

How Protocols Empower Teacher Leaders to Lead and Teachers to Teach

In recent CenterView issues from our series on teacher leadership, we describe how tools, such as learning cycles and protocols, are key to meaningful, change-oriented, teacher-led professional learning. In this current CenterView, we revisit in more detail how protocols empower teacher leaders to lead their peers through structured processes to reflect on and improve instructional practices.

“I’m nervous about observing another teacher’s practice and giving feedback.”

“There’s a lot going on in the classroom, and it’s difficult to know what to focus on during an observation.”

“When teachers trust me to come watch them teach, I want to feel confident that I can offer helpful guidance.”

Such statements of uncertainty reflect the genuine concerns that many teacher leaders have when they take on new instructional leadership responsibilities. Although often accomplished teachers in their own classrooms, teacher leaders can be novices as leaders of their peers. In the five-year Teacher Practice Networks (TPN) initiative,¹ teachers — many of whom are stepping into teacher leadership roles for the first time — report excitement at having opportunities to share their instructional expertise with peers and to engage colleagues in professional learning focused on improving teaching practices. However, a common sentiment among teacher leaders is the realization that facilitating adult learning requires a different set of skills than teaching students, and that these new skills need to be deliberately learned and practiced.

Developing effective teacher leaders, according to researchers, should involve fostering an understanding of how adults learn, sharing strategies for teaching peers, providing opportunities to practice skills in job-embedded contexts, and offering access to high-quality resources.^{2,3} Since a significant part of being a teacher leader is planning and facilitating teacher learning activities that catalyze instructional change, being equipped with the right tools can both serve to build teacher leader confidence and guide effective teacher-to-teacher learning experiences.

Using protocols to bolster teacher professional learning

Tools, such as learning cycle frameworks and protocols, provide teacher leaders with guided pathways toward reaching common goals. Protocols, in particular, can provide a clear structure that enables teachers to focus on a single issue and

¹ The Teacher Practice Networks, a five-year initiative in collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has been advancing K–12 instruction aligned to college- and career-readiness standards through the efforts of teacher leadership.

² Poekert, P., Alexandrou, A., & Shannon, D. (2016). How teachers become leaders: An internationally validated theoretical model of teacher leadership development. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21(4), 307–329.

³ Smylie, M. A., & Eckert, J. (2018). Beyond superheroes and advocacy: The pathway of teacher leadership development. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(4), 556–577.

discuss instructional practice with intention and purpose.⁴ Research also shows that protocols can help create a safe way for teachers to reflect and provide collegial, formative feedback.⁵

Once a teacher leader has identified the desired professional learning outcome or the particular learning experience for teachers, she can choose from a library of protocols — such as the one curated by the National School Reform Faculty — to achieve that outcome or experience. Time-tested protocols exist for a range of purposes, such as inquiring about student opportunities to make meaning from text, observing a peer’s classroom instruction, looking closely at student work to identify learning gaps, or examining lesson plans to ensure they support a classroom of diverse learners. Depending on the protocol, teachers generally engage in these transformative learning processes in 30- to 70-minute sessions.

Teachers tell me that by using protocols to look at student work and data, they have started shifting what they do in their classrooms and are seeing some good results.

– TPN teacher leader

Following, we describe three types of protocols that TPN teacher leaders use as they lead teacher-to-teacher professional learning focused on helping other teachers develop and refine instructional practices aligned to state standards.

Classroom observation and guided discussion protocol

A widely used protocol among TPN teacher leaders for observing and inquiring about classroom practice is the *Instructional Practice Guide* (IPG).⁶ The IPG was selected for teacher leaders in the TPN initiative because it is aligned to Common Core-based state standards that teachers have been working toward in English language arts, social studies, and mathematics instruction.

In interviews that the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning conducted with TPN teacher leaders, we learned that they greatly value the guidance that the two-part IPG offers for conducting classroom observations of peers (part one) and facilitating post-observation conversations (part two). Specifically, teacher leaders called out the IPG as helpful because it provides concrete “look-fors” aligned to state standards during observations, and it provides a common language that facilitates meaningful conversations about practice.

Teacher leaders shared that the protocol enables productive conversations about improving practice in multiple ways:

- Reviewing the look-fors together beforehand gives transparency to the observation process. The observed teacher may even suggest a specific area in which she wants help. This pre-observation conversation helps to establish an agreed-upon purpose for the observation.
- The IPG’s 10 post-observation questions guide the conversation to focus on reflecting on the lesson and then to consider new ways to improve the lesson.
- Teacher leaders indicate that they benefit as much as the observed teachers from the process.

Teacher leaders report that the process of peer observation followed by a conversation is a particularly meaningful professional learning activity because it enables collegial, non-evaluative discussion and support. Teacher leaders appreciate that the IPG protocol fosters a safe structure for conducting constructive conversations about practice. Without the protocol, the observation and reflection process could potentially be an uncomfortable and unsuccessful experience for teacher leaders and teachers alike.⁷

⁴ National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. (2018). *Unleashing teacher leadership: How formal teacher leader roles can improve instruction*. Santa Monica, CA: NIET.

⁵ Boston, M., Bostic, J., Lesseig, K., & Sherman, M. (2015). A comparison of mathematics classroom observation protocols. *Mathematics Teacher Educator*, 3(2), 154–175. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

⁶ Student Achievement Partners (2018).

⁷ Stosich, E. (2016). Joint inquiry: Teachers’ collective learning about the Common Core in high-poverty urban schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6).

Protocols in action: Inquiring into a teacher’s practice on video

With help from TPN member organization Teaching Matters, teacher leader Richard has been learning to guide video-based observation and discussion of classroom practice. At his public middle school in the Bronx, Richard leads his eighth-grade team in weekly professional learning community (PLC) sessions focused on team-identified goals and strategies. During one spring quarter, the teachers looked at student assessment data and determined they wanted to focus on improving instruction in reading comprehension. Across a few meetings, teachers read professional literature on pedagogical approaches for teaching reading and identified strategies that they agreed to practice in their classrooms. They collaboratively designed lesson plans incorporating the strategies, taught the lessons, and videotaped their instruction.

At subsequent PLC meetings, teachers volunteered to share their recorded lessons. Using the *Instructional Practice Guide*, Richard led the teachers through a process of observing one another’s instructional practices and engaging in focused conversations about what they noticed. Afterward, teachers reflected on their observations and on student work in order to make plans for how to refine the lesson.

Looking at student work protocol

The practice of looking at student work to gauge student learning is new to some teachers, who primarily use student work to assign grades to students. A protocol designed to look at student work can be a particularly helpful way for teachers to review a sampling of student work to understand the learning successes and challenges related to learning a specific skill or concept. When teacher leaders use this protocol with their colleagues to look at student work, one teacher shares examples of his students’ work, which provide evidence of what that teacher’s students understand, what they are struggling to understand, and how they are thinking. Collectively, teachers examine the evidence, identify where students are demonstrating knowledge, puzzle through where students are struggling, and theorize why students are having difficulty. By listening to the observations and interpretations of his peers, the presenting teacher gains new perspectives and ideas for taking action to improve his own practice. In addition, the protocol prompts all of the teachers to reflect on what they learned about student learning, assessment practices, and/or instructional strategies and how their new insights might inform their own teaching.

A group of TPN teacher leaders surveyed at the end of the 2016–17 academic year reported that by routinely using a protocol such as the *ATLAS: Learning from Student Work* protocol,⁸ teachers developed the habit of looking at student work as data to inform their teaching and, as a result, began to see classroom instruction as an ever-evolving practice.

Connecting to text protocol

Some TPN teacher leaders use protocols in collaborative communities to help other teachers engage with text through a critical lens. For instance, the *Four “A”s Text Protocol*⁹ is a discussion guide that facilitates leading a group of teachers through a structured process of exploring text with consideration to one’s own values and assumptions. Using this protocol, teachers might read a professional article or chapter on student learning or pedagogy. Or a professional learning community of teachers might read a text used with students. In rounds, teachers select passages from the text and describe to the group how they agree or disagree with the author’s perspective. The protocol calls for teachers to listen to the views of their colleagues without commenting, reflect on those different perspectives, then conclude with an open discussion addressing the question: *What does this mean for our work with students?* In these collaborative

8 National School Reform Faculty, revised November 2000 by Gene Thompson-Grove for NSRF.

9 National School Reform Faculty (2015), adapted from Judith Gray, 2005.

communities, teachers can reflect on previously held assumptions that could impact how they teach, gain new insights, and plan with greater intention on ways to reframe a lesson.

Professional learning experiences that include protocols are helping teachers undergo deep professional growth as they receive valuable input from colleagues, improve their craft through intentional observation and reflection, become more explicit and precise in their instruction, and learn to use data to inform instruction.

The Center view

Leading teachers is difficult work and new territory for many teacher leaders. In fact, as more district and school administrators utilize teacher leaders as key levers to increase teacher capacity and improve schoolwide instructional change, it is essential that teacher leaders are equipped with both leadership development support and useful tools. Providing teacher leaders with training on how to use specific protocols like those described in this issue can increase their confidence to lead, while giving them clear structures and processes through which to support teacher learning. The more that teacher leaders feel supported and prepared, the more effective they can be at helping to empower all teachers.

Resources

CenterView – Learning Cycles: A powerful tool for teacher-to-teacher professional learning. (WestEd, 2018). A short publication describing how teacher leaders facilitate high-impact professional learning using learning cycles to build teacher habits of reflection and continuous improvement. <https://www.wested.org/resources/cftl-centerview-learning-cycles/>

National School Reform Faculty. A professional development organization that provides training and resources for communities of educators to learn collaboratively and through reflection. To access the extensive collection of protocols, you must register for a free account at <https://www.nsrffharmony.org/>.

Student Achievement Partners. An organization that supports teachers with professional learning tools to observe and reflect on classroom practice, and to plan standards-aligned teaching and learning. <https://achievethecore.org/>