

## It's Not Pixie Dust, It's Protocol

By Thomas W. Many

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Improving schools requires a high level of collaboration among and between teachers. Making time for collaboration during the regular school day is a critical first step in creating the conditions for high-performing collaborative teams. As Diane Weaver Dunne (2012) argues, "Time with colleagues spent in focused inquiry about teaching and learning is a necessity, not a luxury" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, *time* is one of those necessary (but insufficient) conditions for the successful development of collaborative teams. Without designated and protected time for teams to meet during the school day, school leaders cannot expect teachers to have the kinds of conversations necessary to change practice. However, time alone is not enough. Ensuring teachers use time productively is just as important.

Educators often ask, "Why is it that some teams use time so much more productively than others?" Some may think it is magic or luck—or even a sprinkling of pixie dust—that enables some teams to use time more efficiently and effectively. However, it is not pixie dust at all but the thoughtful—even artful—use of well-thought-out, carefully implemented, and skillfully facilitated protocols that make a difference.

### Dozens of Protocols—Many Variations on a Theme

The effective use of protocols ensures conversations between and among team members are productive. Stevie Quate, codirector of the Colorado Critical Friends Group, defines a protocol simply as a set of "agreed upon guidelines for a conversation" (S. Quate, personal communication, June 2, 2021), but acknowledges that a protocol is more than that.

Most protocols have a structured format that includes a tentative time frame and specific guidelines for communication among team members. Descriptions of protocols typically identify the purpose, number of participants, length of time required, roles of team members, and expected outcomes.

Quate differentiates a protocol from a *norm*, which consists of agreed-on guidelines for behavior within a team, and suggests a *protocol* is "a structure which everyone understands and has agreed to that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur" (S. Quate, personal communication, June 2, 2021). The kinds of conversations Quate refers to are necessary if principals expect teachers to successfully engage in the analysis of assessment data or the improvement of a lesson.

The design of these protocols promotes examining student work and reflecting on a teacher's pedagogy. Some protocols facilitate the analysis of data while others focus on the examination of a lesson. There are protocols that generate suggestions for setting goals with groups or individual students. Other protocols analyze the relationship between lessons, standards, and rubrics or enable teachers to collect data, make comparisons, and track student progress. Still others delve deeply into the quality of a teacher's pedagogy and identify strategies for improving an assignment, project, or specific aspect of a lesson.

There are literally dozens of protocols—many are variations on the same theme—but Quate emphasizes that in its purest form "a protocol creates the structure that makes it safe for teachers to ask challenging questions of each other" (S. Quate, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

## Benefits of Using Protocols

Coauthors Joseph P. McDonald, Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter, and Elizabeth C. McDonald (2013) study the use of protocols in schools in *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice*. McDonald and his colleagues (2013) agree with Quate and argue that using protocols promotes development of a culture where teachers are “able, willing, and even eager—in consultation with others—to make changes as needed in order to improve the work” (p. 8).

When teacher teams meet to talk about student learning, they sharpen their pedagogy and deepen their content knowledge. According to the National Turning Points Center (NTPC; 2001), teachers who use protocols have a more complete and comprehensive understanding of what students know and are able to do. The regular use of protocols also helps teachers develop a shared language for assessing student work and a common understanding of what quality student work looks like.

The use of protocols creates a culture of continuous learning. As Jennifer Morrison (2008/2009) notes, in the process of collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on information about their classes, teachers are able to step outside their assumptions and understand students more clearly. The NTPC (2001) believes protocols promote “collegial feedback and the critical analysis of student and teacher work in a safe and structured format” (p. 5) and recommends using protocols because they foster a culture that “collaboratively assesses the quality and rigor of teacher work” (p. 5). McDonald and his colleagues (2013) write, “When teachers are looking at student work—particularly looking together at student work—it can be threatening. This is why protocols are useful” (p. 4).

Using protocols also builds a sense of community among and between teachers. The NTPC (2001) argues that looking collaboratively at student work and participating in collective problem solving through the use of protocols move teachers away from the isolating concept of *my students* and toward the community concept of *our students*.

Finally, protocols allow teachers to be more efficient in their work. Quate reminds educators that in most schools, time is of the essence and the one resource that no one seems to have enough of (S. Quate, personal communication, June 2, 2021). Once mastered, protocols become valuable, utilitarian tools teachers use to focus conversations on what matters and, thereby, make the most of the time they do have.

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“It’s scary work, though, and respectful protocols can help.”

—Diane Weaver Dunne

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As teams begin to use protocols, teachers will undoubtedly have questions. The NTPC (2001) warns, “When teachers first begin using protocols as a way of looking at their students’ work, assignments, and instructional practices, the process may feel formal or stiff” (p. 4). The NTPC (2001) continues, “[and] because teachers are not accustomed to sharing work publicly with peers, the process can also feel intimidating at first” (p. 4).

Initially, many teachers feel protocols are a waste of time; but coaches encourage teachers to try them anyway. McDonald and his colleagues (2013) observe, “schools or colleges mired in norms of private practice, and used to ignoring the actual impact of the practice on students’ learning, may not take easily to learning with protocols” (p. 3). However, McDonald and his colleagues (2013) find when pressed to see them all the way through “even reluctant participants find something refreshing about protocols” (p. 3).

Like most changes, as teachers gain experience with the use of protocols, their confidence and comfort levels increase, as do the benefits of using protocols. Principals, coaches, and teacher leaders must have confidence that the use of protocols will make teacher teams more productive.

## A Means to an End—Not an End in Itself

Quate cautions that it is important to remember, “the point is not to do the protocol well, but to have an in-depth, insightful conversation about teaching and learning” (S. Quate, personal communication, June 2, 2021). It is wise to remember that a protocol is a means to an end, not an end in itself. McDonald (2013) agrees and reminds us that “protocols are no panacea for these or any other kinds of collegial problems, but they are valuable in highlighting . . . problems” (p. 11).

In the end, it is the regular and intentional use of protocols—not pixie dust—that holds the key to helping teacher teams use their time more productively.

## References

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