



Leading a Case Discussion of Student Writing

When dealing with a challenging piece of student writing or a classroom dilemma about writing, leading a case discussion can be useful. The following tuning protocol can be used to lead a case discussion.

What is a protocol?

A protocol consists of agreed upon guidelines for a conversation. Using protocols often allows groups to build trust by doing substantive work together. A protocol creates a structure that makes it safe to ask challenging questions of each other. It also ensures that there is some equity in terms of how each person's issues are attended to. Protocols build in a space for listening, and often give people a license to listen without having to continuously respond. Protocols also make the most of the limited time people have.

A Tuning Protocol

To take part in a Tuning Protocol about writing, an educator brings a classroom dilemma about writing or a challenging sample of student work to a group of six to ten other educators. The teacher should also bring materials that support student performance, such as the assignment descriptions and scoring rubrics. A facilitator guides the group through the protocol and keeps time. Uninterrupted by questions or comments from participants, the presenting educator describes the context for the student work, the work or dilemma itself, and often includes a focusing question or specific area for feedback.

Participants have time to examine the student work or think about the classroom situation and ask clarifying questions. Then, with the presenter listening but silent, participants offer warm and cool feedback - both supportive and challenging. Participants often frame their feedback as a question, for example, "How might the project be different if students chose their research topics?" After feedback is offered for a selected amount of time, the presenter has the opportunity, again uninterrupted, to reflect on the feedback and address any comments or questions. Time is reserved for debriefing the experience.

An Example Case Discussion Using a Tuning Protocol

The facilitator, Mr. Will, opens the case discussion by reviewing the protocol with all participants. He also keeps time for the group, and turns the floor over to Ms. Hamilton, the contributing educator for the discussion. Ms. Hamilton re-introduces herself to the group, and briefly describes her current 9th grade English class, in which she has assigned a literary analysis essay on *The Odyssey*. Ms. Hamilton then describes her classroom dilemma: one of her 9th grade students has written a first draft of the essay, but is reluctant to change or revise the first draft in any way, claiming that the first draft is her best work. Ms. Hamilton shares copies of the assignment sheet for the essay with the group, describes the assignment in detail and the writing process expectations involved, and also provides the group with the grading rubric she will use to assess this essay. She shows the group a copy of the first draft that the student is unwilling to revise. She ends her presentation of this material with the following focusing question: "What strategies can I use to encourage this student to revise her writing?"

Mr. Will prompts the group members to look over the assignment sheet, rubric, and student work sample and to think about the classroom dilemma. Group members then ask clarifying questions about the assignment. After Ms. Hamilton answers the questions, she is silent as the group offers warm and cool feedback about her situation. One teacher compliments the clarity of the assignment itself. Another teacher asks the question, “Have students in this class revised other writing assignments?” The conversation continues for ten minutes as Ms. Hamilton takes notes.

After time has expired, Mr. Will prompts Ms. Hamilton to offer comments, questions, or reflections on the feedback. She muses that she has only emphasized revision in her classroom for formal essays. She wonders if an important piece of encouraging students to revise may be to incorporate revision more often into her classroom with both informal and formal writing tasks. Mr. Will concludes the case discussion and leads a five minute debriefing session over what the group has learned.

Leading Case Discussions

Ideally, classroom dilemmas about writing and challenging writing samples used in case discussions are generated by teachers about their own teaching difficulties. With this in mind, below are some common dilemmas or situations that would work for a case discussion:

Scenario 1: A student does not know how to begin writing or what to write for a formal writing assignment.

Scenario 2: A student draft of a formal writing assignment does not respond to the writing prompt.

Scenario 3: A student is unwilling or embarrassed to share writing with peers.

Scenario 4: A student has written a formal essay using a combination of 1st person, 2nd person, and 3rd person.

Scenario 5: Students are writing off-topic postings on an online discussion board.

Scenario 6: A student gives unthoughtful, harsh, or inappropriate responses to another student about writing.

Protocol Materials adapted in part from *Looking Together at Student Work* by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara S. Powell (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) and *Looking at Student Work*, Brown University.

Steps in a Tuning Protocol

60 minute session

Developed by Joseph McDonald and David Allen

The ideal format and allotted times for the steps in a tuning protocol are developed in context with real teaching dilemmas, so keep that in mind as you plan your case discussion. To help you plan, below is a suggested format and approximate time limits that can be used for a case discussion such as the one in the example above.

1. Introduction — 5 minutes

- Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule
- Participants briefly introduce themselves (if necessary)

2. Presentation — 15 minutes

- The presenter has an opportunity to share the context for the student work:
 - Information about the students and/or the class — what the students tend to be like, where they are in school, where they are in the year
 - Assignment or prompt that generated the student work
 - Student learning goals or standards that inform the work
 - Samples of student work — photocopies of work, video clips, etc. — with student names removed
 - Evaluation format — scoring rubric and/or assessment criteria, etc.
 - Focusing question for feedback
- Participants are silent; no questions are entertained at this time.

3. Clarifying Questions — 2-3 minutes

- Participants have an opportunity to ask “clarifying” questions in order to get information that may have been omitted in the presentation that they feel would help them to understand the context for the student work. Clarifying questions are matters of “fact.”
- The facilitator should be sure to limit the questions to those that are “clarifying,” judging which questions more properly belong in the warm/cool feedback section.

4. Examination of Student Work Samples — 10 minutes

- Participants look closely at the work, taking notes on where it seems to be in tune with the stated goals, and where there might be a problem. Participants focus particularly on the presenter’s focusing question.
- Presenter is silent; participants do this work silently.

5. Pause to prepare for warm and cool feedback — 2-3 minutes

- Participants take a couple of minutes to prepare what they would like to contribute to the feedback session.
- Presenter is silent; participants do this work silently.

6. Warm and Cool Feedback — 15 minutes

- Participants share feedback with each other while the presenter is silent. The feedback generally begins with a few minutes of warm feedback, moves on to a few minutes of

cool feedback (sometimes phrased in the form of reflective questions), and then moves back and forth between warm and cool feedback.

- The facilitator may need to remind participants of the presenter's focusing question, which should be posted for all to see.
- Presenter is silent and takes notes.

7. Reflection — 5 minutes

- Presenter speaks to those comments/questions he or she chooses while participants are silent. This is not a time to defend oneself, but is instead a time for the presenter to reflect aloud on those ideas or questions that seemed particularly interesting.
- Facilitator may intervene to focus, clarify, etc.

8. Debrief — 5 minutes

- Facilitator-led discussion of this tuning experience.