

What Are Protocols and How Do They Work?

We are including this brief introduction on protocols for two reasons:

1. To provide some insight into the purpose and benefits of using a protocol; and
2. To help connect the powerful structures of a protocol with the more loosely defined, yet defined nonetheless, structures of discourse.

Excerpted from The Facilitator's Book of Questions, Allen, D. Blythe, T. 2004

Sometimes, powerful opportunities to learn with and from others occur spontaneously and naturally in the course of daily life. A casual lunchtime conversation about what to make for dinner unexpectedly turns into a thoughtful exchange about the relationship between food and culture. Discovering a common interest (woodworking, travel, nineteenth-century novels) with a new acquaintance or a longtime colleague can lead to an exchange of ideas, perspectives, and suggestions – and a promise to continue talking!

What Is A Protocol?

Protocols are structures that enable educators and, sometimes, others (e.g., parents, invited guests) to look carefully and collaboratively at student and teacher work in order to learn from it. While different protocols vary in significant features, they all do two things: (1) provide a structure for conversation – a series of steps that a group follows in a fixed order, and (2) specify the roles different people in the group will play (typically, a facilitator, a presenter, and participants). Protocols do these things in order to promote a conversation among colleagues that enables them to learn about aspects of teaching and learning. The structure of protocols is intended to encourage conversations, normally carried out within 40 minutes to a little over an hour, that are productive, inclusive, positive, and safe.

Protocols can be deceptively simple. On the surface, it would seem that a group need only walk through the steps of a protocol to have a satisfying conversation. The reality is more complex. Protocols, after all, are designed to help configure – not script – an experience through which individuals and the group as a whole can learn. Experienced teachers know that even with a carefully detailed lesson plan in hand, teaching is not simply about moving through the specified activities one by one. Rather, they use the plan as a guide, while taking into account and responding to the questions, concerns, and responses of the students in the class. The protocol, like the teacher's lesson plan, functions as a guide or an outline. Like any tool, to be useful, it needs to be wielded with skill and good judgment. A facilitator's job, like a teacher's, is not only to know the steps of the protocol, but also to apply the skills and judgment needed to use the protocol effectively to support the group's learning. An experienced facilitator recognizes that the outcomes of such learning experiences are never entirely predictable.

What Is A Protocol?

The word *protocol* has different meanings depending on the professional context in which it is used. In education circles, the word has evolved over time to signal a particular kind of group interaction: A protocol-guided conversation aims at enabling educators and interested others to learn more deeply about teaching and learning. Here, and throughout this book, we are speaking of protocols used to promote among colleagues both exploration of important areas of teaching and learning as well as sustained collaborative inquiry into particular questions about teaching and learning.

Within this broader purpose, different protocols can be used to achieve more specific purposes. The purposes of most protocols in current popular use can be arrayed along a continuum that runs from “question raising/problem finding” to “question answering/problem solving.”

The Spirit of a Protocol

A well-designed protocol is more than the sum of its steps. Protocols not only have specific and identifiable features and goals, but they also have a certain “feel” or create a certain atmosphere in which a group works together. Often, the spirit of a protocol is generated by the ways in which the various steps work together to maintain a creative tension among several important qualities:

1. Talking and listening
2. Discipline and play
3. Safety and risk
4. Individual learning and group learning

By “balance,” we do not mean the static, steady state of a set of scales weighted equally. Think instead of a dynamic fluctuation, perhaps the way a pendulum maintains a kind of balance by swinging back and forth over a single midpoint. The balances described here shift throughout a protocol. Different protocols provide for different balances. For example, one protocol may encourage more listening on the part of the presenting teacher; another may hold the group in the listening role for longer or at different points. The facilitator plays a critical role in finding and maintaining the right balance. The group also shares the responsibility for getting the balance right. Its ability to do so, of course, hinges on the participants’ understanding of the protocol – understanding that comes through both experience and the facilitator’s work with the group.