better supported.” By “remembering” steps (in real life: brainstorming steps) we recognize many actions that will contribute to

the future listed in the first part of this protocol.

The experience here may be a bit surprising: many of the ideas generated in this step are very practical and easy to implement. From our current time-frame of reference outside the protocol, the ideas might be rather invisible, or might be obvious but seem unimportant. Other ideas generated here are more idealistic and need a little more buy-in to make them operational. But the participants can see a connection and can take intermediate steps now to help build to those activities.

Debriefing and next steps

After bringing the presenter back into the circle and getting some feedback from them, the whole group debrief is used to begin narrowing the ideas and actions into manageable subsets for teams to address. This process is important in helping to transform the envisioned future into a reality story.

Sometimes, in the debrief, the group finds it overly challenging to narrow the ideas or actions into specific pathways and priorities. If this happens, the facilitator might act as presenter if there is a concept or action in that list that they find most helpful to focus on. If time is available, you might even do a bit more action step brainstorming around that part.

Again, it’s difficult to describe in text because this protocol is such a powerful, unique experience. The group leaves with excitement about the future and a variety of clear action steps, something that doesn’t often happen within run-of-the-mill meetings without protocols! Even if the group does not follow through with all the defined action steps or if the future doesn’t happen quite as they’d envisioned it (maybe teachers and admins but not staff members have their own CFG meetings), use of this protocol shifts the participants’ attitudes toward change and gives them hope, which might be sorely lacking.

Uses to consider

Normally a small group within a staff use the protocol to shift some part of the school to a new place of improvement. In addition to various faculty or staff projects, the protocol might be used to envision changes in things like an in-school suspension program, the literature club, or Student Council. The Futures Protocol is a great way to begin the planning process toward a big district change or a school-wide initiative such as implementing project-based learning or differentiated instruction. Here are a few other specific success stories.

The future of 8th graders

On a much smaller scale, a classroom teacher newly

trained as a CFG Coach had the idea of using the Futures Protocol on a personal level with his 8th grade class. Each student was to brainstorm individually on a sheet of paper what their future would look like eight or ten years into the future, after they were done with school. What would they be doing as career? Where would they be living? What does their house and car look like? What did they enjoy doing as a pasttime?

Then the students got another sheet of paper labeled “The Past” and they began to think back to what were they doing in 7th and 8th grades that “was” helpful to this future they have envisioned? What were some of the inhibitors or roadblocks to success? What wasn’t working? Thinking about their current and recent history through the lens of their desired goals plants the seeds for actions steps later.

Then each student pulled a third piece of paper to write down action steps taken in high school that created that beautiful future. What classes did they take? What activities did they participate in? What did they do with their spare time? What helped them be successful in high school, and what moved them toward what came after high school? What did they do to look for a place to continue their education or training? What did they do to find the right place? Who did they talk with to get ideas?

Finally, each student started yet another list of action steps for “back in 8th grade.” What did they begin to do as eighth graders to begin moving toward this bright future? The teacher prompted the students on how to write action steps concretely and to consider framing them as SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). They were also prompted to look at their seventh grade “Past” list and consider who they talked to and what they did when they needed help. In debrief, these steps based on 7th and 8th grades are revealed as concrete actions that they could start on right away.

After debrief, this particular teacher sorted their students into groups to use a modified version of the [Tuning Protocol](#) to help each other fine-tune their plans. These students kept their finalized plans in their folder, and the teacher would prompt them to review the plan often to see how they were doing and remind them of the future they saw for themselves.

Working with a presenter from outside the school

On occasion I have seen groups who choose to work on a much larger scale with their future. In one case a true “Community High School” wanted to be an active change agent for their small community within a large city. This team brought in the director of the school who presented some of reasons she felt the need for the school to be more

involved in its community. Then the CFG group used the Futures Protocol to envision the future the director had begun to describe.

Ideas were all over the place, and, after seven minutes of brainstorming, we stopped to check in with the director: “Where are we heading in the right direction and where are we not?” She re-focused us on the ideas she heard that most closely matched her vision or pressed it into directions she appreciated. Then the group continued envisioning and brainstorming this beautiful, connected future. The group was very excited about the future they could create.

Because they chose a time-frame four years into the future and they had brainstormed a large number of possible outcomes, drafting actions steps felt a bit like “trying to eat an elephant bite by bite.” The group decided to begin with action steps two years “back from the future” (which was actually still two years INTO the future from today’s actual vantage point). What did we do two years ago that got us to our new future of today? After about seven minutes of that perspective, the group looked specifically to the beginning of our change four years ago (today, from the real-life perspective). The new prompts were: What were our first steps? How did we begin, leading to the steps we just generated that got us to those two years leading to this end-point?

These subtle changes gave the group a way to get started without doing everything all at once. First steps were practical and necessary to result in such a significant change in the school community. The director was excited for the ideas and the groups enthusiasm for her “not so pie-in-the-sky concept.” She also felt like she had a group of people who now shared her vision. With her leadership and direction, the CFG group helped her form working committees to prioritize and organize next steps.

Conclusion

Although complicated to facilitate, the Futures Protocol has many qualities to appreciate. It will take a group from the impossible to the possible, making the future feel exciting rather than overwhelming, and giving them action steps to accomplish so much positive results.

And there are many other variations possible with this protocol: some groups convert the results of the Futures Protocol using the [Affinity Mapping Protocol](#) so different individuals or subgroups can take ownership of particular ideas. Some groups simply keep the chart papers posted on a wall for continued review over time. Others take photographs of the finished chart papers and read the contents into Google Voice, creating a digital document to be shared.

The Futures Protocol offers the opportunity to dream about what the future can be and then brainstorm practical ideas on how to get there. 