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Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol

Source: Steve Seidel, Director of Project Zero at Harvard, devised this protocol for a group of educators that gathered each weekend to look at student work. The protocol is described in Blythe, Allen, and Powell (1997) and McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald (2003).

Overview: This protocol is unique because it does not feature information about context (assignment, classroom, student, etc.) at the beginning; instead, participants are encouraged to look at the work by itself. Steve Seidel describes the four main purposes of the protocol as follows:

The first is to enhance teachers' perceptions of all their students' work by honing the teachers' perceptual skills. A second is to encourage depth of perception by demonstrating all that can be seen in a single student's work. A third is to encourage a balance in perception—the habit of looking for strength as well as need. The assumption behind this purpose is that a teacher can address need only by building on strength. A fourth purpose is to encourage conversation among teachers about what the work shows and how they can act individually and collectively on what it shows in order to benefit their students. (McDonald et al., 2003, p. 77)

The National School Reform Faculty elaborates on the key ideas behind the protocol ("Collaborative Assessment Conference," n.d.):

First, students use school assignments, especially open-ended ones, to tackle important problems in which they are personally interested. Sometimes these problems are the same ones that the teacher has assigned them to work on, sometimes not.

Second, we can only begin to see and understand the serious work that students undertake if we suspend judgment long enough to look carefully and closely at what is actually in the work rather than what we hope to see in it.

Third, we need the perspective of others—especially those who are not intimate with our goals for our students—to help us to see aspects of the student and the work that would otherwise escape us, and we need others to help us generate ideas about how to use this information to shape our daily practice. (§ 3–4)

Number of Participants: 5–15 participants, a presenter, and a facilitator

Time Required: 45–90 minutes
Steps (suggested times based on an 85-minute session):

Step 1: Introduction (5 minutes). The facilitator makes sure that everyone knows everyone else and explains the protocol, including the suggested time for each step.

Step 2: Sharing the Work (5 minutes). The presenter shares the student work with the participants but says nothing about the piece, the conditions under which it was produced, or the student.

Step 3: Examining the Work (10 minutes). Participants silently examine and take notes on the work.

Step 4: Describing the Work (10 minutes)

- The facilitator asks the group to provide nonevaluative descriptions of the work using questions such as “What do you see?” “What’s there?” and “What’s not there?”
- If a participant provides evaluative commentary, the facilitator asks him or her to rephrase the comment as a description of evidence upon which the opinion might be based.

Step 5: Raising Questions (10 minutes)

- The facilitator asks the group to consider questions that the work raises for them using questions such as “What came to your mind as you examined this work?” “What did you notice?” “What struck you?” and “What questions does this raise for you?”
- Participants respond with questions about the conditions under which the work was produced, the student, the context, or the work itself.
- The facilitator might record these questions on a piece of chart paper or ask someone to serve as recorder during this step. (The presenter remains silent during this step.)

Step 6: Speculation (10 minutes)

- The facilitator asks participants to speculate on what the student is working on, both personally and academically.
- Participants make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student might have focused on in creating the work.

Step 7: Presenter Reflection (10 minutes)

- The facilitator asks the presenter to address any questions or speak generally about the student whose work is being examined or the context of the work.
• The presenter may offer a perspective that relates to the work, including what he or she sees in it. However, the presenter does not need to answer any or all of the questions.
• Some presenters share what they found surprising about the participants’ comments during steps 4–6.

**Step 8: Implications of the Work (15 minutes)**

• The facilitator invites everyone (including the presenter) to address the implications of the work and their analysis of it. A typical facilitator question at this point might be, “What have we learned by examining this work that can help us in our own teaching?”
• Participants can discuss their own teaching, how people learn, or how the student whose work was examined can be supported in the future.

**Step 9: Debriefing (10 minutes).** The facilitator invites the whole group to de brief the experience—both the content of the conference as well as the process—after thanking the presenter and offering him or her a chance to reflect.

**Critical Elements:** Participants may have difficulty sticking to nonevaluative descriptions of the work and may need help rephrasing their comments. Similarly, they may be unsure about what kinds of questions they can raise; almost any question about the work, its context, or the student is appropriate. Finally, it is extremely important for participants to see beyond the particular student and work being examined to general teaching and learning strategies.

**Tips for the Facilitator:** The facilitator plays a very active role in this protocol; steps 4–6 in particular require the facilitator to provide prompts and probably examples. The facilitator may need to have participants practice making nonevaluative descriptions before the process begins by surveying the room (see the tips for the facilitator under the Rounds Protocol) or analyzing a piece of writing or artwork.

The facilitator may also need to reassure participants that they can, indeed, do this protocol without knowing the context of the student work.

MacDonald and colleagues (2003) suggest that facilitators also need to “press participants to go deeply into the work, to raise more questions and make more speculations collectively than any one member imagined possible” (p. 79). Facilitators need to help participants surmount superficiality. For example, when asked what a student seems to be working on, a participant might say, “a math problem.” The facilitator should prod the speaker to think about the learning the student is going through to do the math problem.
Although some approximate times are given above, the facilitator must have a keen sense of when a group is finished and ready to move on or needs to stay on a step and push thinking deeper.