Building Community Through The Use of Protocols

KSTF staff have seen a proliferation of **Professional Learning Communities** among teachers. In our work with teachers, we see more being asked to come together with their school colleagues to analyze classroom data on a regular basis. Here's a common scenario: A teacher (maybe even a new teacher) is asked to facilitate a Professional Learning Community. Among other responsibilities, she's expected to support colleagues in analyzing data once a month. This expectation is a bit daunting because she isn't sure how much her colleagues have done this kind of work before. And she hasn't facilitated analysis of classroom data much herself. Sound familiar? Read on to learn how we support **our Teaching Fellows** (early-career teachers) to use tools that assist them in doing this important collaborative work.

The KSTF Teaching Fellowship is a program that supports early-career teachers in **building a strong foundation for a career in teaching**. KSTF believes that making connections among Fellows is some of the most important work that we do. We focus on building a strong cohort community during the first two years of the Teaching Fellowship and have found that structures, like protocols, support Fellows in working with each other around important problems of practice, such as sharing classroom data[1]. We see this use of protocols as a **first step in supporting Fellows in working with colleagues**, which is a part of a strong foundation for a career in teaching.

Protocols are directions and guidelines to support discussions about important ideas. We generally use or modify protocols from the **NSRF Harmony Website**. They have a free repository of protocols that can support discussions around data or practitioner dilemmas. We support Fellows to use protocols as a structure to analyze classroom data and build skills for collaboration. We see the collaborative analysis of classroom data as a process that allows colleagues to share what they are teaching with each other and to get important feedback on what may be happening in their classrooms. This allows Fellows to improve their knowledge of different ways to support student learning and the many ways students interact with and process content. Using protocols to analyze student data allows teachers to better understand the student learning experiences in their classrooms and to augment the story of student learning that they've gained from summative assessment scores. The more data used to answer

the question, *What are my students learning and how do I know?,* the better teachers with any level of experience can plan to support their students.

In addition to supporting teachers in analyzing classroom data, protocols **support the building of a strong cohort community**. The decision to become a teacher is deeply personal for **our Fellows** as it is for many teachers around the country. As a result, the teacher-produced artifacts used in classrooms may be deeply personal as well. This is why teachers sometimes hesitate when asked to share these extensions of their personal and professional selves, especially when they aren't sure how what they have worked so hard on will be received.

We recognize how difficult it is to share classroom artifacts with others. To support our Fellows in growing in this area, we organize small groups to use protocols at and in between cohort meetings. These protocols structure the conversations teachers have around classroom data to increase the feeling of safety for the sharer and allow for targeted feedback from the other members of the group. Using protocols in this way increases Fellows' networks and improves Fellows' ability to analyze classroom data, skills that are valuable in practitioner and researcher circles. One way Fellows improve their ability to analyze data is by participating in protocols and by facilitating them. Facilitating protocols allows Fellows to think critically about what is necessary during each stage of the protocol and how each stage builds to the next.

For example, we provide a version of the ATLAS protocol to our Fellows when we invite them to share and analyze data. The protocol contains norms of discussion. It also contains an invitation to the group to describe and interpret the data, to share implications of the work for teaching and assessment, and to reflect on the use of the protocol for the analysis that just took place. The protocol as written takes about 45–50 minutes to complete.

In our work, we've noticed that 45–50 minutes is too long for an initial introduction to protocols for Fellows, so we shortened the timeframe to 30 minutes. We've also noticed that providing supportive text beyond what is usually included in protocols supports Fellows in facilitating protocols. In the ATLAS protocol, there are suggestions to facilitators to support them in keeping group members true to the task of each section of the protocol, however, specific prompts are not provided to support novice facilitators in deciding what to say

when they notice a group member has gotten off track. For example, the Describing Data section of the ATLAS Protocol contains the following bullets.

> The facilitator asks: "What do you see?"…
> If judgements or interpretations do arise, the facilitator should ask the person to describe the evidence on which they are based.

To support the Fellows in asking for evidence when they hear a judgement of interpretation, we provided this prompt.

> If an interpretation is made during the description section, say *"That's an interesting point. It seems like an interpretation though. What did you notice that made you say that?*

We've also noticed that Fellows who are engaging in protocols for the first few times struggle with silences. As a result they may raise a tangential topic to discuss during the data description or interpretations sections or ask to move on before all of the time is exhausted. To support the facilitator in curbing these tendencies we provided the following prompts.

> If a participant is talking about something unrelated to the protocol, say *"That could be something interesting to explore later, but it seems to be taking us away from the focus of this time in the protocol."*

> If participants are struggling with silence and begin to chat about unrelated topics or want to move on, say *"I get that silence can feel awkward, but silence sometimes means that people are thinking and some of the best comments come out of sitting in silence."*

Prompts such as these provide Fellows one way to enact the suggestions for adept facilitation that are provided in many protocols.

We have found that protocol use supports collaboration among teachers, which aligns with our vision of **leadership as reflexive and distributed**. This means teachers begin with personal improvement of their own knowledge, motivation, affect or practice on the way to continuing to improve with others in these same areas. We see the opportunity to engage with protocols as a way to allow novice teachers to improve themselves in two ways. First, through sharing and reviewing their and others' classroom data, they are improving their knowledge of the different ways they might support student learning and learning about the many ways students process content. Second, they are improving their

practice as they learn to analyze classroom data and facilitate the analysis of data, skills that are valuable in practitioner and researcher circles.

Taken together, we hope these improvements increase our Fellows' willingness to open up about and invite others into their work. We have shared how we use protocols to support our teachers, and are interested in the work that you all are doing. What successes or struggles about protocol use can you share from your setting? We'd love to hear from you!

References

[1] Classroom data includes teacher-produced artifacts (e.g., teacher-developed worksheets, lesson plans, syllabus, etc.) and student data (e.g., student-produced work, classroom conversations and videos, etc).