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The Learning Conversations Protocol

An Intentional Interruption Strategy for Enhanced Collaborative Learning

The problem with 'great discussions' is that analysis, debate and challenge – which are necessary for true (permanent) learning – are often absent.

– Steven Katz and Lisa Ain Dack

In this monograph, we have invited educational psychologists Steven Katz and Lisa Ain Dack to share the Learning Conversations Protocol, a strategy – if implemented correctly – to turn "great discussions" into successful professional learning.

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The default practices of "great discussions"

Professional learning – the kind that has the goal of changing teacher or leader understanding in a way that leads to permanent changes in practice (Katz & Dack, 2013) – often occurs in a collaborative setting. When groups of people get together to "learn" in this way, the experience tends to be characterized by significant discussion. People often leave a meeting and comment to themselves or to others, "That was a great discussion!". The problem with "great discussions", however, is that the components of "joint work" (Little, 1990) that are necessary for true (permanent) learning, such as analysis, debate and challenge, are often absent.

Take the notion of groupthink , for example, which refers to the stifling of individuality that occurs in a collective context. The idea behind groupthink is that if you put a group of people together and allow for a free-flowing discussion, the group tends to settle on content for which there is already high agreement among group members. Essentially, being in a group leads to a lack of variability in perspectives (Katz, Earl & Ben Jaafar, 2009). And so the "great discussion" may involve a significant amount of talking, but with few differences in opinions being purposefully shared. This is problematic for "real" learning, which relies on diversity of opinion (Katz & Dack, 2013).

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In addition to groupthink, there are several other reasons why the core components of joint work (such as analysis, debate, and challenge) are often absent from collaborative learning. This monograph isn't intended to be a complete articulation of these, which we've described in great detail elsewhere (Katz & Dack, 2013).

However, the common denominator that unites all of the reasons can be found in basic human nature. Human beings tend to shy away from change more than they embrace it. Take the confirmation bias, for example, which refers to the idea that once people have a hypothesis about something, they tend to look only for things that confirm rather than challenge it. The confirmation bias, well supported by research, essentially shows that people tend to engage with the world in a way that confirms what they already think, believe, know, and do, and work hard to avoid evidence to the contrary. And so, in "great discussions" it is often the case that people are paying significant attention to the ideas they hear that confirm their existing beliefs and practices, and ignoring those that don't. This is problematic for learning because real professional learning is about *changing* beliefs and practices to lead to positive changes for students.

An additional characteristic of human nature that works against the notion of joint work is the "culture of niceness" (Elmore, 2007) that is so prevalent in education. In a culture of niceness, beliefs, ideas and practices are superficially validated in collaborative exchanges. People often avoid professional conflict or challenge in order to protect others' feelings. This comes at a cost, however, forgoing opportunities for the kind of critical challenge that leads to deep understanding and changed practice. As a result, "great discussions" are often filled with a superficial niceness that makes people feel good, but does not provide the critical challenge that is necessary to lead to real (permanent) learning.

From "Great Discussions" to Focused Learning Conversations

In collaborative settings, significant learning is more likely to occur in the context of a learning conversation as opposed to a "great discussion." The key components of learning conversations that move them beyond "great discussions" is that they are both *planned* and *systematic* (General Teaching Council, 2004). Learning conversations do not just happen on their own when groups of people get together to "discuss," but instead are a result of intentional, systematic planning of the learning opportunity.

Successful collaborative groups often use protocols to structure their learning conversations. Protocols are structured sets of guidelines to promote effective and efficient communication and problem solving. They help to focus on the task at hand and mitigate the default practices of collaboration described above. Take the culture of niceness, as an example. When providing feedback to one another, people tend to avoid any kind of comment that could be interpreted as negative or challenging due to a belief that this kind of feedback isn't "nice" because it takes issue with the person's value as a professional. Alternatively, when there is some kind of constructive feedback to provide, it gets coupled with a superficially positive comment to maintain the facade of "niceness." Protocols can help to interrupt this propensity to avoid challenge, by providing rule-based guidance on how to describe practice and provide feedback on it in a way that separates person from practice.

There are many different kinds of protocols and there are entire books that have been written to describe all the different choices and the particular scenarios in which they work best (Easton, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald, 2007). For example, there are protocols to explore a problem of practice, assess whether an assignment meets a teacher's goals, look at student work samples, help teachers determine what and how students are thinking, provide feed-back on a teacher's assignment and many others. From our perspective, protocols don't need to be fancy or overly complicated in their instructions; what they need to do is provide a structure that forces people to do things that they wouldn't naturally do, like separate person from practice and/ or description from interpretation.

Our Learning Conversations Protocol

Imagine a small group of school leaders gathering to discuss the challenges of professional practice that they are currently facing. Each leader is working on his/her own leadership inquiry to tackle a challenge of professional practice, and the goal of the collaborative meeting is to share inquiries and provide feedback to one another. Being privy to many meetings like this, we have found that in the absence of a protocol as an intentional interruption strategy, these meetings tend to be filled with "great discussion," which includes agreement, confirmation and little diversity of opinion. And even when the discussion gets "passionate," and some critical challenge is evident, there is little focus on how this discussion will translate into next steps in learning for those present.

We developed our Learning Conversations Protocol as a direct response to this challenge (Katz, Dack & Malloy, forthcoming). We use this protocol to intentionally interrupt the "great discussions" that we have observed time and time again. The protocol is intended for use in any collaborative learning setting that is focused on building the capacity of

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leaders. We define "leadership" broadly here, as we use this protocol not only with school leaders, but with teacher leaders and district-level leaders as well. The intent is to use the protocol to collaboratively analyze an individual's work and to push the thinking of all members of the group beyond what they would be able to achieve on their own.

This protocol, like most others, requires someone to take responsibility for leading or facilitating the process (e.g., forcing people to adhere to the instructions and complete each step, enforcing the timelines, stopping inappropriate discourse, etc.). Since the protocol requires participants to behave in ways that aren't natural, without a facilitator groups often revert to the default practices that the protocol is intended to interrupt. Importantly, the facilitation of the protocol is itself a skill that requires practice. It requires the facilitator to know the protocol well enough to recognize when a norm is being violated, as well as when and how to intervene when this is happening, which can be both challenging and un-comfortable. In many of the school districts in which we use the protocol, we have modeled facilitation in a gradual release model, with some of our more ex-perienced groups rotating the facilitation role among all group members with great success. In addition to the role of facilitator, there is always one person who is the presenter. All other group members act as critical friend analysts/ feedback providers.

The 7 Steps of the Learning Conversation Protocol

It is essential that the steps of the protocol and the conceptual underpinnings (i.e., "the why") behind each component are kept together, because "the why" is the key to successful facilitation (and implementation). You'll see that explicating "the why" is built into the protocol directly, as the facilitator explains the rationale behind each section throughout the process.

Setting the Stage

The facilitator reviews the norms as well as "the why" behind them.

Norms include:

- follow the steps
- no placing blame
- collaboration
- tolerating discomfort in the process
- leader presenter to take his/her own notes
- everyone else to keep a "parking lot" for personal connections

Prior to launching into the protocol, the facilitator reviews the norms, as well as "the why" behind them. There are two norms that are necessary to describe in greater detail here. First, the norm of "tolerating discomfort in the process" is especially important. As mentioned, a protocol like this is uncomfortable by design. You will see as you read below that there are a number of components of the process that would be quite uncomfortable for someone not used to it. One of the criteria for successful implementation of the protocol is tolerating this discomfort. Comfort cannot be a success criterion for using the protocol effectively, as discomfort is an essential prerequisite for real (permanent) new learning. We have observed groups who have said things like, "We really didn't like the way it felt to do it that way, so we made a change that was more comfortable for our group." While that sounds commendable, it's problematic because making a change to make the protocol "more comfortable" likely means allowing behaviours that the protocol was designed to intentionally interrupt! That's why sticking to the protocol is a norm, as is tolerating the discomfort that comes along with that.

Second, the norm of keeping a "parking lot of personal connections" is crucial. This norm asks that all group members, while participating in the collaborative analysis of someone else's work, also keep a "parking lot" of the connections that they are making to their own practice. The parking lot norm ensures that all participants leave the meeting having explicitly labeled how their own thinking has been pushed and how they might move their own learning forward, whether they are a lead presenter that day or not. We always tell people that using the protocol is about both benevolence and selfishness. It's important to be benevolent and come to these learning encounters with the goal of helping colleagues move forward in their work. But there must be a selfishness component as well, in that all group members need to leave the learning encounter feeling that they have learned something for themselves.

Step 1
Introduction (5–8 minutes)

- The facilitator reviews "the why" behind this step.
- The leader presenter briefly explains where s/he is in the process of his/her leadership inquiry, what learning moves have been undertaken and what specifically has been learned.

In the first step of the protocol, the presenter shares his/her work, including the inquiry question and the evidence for it, the learning moves that s/he has been doing, and the learning that has emerged from them. When the group is familiar with the leadership inquiry being presented, the presenter will not start back at the beginning, but will just update the group on what work s/he has done since the last time that inquiry was presented. There are 5–8 minutes allocated for this first step.

This section of the protocol is designed to intentionally interrupt two things that groups tend to do when a discussion is left unstructured. The first is the propensity that people have to tell long stories when given the opportunity to "present," rather than to be concise. The time limit given and the parameters set ensure that the presenter shares only the details that are necessary for the group to understand the work being undertaken. The second interruption is of the propensity that people have when working on a challenge of practice to plan a move, do it, and then begin planning the next move, without "assessing" or "reflecting." Essentially, the protocol interrupts the natural inclination that people have to get stuck in a plan-act, plan-act, plan-act sequence. Having to present the full cycle of *plan*, *act*, *assess*, *reflect* ensures that people do in fact "close the loop" for each move they make by taking the time to articulate what they learned from each move they completed.

Step 2
Clarifying the Leader's Work
(5–8 minutes)

- The facilitator reviews "the why" behind this step.
- The group asks clarifying questions to fill in any gaps.
- No judgments or interpretations are to be made about what the leader was doing, and no suggestions.
- The leader presenter answers specific questions in a crisp and precise manner.

In the second section of the protocol (5–8 minutes), the group asks clarifying questions to fill in any gaps. Clarifying questions are those that the presenter can easily answer. They don't have to be yes/no answers, but they are predominantly factual and do need to be answered crisply and precisely. Examples of clarifying questions include things like, "What grade are you referring to?", "How many teachers are in the math department?", "What specific questions did you ask at that meeting?", "Was this the first time that group worked together?". The intent of this section of the protocol is to ensure that the group has the complete picture of what has been presented while putting limits on the presenter's typical temptation to pontificate. In addition, this section of the protocol is designed to intentionally interrupt the propensity that people have to listen to a presentation and quickly make it about themselves, saying something like, "This once happened to me when . . . . " Allowing only descriptive questions at this point ensures that the group focuses exclusively on understanding what the presenter has shared.

Step 3
Interpreting the Leader's Work
(8–10 minutes)

- The facilitator reviews "the why" behind this step.
- The group tries to understand the leadership inquiry and/or latest learning move(s) at a deeper level.
- Each individual puts forward how they are conceptualizing or representing what they've heard.
- Avoid any push to consensus; table as many different ways of thinking about the inquiry as possible.
- No suggestions!
- Possible prompts:
  - I think I heard/or didn't hear [leader X] say that . . . "
  - "This makes me think about . . . "
  - "I wonder if this issue is really about . . ."

  - "I am curious why [leader X] would think that . . . "
  - "I wonder what assumptions [Leader X] is making in order to draw those conclusions . . ."
- *Leader Presenter:*
  - Doesn't speak, listens to how he/she has been understood by the group.
  - Asks him/herself, "Why would they think that?"
  - Works on active listening – agree before you disagree.

In the third and possibly most pivotal section (8–10 minutes), the group (other than the presenter) works together to try to understand the presenter's inquiry and learning at a deeper level. The intent is for the group to put forward as many different ways of thinking about the work as possible, rather than come to consensus. This interrupts the propensity for "groupthink" described earlier. Importantly, no suggestions are allowed in this step, which is contrary to what people tend to do when left to their own devices. This section is about ensuring a push to a "deeper understanding" of the challenge, a hallmark practice of expertise (Katz & Dack, 2013).

Note that the presenter is not permitted to speak in this section of the protocol. Instead, the presenter is asked to engage in active listening, practicing what we call "agree before you disagree." This is intended to be an interruption of the natural inclination that people have to be defensive as the "confirmation bias" is encouraging them to explain away any challenging feedback they're hearing. Further, forcing the presenter to actively listen and remain silent also serves as an opportunity for the presenter to engage in a priority-setting exercise. In "great discussions," points that are raised early often dictate the flow of the discussion, even if they're not most important. Here, forced and active listening creates space for the presenter to mentally sort what is said based on what resonates the most.

Step 4
Quick Clarification (2 minutes)

- The facilitator reviews "the why" behind this step.
- The group asks any additional questions of clarification that have come up.
- The leader presenter can clear up any inaccuracies or missing information (but not more than that).

In the fourth section (maximum of 2 minutes), the group has the opportunity to ask any last clarification questions that have come up and that they need answered prior to making suggestions (in Step 5). This additional clarification section is here because it is often the case that the interpretation conversation in the previous section leads to additional questions of clarification that the group wishes had been asked earlier. Importantly, this section is a *quick* clarification. In addition to the group asking any last clarification questions, the presenter is permitted to clear up any inaccuracies that were heard, but is not allowed to say more. This continues to be an interruption of the presenter's propensity to want to defend and confirm without thinking through the feedback. Without being explicitly reminded that only factual inaccuracies can be cleared up here, the presenter tends to start to respond to everything said in Step 3.

Step 5
Implications for Thinking (and Practice) (8–10 minutes)

- The facilitator reviews "the why" behind this step.
- The groups discusses the implications for the leader presenter's learning or where the leader presenter should go next in his/her thinking based on what they've heard and discussed.
- *Possible prompts:*
  - "I think [Leader X] really might want to think about . . . "