Opportunities for professional dialogue – the “protocols”

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Why talk about our work? Why talk together about student work? Why come together in small groups to learn about improving our practice?

“I’ve been teaching for 7 years and this is the first time (using the protocols) I’ve discussed my work with my colleagues” (NSW teacher, 28).

“I’m an experienced teacher, with a large repertoire of strategies at my finger tips, but I’m amazed and excited by how much I’ve learned from my peers by using the protocols” (WA teacher, 53).

“We are able to use the protocols as a way of focusing and facilitation onsite. The protocols are tools that help us to effectively translate policy... It gives us a system we know how to run, which is very important because the time that all of us have is short” (Tasmanian deputy principal).

“The structured professional dialogue that occurs by using these rules of engagement - the protocols - allows everyone to have their say and to learn from one another” (Victorian teacher, 35).

“All principals should experience the protocols – it will enhance their ability to talk with their staff about pedagogy in meaningful ways” (Queensland principal, 59).

Such are the responses from participants in Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) workshops where the “protocols” have been introduced as a way of facilitating professional dialogue about student work. Designed and used mainly in small group settings of 5-8, the “protocols” have been hailed by some as “subtle processes to get teachers talking in meaningful ways about what matters most - teaching and learning”. Now in use in many settings and schools across Australia the protocols are providing a much needed impetus to pedagogical change.

Of all the changes required as the social fabric of the 21st century demands new innovations and much more of our schools, it is pedagogical change that has received the least attention. Why? Simply because it’s the hardest to demonstrate real, as opposed to superficial, change. Organisational structure, curriculum and
school environment may be changed in relatively short periods of time educationally speaking, but pedagogical change takes time, sometimes several years and considerable effort on the part of teachers and school leadership. Often it is easier to put it aside than to deal with it because it requires deep thinking about the craft of teaching and how students learn. It requires supportive structures and opportunities to gain greater insights into what creates successful and effective teaching experiences where students are engaged, challenged and are provided with meaningful and relevant experiences that help to develop greater understanding not only about subject content but about the ways they learn. It is clear that pedagogical change occurs by design and not accident.

The protocols give teachers a way to examine pedagogy and to collaboratively determine how it may be bettered. There is no “silver bullet” for pedagogical change. It requires determination, perseverance and a clear vision of what is the desired outcome.

Under the guidance of a facilitator the protocols are designed to focus on student work or teacher work, and through the use of a timeframe and set of rules, participants are effectively led through a process which delves into issues about teaching practice. Through this collaborative process all participants learn about ways to improve their own practice. No one voice is more dominant than others.

What is so innovative about this approach? Increasingly we are hearing from experts in educational reform that the focus in schools should be brought back from other “distractors” to teaching and learning – in particular to a focus on pedagogy. The ANSN has long believed that the key to improving classroom practice is to take the time out of our busy schedules to reflect on what we actually do in the classroom. The opportunities for a structured professional dialogue about our practice assists in “deprivatising” what happens in our classrooms and essentially makes us more accountable. Further, when we reflect in a “safe” environment with our colleagues in this structure we can stay focussed on improving our own practice. By learning from each other we are able to make meaning of what we do and why we do it.

What is a protocol? A “protocol” is a set of rules that provides a structured process and a time frame for a group of colleagues to look closely at a piece of student work (or teachers’ work eg a policy, a program or unit). Usually one person presents student work that is the product of their teaching, to the group. This may be written work, a videoed performance or a product/artefact. With the help of their peers and specific questioning techniques, warm and cool feedback, the ensuing dialogue assists the presenter to hear from colleagues about the strengths of the work and about ways that it might be improved.
Everyone in the group is encouraged to reflect on their own practice and think deeply about it.

The process has been likened to using a magnifying glass as a lens through which to look at student work to “mine” for the evidence of learning. “By listening to our colleagues and reflecting on our own thinking we are able to get deeper into the work - get below the superficial level of what it looks like and uncover the evidence of learning. Often others can see what we cannot, even though the work is a product of our own teaching,” (Maureen O’Rourke Victoria State Coordinator ANSN)

There is a range of protocols that can be used for a variety of purposes. For example, the Tuning Protocol can be used to “fine-tune” policies and programs for improvement. In the Consultancy Protocol the presenter frames a question about their work and poses it for the “consultants” to address. The question posed is always designed for improvement. The 6A’s Protocol can be used by an individual or a team before, during and after the implementation of a unit of work to reveal its relevance and congruency. The ATLAS Protocol looks closely at student artefacts for actual evidence of student thinking and participants use this evidence to shape improved practices.

The ANSN has developed a kit which includes a video, entitled “The Heart of Teaching” (subtitled: The Protocols Kit). The kit was developed with support from the Coalition of Essential Schools (USA) with ACT high school teachers and the ACT Department of Education and Community Services (ACTDECS).

For further enquiries about ANSN protocols (workshops and training) or other ANSN activities please contact Christine Owen at the ANSN National Office ph 02-9514 5407, Mobile 0418 456911 or by email ansn@bigpond.com Postal address ANSN C/- UTS Faculty of Education, PO Box 222, Lindfield NSW 2070. website http://www.nsn.net.au

About the Australian National Schools Network
The ANSN is a not-for-profit network that is a collaboration of schools, teacher unions, tertiary education faculties, individuals and government and non-government systems and sectors. The work of the network is invariably innovative and richly varied, including: supporting schools, conducting professional development, leading research circles, liaising with technology companies, developing resources and advising education systems. The ANSN aims to be at the forefront of new thinking about learning, pedagogy, curriculum, school structure, pastoral care and school reform. It seeks to be involved in development projects on a range of issues in order to help teachers and schools around the nation. The ANSN acknowledges and respects the work of teachers and tries to create opportunities for teachers to be involved.