Project-Tuning Protocol

Source: Adapted from School Reform Initiative, www.schoolreforminitiative.org.

For the project tuning session, bring a design-in-progress for a project you are developing or revising for classroom use. It should be an unfinished design in the sense that you wish to have other eyes on it, along with suggestions for how to refine it.

Elements of the Session

To start the session, give a ten-minute maximum overview of the project. Participants then have an opportunity to look at *the work* (such as your project description, project handouts, rubrics, or models of student work). Finally, frame a question for the group to address during the discussion.

Bring a one-page project description to the session and sufficient copies for the group (we recommend ten). Include at least some of the following elements in your description.

- Overview

- Essential questions

- Products

- Learning goals

- Timeline and milestones (what duration and what checkpoints or intermediate products?)

- Strategies for meeting the needs of diverse learners, including English learners, and

  students with special needs

- Presentation (how will students present or exhibit their work?)

- Assessment

- Your question for the group

Norms:

- Hard on the content, soft on the people

- Share the air (or "step up, step back")

- Be kind, helpful, and specific

Protocol (forty to forty-five minutes):

1. **Overview (ten minutes)—**The presenter gives an overview of the work and explains what goals he or she had in mind when designing the project. The presenter might also choose to put the project into context so that colleagues understand how it fits into the larger scope and sequence of the class. Participants then have an opportunity to look at the work—the project handouts, rubrics, student work, and so on. The presenter then frames a question for the group to address during the discussion.

2. **Clarifying questions (five minutes)—**Critical friends ask the presenter *clarifying questions*. Clarifying questions have brief, factual answers and are intended to help the person asking the question develop a deeper understanding of the dilemma. An example of a clarifying question is "How were the groups chosen for this activity?"

3. **Probing questions* (five minutes)**—Critical friends ask *probing questions* of the presenter. Probing questions help the presenter expand his or her thinking about the dilemma. However, probing questions should not be advice in disguise, such as "Have you considered . . . ?" Examples of probing questions are "How did each student demonstrate his or her understanding through the final product?" and "What evidence did you gather to determine the extent to which your learning goals were met?"

4. **Discussion* (ten minutes)**—The presenter reframes the question if necessary and then moves away from the group. The group discusses the dilemma and attempts to provide insight on the question the presenter raised. It may help to begin with warm feedback, such as "What went well with the project?" and then move on to cool feedback. Cool feedback includes a more critical analysis of the work, using the question the presenter proposed to frame the discussion—for example, "What isn't the presenter considering?" or "I wonder what would happen if . . ." (The presenter does not speak during the discussion, but he or she listens and takes notes. Resist the urge to speak directly to the presenter. The facilitator may need to remind participants of the presenter's focus questions. It can be helpful to ask after eight minutes, "Have we addressed the presenter's questions?")

5. **Response (five minutes)**—The presenter moves back into the group and responds to the discussion. It is not necessary to respond point by point to what others said. The presenter may share what struck him or her and what next steps might be taken as a result of the ideas the discussion generated. (Critical friends are silent.)

6. **Debrief (five minutes)**—The facilitator leads a conversation about the group's observation of the process. Questions for the group might include "Did we have a good question?" "Did we stick to the question?" "When was a moment when the conversation made a turn for the better?" "Was there any point where we went off track?" and "Did our probing questions really push the thinking of the presenter?" (Resist the urge to turn the debrief back into a discussion of the dilemma.)

7. **Closing the loop (optional; five minutes)**—Participants write in their journals about what they have learned from participating in this protocol and how it could inform their own practice. If time allows, participants share one of their takeaways with a partner, or everyone in the group shares one takeaway.

* During both of these sections, it may be helpful to take two minutes and have participants turn to a partner to generate questions or discuss their response to the presenter's framing question.

Tips for Facilitation

The following are tips for facilitation.

- **Work with the presenter to frame a good question beforehand:** Meet beforehand to discuss the dilemma and craft a question that is open ended and not easily solved. Write the question on the whiteboard so that it is visible during the entire conversation.

- **Stick to the time allotted for each section:** If you need help with keeping time, ask someone to volunteer to help you, or use a timer.

- **Don't be afraid to keep the group focused on the protocol:** If someone asks a probing question during the clarifying questions portion, gently ask the participant to write it down and wait until you have moved on to that point in the conversation.

- **Redirect the conversation when necessary (without unnecessarily monopolizing airtime):** If the discussion jumps to cool feedback before warm feedback is shared, make sure to take time to celebrate the work first.

- **Resist the urge to skip the debrief:** The debrief is a crucial way to deconstruct the conversation and improve the quality of our dialogue with colleagues over time.

- **Be courageous and confident:** Strong facilitation is the key to having successful dialogues about our work, and everyone in the group appreciates it. If it helps to read each step to the group, by all means do so.