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The Power of Protocols for Equity

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Structured protocols can help teachers ensure equitable participation and create more culturally responsive discussions.

When I taught expository writing as a classroom teacher, I found the fastest path to improving my students' writing was to build their capacity to engage in deep discussions so they were able to work through their thesis or arguments—testing their claims and hearing their peers' perspectives. This pushed them to revise their own thinking. John Hattie's research around academic conversation and discussion confirms what I learned by direct experience: Academic conversation is one of the most powerful practices we can bring to our classrooms to promote higher achievement (Hattie, 2012).

So now, as a consultant, when I go into classrooms as part of an equity audit or as a coach supporting school teams to incorporate more culturally responsive practices, one of the first things I look for is who is doing most of the talking during instruction. As the old adage has it: "Whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning." This notion is supported by the growing evidence from researchers such as Aida Walqui and colleagues and their work with English learners at WestEd (2019), and Ron Ritchhart and his work around the cultures of thinking out of Harvard's Project Zero (2015). This body of research highlights that talking in all its forms—*conversing, discussing, debating, and dialoguing*—helps increase students' brain power so that they are able to take on more rigorous work and engage in deeper learning down the road.

But to grow students' brain power using academic conversation as a strategy, we need robust talk structures that allow more students to join in the conversation confidently, especially English learners, introverted students, disengaged students, and historically marginalized students. These are all students whose communication styles and funds of knowledge are not typically leveraged in classrooms.

For the most part, schools have limited the range of everyday talk structures and processes in our classrooms. I often see teachers only using *turn and talk* as a discussion strategy, sometimes alternating it with *think, pair, share*. These two strategies have become instructional staples. But while useful, they are not sturdy enough for deeper discussions that facilitate deep thinking or what I call "cognitive chewing."

Free-Flowing Structure

In addition to adding more robust discussion practices, we also want to make these practices more culturally responsive by centering them around the principles of youth culture and collectivist practice. I encourage teachers to find talk structures and tools that:

Honor the funds of knowledge each student brings to the conversation.

Give marginalized students greater access to the flow of the discussion.

Give students more agency in directing the conversation.

Give students a more robust cognitive workout by leveraging their everyday modes of communication.

That's why I suggest that a good starting point for facilitating deeper, more equitable discussions is to use structured protocols. Protocols are more than a fancy word for strategies. Made popular in the early 1990's by the Coalition of Essential Schools and promoted by the National School Reform Faculty, discussion protocols are rules or procedures that provide a structure and process so everyone has time to think, talk, and listen.

Protocols are now widely used in adult learning communities and a growing number of classrooms across the country. They come in a variety of formats, from techniques to gather focused feedback on a project or piece of writing before revising—like a *tuning* protocol—to interactive processes like the *gallery walk* protocol, in which students build on each other's knowledge about a topic or content to promote higher-order thinking through cooperative learning. The good thing about protocols is that they can be modified to suit multiple purposes and different types of discussions. Despite their variety, they have common features: There is structured turn taking during a discussion, and speaking and listening are usually timed so more students can participate.

The overly structured nature of protocols might seem counterintuitive to the goal of encouraging a free-flowing discussion that welcomes all students. In reality, it is just the opposite. Protocols create ways into the discussion for students typically left out. We often see the same students talking in class, namely those who are comfortable conversing in English, have mainstream background knowledge, or are more extroverted.

Five Steps to Support Protocols

The following five steps will enable you to begin creating the conditions for incorporating protocols into your classroom to increase engagement and access for all students:

1. Offer structures and time for small talk that paves the way for social-emotional safety later in academic conversations. Building a culture of academic conversation begins with building a culture of connection. Creating opportunities for students to talk to each other and get to know each other sets the social-emotional stage for them to engage collaboratively during academic discussions.

Protocols such as *dyads* can offer a container for a social-emotional grounding to the school day or beginning of the class period. Made popular by math equity educator Julian Weissglass and community organizer Ana Becerra (2004), a dyad is a listening and talking exchange between two people that provides a structure for constructivist listening—a process in which the speaker is listened to for a dedicated amount of time without being interrupted.

For more interactive group protocols try the *tea party*, which can be used with quotes and images that students help curate, or *diversity rounds*, which explores personal identity. Both of these protocols provide students a fun but structured way to learn more about each other and build relational trust.

2. Use protocols to shake up inequitable participation patterns during academic discussions. One of the dynamics I often see in classrooms is unequal participation. Even when we use powerful strategies and structures such as Socratic seminars, we see the same students doing much of the talking. This leads to inequitable outcomes for English learners, introverted, or struggling students who don't feel confident enough to actively engage in free-flowing class discussions.

Well-defined protocols can make discussions more egalitarian by providing time for everyone to get practice talking about their ideas about the content. For example, the typical protocol is done in "rounds" with a small group of 3–5 students. Each protocol round has three important steps that foster equitable participation. First, the process begins with 3–5 minutes of uninterrupted time for one person ("the presenter") to talk. When that person is finished, the other members of the discussion group have a set amount of time to reflect on and respond to what the presenter shared. The presenter has a final moment to respond to on the advice given by his partners. Then a new presenter from the group is invited to share his or her thinking and is given the same 3–5 minutes to talk. This process continues until everyone in the group has had time to talk.

Two protocols that should be staples in classrooms are the *tuning* protocol to help students revise and improve on a piece of student work in preparation for larger group discussions and the *text-rendering* protocol, which can help students access grade-level text by starting with noticing and naming what is familiar or what sparks one's curiosity in the text.

3. Use the elements of hip-hop culture to modify protocols and make them more responsive to students' interests and knowledge base. Many of our middle and high school students are steeped in hip-hop culture, regardless of racial background or

socioeconomic status. Hip-hop has grown up and become mainstream. Although widely considered a synonym for rap music, the term *hip-hop* actually refers to a complex culture organized around the values of social justice, respect, self-worth, community, and having fun.

While maintaining the integrity of the discussion protocols you choose to use, think about ways to include *fun* as a design principle in classroom discussion. As Chris Emdin (2013) reminds us, much of today's students' schema—the brain's network of knowledge, associations, allusions, references, and connections that give content meaning—is influenced by hip-hop culture. So why not leverage interactive hip-hop structures like the *cipher* and *rap battles* to help students access their existing funds of knowledge? These features of hip-hop culture have dialogic qualities that we can use to help students see that they are competent at deep thinking. How to do this? Consider a mash-up of a traditional protocol and one of the hip-hop structures:

Remix the *fishbowl* protocol as a *cipher*. The fishbowl protocol has a small number of students seated in an inner circle discussing a topic or text and using specific academic conversation skills the class is practicing, while the remaining students sit around them in an outer circle. The students in the outer circle listen to the discussion and take notes. At a designated point, the students in the inner circle rotate out, join the outer circle, and a new group of students comes into the inner circle. This has a lot in common with a hip-hop practice called *cipher*, in which a crowd of spectators and onlookers surrounds rappers engaged in "freestyling" as each rapper steps into the cipher to share their rhymes. In a remix or mash-up of these formats, you can introduce a more free-flowing type of fishbowl, building on collectivist, participatory elements common to hip-hop culture. For example, students in the outer circle can more actively engage and comment on what they're hearing from within the fishbowl with finger snaps. Or, you can make movement between the outer circle and inner circle more free flowing by letting students tap each other in.

Use a cipher-style protocol like the *kiva* to help students focus on "cognitive stitching" as they build on each other's ideas. In a *kiva*, rather than having an inner and outer circle, four students are positioned in a square, and four more seats are lined up behind each of them so that the pattern resembles a wheel spoke. The four speakers in the square discuss the topic and questions of the lesson. After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation, building on what's been said. The goal is seeing who can take the discussion deeper, make interesting text-based connections, or find real-life connections to academic concepts, depending on the subject area.

Reconfigure the *chalk talk* protocol as a *graffiti tag billboard*. Invite students to "tag" the "billboard" using elements of sketchnoting, doodling, collage, and written word to stimulate thinking before a discussion begins or to deepen it afterwards. The idea is to leverage students' comfort with multimodal expression as a way into dialogue, discussion, or debate.

4. Invoke performance elements of spoken word poetry for deeper thinking during discussions. Like hip-hop, spoken word is part of youth culture and flows out of the oral traditions of many indigenous communities and communities of color. Spoken word is a poetic performance art that is word-based, and it can center around either poetry or prose. It looks like fun, but the fluid use of word-play and metaphor makes it serious cognitive work. According to Rick Wormeli (2009), metaphor is a powerful tool for making meaningful connections and demonstrating understanding of complex concepts that changes the structure of our brain, allowing us to do more rigorous thinking as a result. The lyrical nature of spoken word techniques can give in-class discussions energy and flow, which increases engagement.

5. Give students the power to facilitate. Because culturally responsive teaching is about building student agency and brain power, it is important to train students to self-facilitate discussions. Protocols offer the needed structure and procedural "wireframe" to get them started.

Teach them to "hand off" the conversation to each other rather than have it always flow through the teacher.

Pick an MC for the discussion. In street parlance, MC stands for the "master of ceremonies." In hip-hop culture, when a number of rappers have gathered for a performance, the MC manages the energy of the crowd and the flow of the set. Help students channel their inner MC as facilitators in protocols. They need to focus not just on the procedural aspects, but also on the social-emotional climate of the discussion or debate to ensure norms are being followed and a positive vibe is maintained.

Making It Work

Incorporating protocols into your classroom routines takes some planning and guided facilitation to build all students' capacity to engage in powerful discussions that lead to deeper learning. Here are a few additional tips to keep in mind:

Rethink how you use time. Discussions that go beyond the surface of a *turn and talk* take time. Do a time audit. How are you currently using instructional minutes? Maybe two to three days out of the week you can combine guided practice time and independent work time to make more room for academic conversations using protocols.

Be patient. Remember the rule of the first pancake. Recognize that, like the first pancake, deep discussions are going to be a bit messy in the beginning. But after making some adjustments, the pancakes will come off the griddle round and ready to eat. Similarly, over time students get used to using protocols to take their discussions deeper. This is where the design thinking principles of *prototyping* and *iterating* are important.

Teach the value of code switching. You need to have norms in place to effectively implement protocols. But resist the urge to police students' use of language, like slang, non-mainstream English like African American Vernacular English, pidgin, or creole dialects like "Spanglish."

Let students talk in the language most comfortable for thinking. Be aware of the number of different languages and dialects spoken in your classroom. As a culturally responsive educator, find ways to leverage this linguistic diversity. Early in the school year, talk with students about the positive connection between discussion, thinking, and their home languages. In addition, teach them to "code switch" across registers. A *register* is defined as the level of formality in language that's determined by the context in which it is spoken or written. We have three common registers—a social or community register, a "business" register, and a more formal "academic" register.

There is a big difference between moving back and forth across registers (code switching) and having to abandon one's language assets. This isn't about modulating. Rather, it is a matter of "both/and". Students should not feel like they have to abandon their home and community language when they come to school. It is actually one of their assets.

On Equal Footing

Protocols can be a powerful equity tool. Leveraging protocols in our classroom can ensure equal participation in discussions that grow understanding and brain power for *all* students, as well as help them access their funds of knowledge, using practices from youth culture to ignite engagement.

Resources for Protocols

Get detailed descriptions of the protocols mentioned in this article along with facilitation tips from these two organizations:

National School Reform Faculty <https://nsrfharmony.org/protocols/>

School Reform Initiative <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/>

Reflect & Discuss

- Do an equity audit: Who is doing most of the talking during your class discussions? Whose voices are being pushed out?
- How can you give students more agency in directing and facilitating academic conversations?
- Choose a protocol mentioned in the article and commit to trying it. How do you anticipate that it will improve your next class discussion? How will it ensure every student is being heard?

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