# Professional learning communities

# Protocols for collaborative analysis of student work

*These protocols were developed by Helen Timperley. You may adapt them.*

There are several different kinds of activities that can promote student learning through teachers working with one another in professional learning communities. The option presented below involves the collaborative examination of evidence of student learning.

Examining evidence related to student learning is one effective way to promote professional learning when the process involves discussing a puzzle of practice in relation to some learning outcome for students.

There are various kinds of evidence that can be used. Two possibilities include:

* Student–produced artefacts, for example, an essay, workings for a mathematics problem.
* Student assessments, for example, a reading test, results of a test across classes, together with what the students were asked to do.

**The following pages are:**

* Principles to guide conversations
* Protocols for conversations
* Leadership challenges.

## Principles to guide conversations

1. The puzzle of practice links learning outcomes for students to teaching practice.

* This means that the purpose for examining the evidence is to develop more effective teaching practice (an adaptive expertise focus).
* When students are talked about, so is teaching. When teaching is talked about, so is what students have learned, or not learned.

1. Questions about any aspect of the puzzle of practice are accompanied by reasons for asking the question.
2. Suggested solutions are put on hold until after a thorough diagnosis of the challenges.

* This means phrases like, “Have you tried … because …” come in the second half of the meetings.

1. Suggestions about solutions are accompanied with reasons such as “I wonder if you tried x. It might help this student because I have found that sometimes misconceptions about … arise when … .” Reasons like “It worked for me” or “I think …” are not sufficient.

* This helps to develop deeper knowledge and skills rather than the surface helpful hints.
* This helps to stop people giving suggestion after suggestion with little theoretical basis.

1. Suggestions about solutions are framed in terms of options and checked with the teacher presenting the puzzle of practice for their feasibility.

* Use phrases like “We’ve made a number of suggestions. Are there any that are likely to work for you with your class?”

1. There must be NO BLAME or indirect references to stupidity.

* These are conversations to promote professional learning and learning doesn’t happen in an atmosphere of blame or shame.

1. The process requires process leadership to ensure group norms are focused on learning from one another about how to teach students more effectively. It also requires at least someone to have expertise in the area of the student work.

* Blaming the student or the parents, or having the blind leading the blind, are not helpful.

## Protocols for conversations

Protocols can be useful to get started. They can also limit learning when getting through the protocol becomes the focus rather than promoting professional learning. This protocol may help but please accept its limitations. The principles in the previous section are much more important.

| **Protocol phase** | **Guidance to participants** | **Reasons** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Establish the purpose for the meeting  (2 mins) | Establish the professional learning purpose of the meeting and check understandings and agreement. This step can be dropped after a few meetings. | This puts everyone on the same page and provides the reason for interrupting off-task conversations during meetings. |
| Review of previous week’s focus  (5 mins) | The teacher(s) whose students were discussed the previous week reports on whether the agreed actions have made a difference. Responses such as “I haven’t tried it yet.” indicates the suggestions were probably not helpful. Leadership intervention is important here. Whether or not to spend more time when things have not worked is a leadership judgement call. | An accountability step that ensures actions follow the talk and a feedback step to determine if the process is useful. |
| Describing the student work or assessment information and the puzzle of practice  (10 mins) | There may be one or more students’ learning represented in the work. The only rule here is manageability. The teacher presenting the work or assessment information describes the aim, the criteria used to evaluate the work, the essence of the teaching approach and what aspect of the students’ work was puzzling for the teacher given the teaching described. | Providing criteria for evaluating the work gives an insight into the teachers’ knowledge and keeps everyone on the same page. Presenting the work and the teaching helps to highlight these links. Identifying the puzzle of practice focuses the conversation. |
| Interpreting the student work or assessment information  (10 minutes) | The group tries to make sense of what the student was doing and why. The group should try to find as many different interpretations as possible and evaluate them against the kind and quality of evidence. From the evidence, group members try to infer what the student was thinking, does and does not understand, how the student interpreted what he or she was supposed to do. | The process is essentially an interpretive one, so there are rarely simple answers. If there were simple answers then it would not be a puzzle of practice. |
| Implications for teaching practice (10 mins) | Based on their observations and interpretations, the group can offer suggestions, with reasons, and evaluate each of these in terms of links to the interpretation and how useful the teacher finds it. Other teachers may comment on the usefulness to them. | Reasons are central to promoting theoretical understandings and central to professionalism, rather than just gathering a few helpful hints. Encouraging others to comment on usefulness helps them to see the process as relevant to their learning. |
| Implications for professional learning identified  (5 mins) | Identify additional support the teacher might need to act on the suggestions, such as, observing someone else, reading relevant information, having someone come in and assist them when they try it out. | If this step becomes part of the process, then the norm of “everyone must pretend to know” is gradually subverted. |
| Then repeat the process |  | More than one provides interest and creates more opportunities for a variety of problems of practice to be addressed. |

## Leadership challenges

Not everyone will come to the community with a professional learning orientation. Elmore (2004) identified that a common norm in schools is feeling one must pretend to know. This is counter-productive to learning and to developing adaptive expertise. One of the manifestations of having to pretend is to blame everyone else for less than optimal student outcomes, particularly the students. It can be challenging to address the discourse of “the students are the problem”.

**A suggested way through**

Consider the “Students are the problem” type of response in the light of competing theories. You have one theory, they have another. When theories are in competition it is important for each of you to understand each other’s theories and the evidence on which they are based, find the points of agreement and disagreement, and work out how you can move on from there. This might be through testing the competing theories by gathering evidence or just agreeing to get on with the focus of the project – which is also a way of testing them*.*

The values and reasoning underlying their statements need to be unpacked each time and not let go. Don’t avoid discussing such statements because they become insidious and undermine the process. Check where the other person is coming from but think through your arguments and evidence for an alternative perspective. Anticipate reactions and work out a few phrases that might help. Practice with your colleagues before you have to have the conversation.

**Some possible statements**

If the purpose for the meeting has been agreed, then return to the purpose with statements like *“That might be the case but what we’re trying to do is .... Do you disagree with this purpose?*”

Other possibilities might include, depending on the situation:

Acknowledge their point of view (don’t talk over them but interrupt if they are going on) and say something like one of the following:

* *“I get the impression you’re saying there’s nothing more you can do to be more effective with these students. Is that the case?”*
* *“Other schools with similar students have managed to lift their profiles through more focused teaching and learning. They came to believe it was possible through trying to do it. Are you prepared to have a go?”*
* *“I’m getting the impression you have really low expectations of your students. I’d like to spend some time exploring this. Tell me more about what is on your mind.”*

Work together to identify some possible ways to address expectations or fears, if appropriate, but **always** check that any advice you give would work for them and, if not, why not. Don’t get into the situation of providing solutions which they then knock down. It’s their responsibility to develop solutions that will work for them in their situation.

One way to change the expectations or reactions is to start small and focused on something that we know can make a difference. Small victories usually motivate everyone to do something more. Would that work for you? [If yes] What could that focused change be?