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2-2015

# Power Tools for Talking: Custom Protocols Enrich Coaching Conversations

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### Recommended Citation

Pomerantz, Francesca and Ippolito, Jacy, "Power Tools for Talking: Custom Protocols Enrich Coaching Conversations" (2015). *Childhood Education and Care Faculty Publications*. Paper 2.  
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By Francesca Pomerantz and Jacy Ippolito

**CUSTOM PROTOCOLS ENRICH  
COACHING CONVERSATIONS**

**D**iscussion-based protocols — an “agreed upon set of discussion or observation rules that guide coach/teacher/student work, discussion, and interactions” (Ippolito & Lieberman, 2012, p. 79) — can help focus and structure productive professional learning discussions.

However, while protocols are slowly growing into essential elements of professional learning in schools (Ippolito, 2010, 2013; Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009), there remains little research to

guide educators in the process of exploring and implementing protocols to advance specific instructional goals.

With this in mind, we have begun to document how teams of teachers explore and use protocols to support professional learning (Ippolito & Pomerantz, 2013/2014).

We investigated how the use of protocols enhanced professional learning among a group of reading specialists when Salem State University partnered with a suburban school district. The goal was to support eight elementary and two middle school reading specialists as they became data coaches, helping classroom teachers examine the implications of literacy data for their instruction.

This project took place in a northeast U.S. suburban school district with one high school, one middle school, and five elementary schools. Of the district's roughly 5,000 students, fewer than 20% are of African-American, Latino, or Asian descent, and fewer than 10% report that English is not their first language.

To document how the 10 middle and elementary reading specialists implemented protocol-based data meetings, we asked the following questions:

- Which protocols would teachers adopt, adapt, and find most useful when presented with an array of options?
- What processes would facilitate the adoption and implementation of the protocols?
- In what ways would protocols influence the quality of the conversations at instructional data meetings?

Here are the results of our research.

#### **Which protocols would teachers adopt, adapt, and find most useful when presented with an array of options?**

Over the 2011-12 school year, we conducted a series of 10 two-hour workshops to build reading specialists' capacity for designing and using protocols to lead instructional data meetings with teachers.

Using the collaborative assessment conference protocol, we began by examining two short case studies of struggling readers. In this protocol, a facilitator asks participants to make observations about student work or data brought by a presenting teacher, raise questions, and discuss the implications for teaching. Initially, one of us played the roles of both the presenting teacher and facilitator.

The reading specialists enjoyed sharing their expertise as participants in the conversation, examining data, and discussing ideas for instruction. In this first phase, as teach-

### **RESOURCES FOR ADOPTING AND ADAPTING PROTOCOLS FOR ADULT AND STUDENT WORK**

School Reform Initiative

[www.schoolreforminitiative.org](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org)

Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse Tools

[www.literacycoachingonline.org/tools.html](http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/tools.html)

Project Zero's Visible Thinking Routines

[www.visiblethinkingpz.org](http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org)

EngageNY Teaching Practices & Protocols

[www.engageny.org/resource/grades-3-5-ela-curriculum-appendix-1-teaching-practices-and-protocols](http://www.engageny.org/resource/grades-3-5-ela-curriculum-appendix-1-teaching-practices-and-protocols)

Continuum of Protocols

[http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/continuum\\_discussion\\_protocols.pdf](http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/continuum_discussion_protocols.pdf)

#### **SPECIFIC PROTOCOLS USED IN THIS PROJECT**

Carousel brainstorm: For generating and displaying a group's ideas on multiple topics.

[www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/carousel\\_brainstorm\\_protocol.doc](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/carousel_brainstorm_protocol.doc)

Collaborative assessment conference: For looking deeply at student work.

[www.schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/cac.pdf](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/cac.pdf)

ers new to protocols, they gained an appreciation for the focus and productivity of the protocol-based discussions.

We then turned over responsibility for facilitation and presentation to the reading specialists so that each participant played both roles in the first few sessions. Participants in the role of the presenting teacher wrote and brought in their own case studies based on real questions about students with whom they worked. These conversations had immediate implications for the presenting teachers' work with the

students, and the reading specialists valued the new and specific teaching suggestions they received from colleagues.

After experiencing firsthand the benefits of professional learning through protocol-based discussions, the reading specialists reflected on the process of using the protocol to structure the case study discussions. They identified advantages of using the protocol: increased professionalism, a common goal, mutual respect,

validation from colleagues for one’s ideas, and highly focused, productive conversation.

While all agreed that the protocol was useful in structuring a conversation about an individual student, it quickly became clear that such extended conversations about individuals were rare in their school settings. They needed a protocol to discuss classroom data sets, not just individual students.

We reviewed other protocols from the School Reform Initiative website, and participants determined which ones might suit their purposes better. No single existing protocol fit the bill. As a result, one of the reading specialists drafted a protocol, based loosely on the collaborative assessment conference protocol, for use in grade-level meetings with classroom teachers specifically to discuss DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) and Fountas & Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System data.

The newly designed protocol relied on four rounds of teacher observation and conversation: examining data, making observations about the data, sharing implications for practice based on observations, and reflecting on the conversation. (For a copy of the final protocol, see Ippolito & Pomerantz, 2013/2014.)

Reflecting on the project in a written survey, one participant cited the importance of the reading specialists collaboratively developing their own protocol: “I felt empowered in the implementation of our protocols for data team meetings because I had participated in the development of those protocols.”

Another participant valued the formality of the protocols. She wrote: “The information, materials, and instruction by the consultants provided us with the opportunity to discuss and ‘experience’ the data meetings, which were always done informally. The formality improved the success!”

### **What processes would facilitate the adoption and implementation of the protocols?**

In the remaining sessions, reading specialists tried out the draft protocol in three small groups, switching roles, increasing their comfort level with facilitation, and revising the protocol in response to debriefing conversations.

At this point, questions about logistics and implementation loomed large. When would the instructional data meetings occur? Was there enough time? Who would cover teachers’ classrooms? Who would inform the principal about the need for the meetings? How would the school and district leadership “sell” the meetings to teachers?

Here, the support of district leadership was essential. The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction drafted a letter to classroom teachers explaining the purpose of the meetings and shared it with the reading specialists for their input.

It became clear that some of the reading specialists were anxious about their new roles as facilitators and data coaches. They were concerned about encountering resistance from colleagues and conversations that could get off track. They shared stories about teachers using meetings to complain about lack of time — both in the classroom and in their personal lives.

Consequently, the final session before the first instructional data meetings focused on two key questions: How might you explain your role at your first meeting with classroom teachers, and how will you explain the purposes and goals of the meetings? We provided several suggestions to get the reading specialists thinking about their introductory statements at their first instructional data meetings.

Recommendations included making statements regarding confidentiality (what is said in the room stays in the room), setting goals for working as a team to facilitate student learning and growth, and creating a definition and explanation of the importance of the facilitator’s role. Participants then drafted and shared introductory statements of their role and the purpose of the meetings.

We used a carousel brainstorm protocol to elicit their concerns about what might get in the way of accomplishing the purpose/goals of the meetings, worries about working with colleagues, and the kinds of resistance they expected. They then discussed where the resistance might come from and the key messages teachers might need to hear in response. With these key messages in mind, participants revised their introductory statements.

Reconvening after the first instructional data meetings, the reading specialists reflected on their work and discussed next steps. Effective practices included reading specialists managing meetings in pairs of facilitators and timekeepers (a solution made possible by two reading specialists working together in each school) and sending data to teachers before the meetings. This allowed teachers to examine data in advance and provided more time for discussion. Finally, the group further tailored their protocol based on their experiences.

This careful scaffolding built confidence and eased implementation of the protocols. On the end-of-project survey, one reading specialist wrote, “Running through the protocols built my confidence to hold the instructional data meetings.”

Another participant said, “This partnership has prepared



us to conduct different types of data meetings using protocols. It has given us the confidence to encourage rich conversation among our teachers with a mutual end goal — to move students along and encourage success.”

One participant said she valued “having us each take part of the case studies and follow the protocol so we feel more confident in leading our data meetings.” Another reading specialist said, “It gave me more confidence talking with colleagues.”

### In what ways would protocols influence the quality of the conversations at instructional data meetings?

In survey responses, reading specialists emphasized the value of protocols for promoting equity in speaking time and keeping discussions focused on the interpretation and implications of student data.

One reading specialist said, “Our data meetings and use of a protocol gave everyone a voice.” Another participant said classroom teachers valued the protocol: “I learned that the teachers want us to lead them in the right direction and respect the idea of using data to drive instruction. They saw the benefits of the protocol in keeping the meetings focused and productive — valuing their time.”

According to many of the reading specialists, the protocols led to productive conversations with teachers focused on teaching and next steps in instruction. Comments included:

- “We met with teachers to discuss the data that they collected on students. We discussed patterns and trends that they saw and how they could move their students forward in the classroom.”
- “[We looked] at implications and planning (i.e. fluency instruction, progress monitoring, word work).”
- “[We] looked at data from multiple assessments to make decisions about who needed to enter/exit intervention groups.”

### PROTOCOLS AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Protocols can be powerful tools for professional learning. As one reading specialist explained, “We rarely have the time to have sustained conversations with colleagues. It surely is in these continued, rich conversations that we grow professionally and become more effective as teachers and as supporters of classroom teachers.”

However, protocols need to be collaboratively explored, tweaked, and designed. Like the reading specialists involved in this case study, education leaders and teachers might find that they need to strategically select and tailor protocols in order to find a perfect fit for their purposes and context.

If great care is not taken to introduce protocols in a respectful manner, in a sequence of slowly increasing challenge and intensity (in terms of the levels of trust needed to engage in the collaborative conversation), participants may easily be turned off by what could be perceived as stilted conversation. In our

project, the process of collaboratively exploring and designing protocols was key to creating a sense of ownership on the part of the reading specialists.

If protocols are introduced as panaceas, without clear modeling of best facilitation practices, teachers can easily miss the power of these important tools. Instead, carefully demonstrating protocols, noting and exploring the underlying purposes of various steps, and inviting participants to design their own subject- and context-specific protocols allows teachers to own and use these tools in meaningful ways.

If collaboration is key to understanding and implementing new curricular standards, then protocols are the structures for spurring and supporting that necessary collaboration.



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