

# National School Reform Faculty New York Facilitator Portfolio

*Santiago Taveras*

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## **Introduction**

As a life long educator, I have had the opportunity to work in schools in a number of ways. My role has changed repeatedly. Starting as a teacher, moving on as an assistant principal, then a principal and now a Local Instructional Superintendent. This path had me changing rooms, as a teacher, offices as a principal and assistant principal. Along with these physical changes from one place to another my responsibilities have changed as well, but one thing has remained constant regardless of my position or title. This constant variable is that I am a *facilitator*. Whether it is facilitating my class, professional development sessions, or simply facilitating meetings about policy and decision making; learning to facilitate these forums is a skill that I have had to work on throughout my career.

As a teacher, I developed norms and values, which I felt were important to establish in order to effectively teach my students. These norms and values usually came in the way of rules and regulations. Although I always thought of myself as a very fair teacher, in the first year of my career, many of the rules were punitive and were totally created by me. It wasn't until the second year, that I remember meeting with my 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade bridge class, which I had the class sitting in a circle and talked about appropriate and inappropriate classroom behavior. The students took ownership of that discussion and came up with some very similar rules and regulations, which we called "appropriate classroom behaviors". These norms and values came from the students and were exactly the behaviors that I wanted to see in the classroom. Although I did not know it, I had successfully used my first protocol. It was at that point that I started to develop my toolbox.

I have been exposed to different protocols in my formal studies and in participation in a number of conferences and through my career. It wasn't until this year, that I actually learned the names and the power of the protocols. This year, I find myself working with Alan Dichter who is now my colleague and a person who was my mentor when I first became a principal over seven years ago. Participating in a number of workshops on facilitation, lead by Alan, I now think about protocols as tools to assist me in the planning of professional development.

## **ADDRESSING THE "FACILITATOR STANDARDS" THROUGH THE WORK**

### ***Building Democratic Community with Voice and Respect for All:***

As a supervisor and professional developer, I have had a number of opportunities to use the tools in my toolbox to plan workshops and professional development sessions. The first standard, "*building democratic community with voice and respect for all*" is probably the standard that I find most important when planning any workshop. The audience and the purpose of the meeting help me determine the opening activity, so that I can develop a good tone for the rest of the meeting. I feel that if the opening activity goes

well, so will the other parts of the session.

On one occasion, I was asked to facilitate a workshop with five new principals who were starting their own schools. They were asked to come to a meeting on a Saturday in mid-town Manhattan. I was very concerned about the opening activity, because the last thing I wanted was for the five principals to regret their participation in this session, since they were now giving up their own time on a beautiful spring day in New York City. The opening activity I chose was the “*post card*” protocol. I asked the group, including myself, to choose two cards from the bunch, that best depicted their leadership style, and two, a post card that best represented the way they felt about the work ahead of them as new small school principal. All participants had a lot of fun sifting through the post cards and selecting two. During this time, they talked to each other, made jokes and made comments about other post cards, which they did not choose. After a few minutes, each person had made their selections and they had an opportunity to share their thoughts about the cards they had chosen. Being able to put their feelings out on the table was a relief for them and they also noticed that although all the schools were facing their own issues, they all shared the worries about opening up their own school. Again, the norms were set through the use of the protocol. I clearly restated the norms and expectations I had for the group.

On another occasion, I worked with a mixed group of approximately thirty people, which included teachers, students and administrators; I did a workshop on “Advisory”. For this group, which had been working together for a few months on developing Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) within their school building, I tried the “*North/South*” protocol, because I felt it was important for them to see how people classify their leadership style. I also wanted them to start to value and respect the differences and similarities of their peers. This activity was really helpful in breaking the ice, because each person had the opportunity to speak in their smaller group, and develop a friendly relationship with people that are part of other planning groups. This activity again sets the foundation for future work. The norms and values are modeled during the protocol, therefore setting a culture and tone that is respectful. As a facilitator, my job is to highlight the desired behaviors I observed during the protocol and encouraged them to accept those behaviors as our norms for continuing the work. The very next day, I had the opportunity to try this same activity in another school, which was going through a similar process. Again, the results were positive and the opening protocol paved the way for the remainder of the session.

Earlier this year, I was able to run the first of a series of workshops with a group of assistant principals who had previously come together for meetings, but did not know each other well. For the first session, I decided to use the “*Diversity*” protocol, where I asked the group to think about how being part of the group helped shape their educational philosophy. I asked them to group themselves by the size of the high school they attended, small, medium and large. I then asked them to group themselves by the decade when they were in high school, and last, I asked them to group themselves by where they come from. Although the activity took a little longer than I expected, the norms of respect and listening to each other were established. As the facilitator, I highlighted the behaviors I observed during the activity and asked that they value these as our norms during our monthly meeting. In addition, the assistant principals got to build community by sharing stories and experiences with other members of the group that they had not talked to

before. Everyone was smiling and a wonderful tone was now set for the rest of the meeting.

The group has now met five times and the relationship between the assistant principals and the relationship between the assistant principals and me has grown tremendously over time. This relationship has made it easier for us to cover very difficult topics and address controversial issues effectively. My job as a facilitator essentially becomes easier after every meeting with this group, because I see the members of the group as facilitators, so that they can actually start to practice some of the protocols we have covered. This is a shift that allows each member of the group to grow at their own pace and for them to start planning their own professional development with their peers and their teachers. A great example of this was when a smaller group of assistant principals of mathematics and a smaller group of assistant principals of social studies, worked together to develop a half day of professional development for their peers in the Region. It was interesting to see how both groups used and planned to use protocols as part of their half day of professional development.

The feedback the assistant principals received from their peers after their half day of professional development was also e-mailed back to all participants and used to plan for the next professional development session. I have modeled this system of feedback with the group of assistant principals after every meeting. They now look forward to the feedback, and realize that I not only read it, but take into consideration whatever suggestions are made. This way of communicating the feedback with everyone involved in the professional development lends itself to building a democratic community with voice and respect for all. I truly feel that without the feedback, we would not have been able to move forward so quickly. The feedback has definitely resulted in building trust with the group.

Building democratic community with voice and respect for all is a powerful standard, which is the focus of my thoughts whenever I plan workshops or professional development sessions. I have done other meetings that continue to re-enforce the value of the tools in my toolbox. I can't image planning any professions development session, without thinking of a good opening activity. When planning a professional development session, I also think about the composition of the group and the whether or not I will meet with them one time or a number of times. I try to think of the best ways to accomplish the goal of the meeting, by taking all these variables into account, before I decide on the protocols to use in each session.

### ***Surfacing and Managing Controversy and Paradox; Valuing Dissidence:***

The beauty of an opinion is not just that everyone has an opinion about a number of different topics and issues, but the passion in which people voice their opinion and how personal they make them. This is especially true in education. There are different philosophies about teaching and learning, and it is very rare when you can gather a group of twenty or more educators and have them agree on any topic. Introducing new ideas and moving people toward a common understanding and belief on one thing, is no easy task. Fortunately for those of us who use protocols, we have tools that help facilitate difficult conversations and at the same time, allow for differences to be expressed in a safe environment where participants can feel comfortable voicing their opinions.

Introducing the concept of an advisory to the two schools I'm working with and getting them to move their thinking in favor of advisories was a big challenge. The second purpose of the advisory discussion was to give all participants a better understanding of different advisory models and the basic essential elements of a successful advisory system. In order to accomplish this I used the "*Wall Talk*" protocol right after the opening activity. This allowed the members of the group to put down their initial thoughts about "advisory" on the wall. The wall was a safe way to put down their thoughts, questions, concerns, and issues about advisory. I encouraged them to voice their agreements and disagreements with any of the statements on the wall. These comments were not addressed until after an activity where the participants read a chapter of a book on "advisory" where we used the "*Save the Last Word for Me*" protocol. After a forty-five minutes discussion based on the text, on advisory, they all went back to the word wall, using a different color, to see how their thinking had changed after the text based discussion. It was interesting to see that the text-based discussion helped ease some of the fears people had about advisories.

The combination of the two protocols allowed for differences to be acknowledged and dealt with in a fair and equitable manner. Allowing discourse in a structured manner where norms and values have been established allows all participants to listen to both sides of an issue and address conflicts. This first advisory session was just the beginning of many more conversations about advisory to follow in the months ahead. The protocols provided the structure for everyone to get the same information in the same way and for the facilitator to guide the direction of the thinking on advisory.

Using the "*Save the Last Word for Me*" protocol to discuss the "Principles of Learning" article during a meeting with forty-four principals from different parts of the city, multiple grade levels schools and varied levels of experiences with the Principles of Learning was a real success. A few days before the meeting, I sent out the agenda, with the article attached. One principal in particular called me and complained about how useful could this meeting be for her, who had read the article on a number of occasions and did not think she could get anything out of it, by reading it and discussing it again. The same principal wrote back the day after the meeting thanking me for "pushing back" and making her attend the meeting. She mentioned how useful it was to have the text based discussion with colleagues who had experienced the article before and principals who had just read it for the first time. She also went on to mention how valuable it was for her to listen to other perspectives about the same Principles of Learning, from principals who had a different population of kids as her. She liked the structure and the content of the meeting. The power of that moment and her change in thinking was made possible by the use of protocols, which allowed for totally differentiated professional development for all the principals regardless their level of expertise with the Principles of Learning. Although everything worked out this time, I question when is the right time to push back? This is a question which continuously comes up whenever someone questions the content of a professional development session, and a question which I continue to grapple with.

In an effort to be transparent in moving groups of educators forward, the *Wall Talk* and the *Save the Last Word for Me* protocols were instrumental in guiding these three different groups of people towards a common goal. One of the most valuable parts of protocols is the time saved by the structures and parameters put in place by the

protocol, which allows for controversial issues to be discussed in a timely, fair and equitable manner where everyone's voice is heard.

Thinking ahead to the next academic school year, I am already thinking about my schools and the work that lies ahead. With many new small schools opening every year and sharing buildings, there is a lot of work ahead with schools who share the same building, but do not share the same level of success. How do I work with all the schools in a campus, without making one school feel that they have nothing to share with the other schools, but they have a lot to learn from them? These are just two of the many questions I am currently grappling with as I start to think about my work as a supervisor, but more importantly, as a facilitator, who will have to face these very difficult conversations in the near future.

### ***Developing a Facilitator Tool Box:***

One of the Principles of Learning from the Resnick study is "*Self Management*". This is the area where I grapple with as a facilitator. Being my own critic and working on my own facilitating skills I often ask myself several questions; how do I know when to change a protocol to meet the needs of the audience? Along with that, when do I change plans, because the implementation is not going as well as planned? When is enough time enough, before changing the course?

Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to work with Alan who sometimes comes over and whispers something like, "you don't have to have everyone do the *"cool feedback"*", since they are saying the same thing." A little modification like that makes a world of difference in the fluidity of the activity. As a facilitator, I have to learn to listen to the audience so that I can make those decisions on my own and not make anyone in the group feel that they have been silenced.

The familiarity with the group helps makes these decisions easier. As a facilitator, you learn the habits of the group, and know when it is OK to move on or when to wait those extra moments. A protocol is a tool. The protocols alone can't help you make these decisions. A good facilitator uses the tools as a means to achieve the goals he set out to accomplish when he created the agenda. A good facilitator listens and reads its audience, so that he can effectively use a protocol, as it was intended to be used. Knowing when it is the right time to adjust or modify it whenever he sees fit is very important. I think of protocols as tools to make the job easier as long as you know which protocol to use and how to use it. For example; when you have to change the alternator in a car, you can have the best tools money can buy, but if you don't know how to use the tools, they are worthless. Protocols are the same way. A toolbox full of protocols is worthless, unless you know how to apply them.

Alan always emphasizes the importance of feedback. Asking for feedback from the group I work with has become part of my planning. I take their feedback, type it and send it electronically to all the participants as soon as possible. This allows two things to happen. One, they continue to think about the professional development session even after they leave. Two, they can see that I make adjustments in the next session based on the feedback. Besides their feedback, I also include the notes from the meeting. This process has developed a culture of continuous feedback, where the participants send me

feedback even days after the workshop. This makes me think that they got something out of the session, because they are still thinking about it several days later.

This year, since my role as a supervisor calls for the professional development of instruction in the classroom, I have had the opportunity to address student learning in a number of meetings. We have done workshops on improving literacy across the curriculum and differentiated instruction for varied level learners. I structured these meetings by carefully selecting the proper protocol, which I think would best create a culture where everyone's voice is given equal time and value. Although I let the participants make their own hypothesis and develop their own beliefs I do guide their thinking by carefully selecting any reading materials, video clips, or graphic organizers. The best professional development I do is when I can help the participants move toward the desired goal. When the participants come out of the meeting feeling that they came up with an idea which is similar to or in the same line of thinking as what I had hoped they come up with, I feel I accomplished my goal.

As you have read in the previous pages, I have used a number of protocols in my work. I also have experienced other protocols, which I have yet to try and I am certain, that there are a number of other protocols out there that I haven't experienced or heard about up to now. I feel that my toolbox has enough tools for me to feel comfortable facilitating a group other groups including groups that are not necessarily a group of educators. My wife is part of the Latina Political Action Committee (LPAC), which often has difficulties completing the items on their agenda and keeping to their time limit. I have volunteered to facilitate one of their meetings, and I'm confident that when I plan the agenda and select the protocols, we will be able to meet LPAC's goals in a timely manner. If everything goes well, I may even offer to train them so that they can facilitate their own meetings in a more effective manner.

### **Using Authentic Public Learning for Equitable Outcomes:**

Equity is something I have a lot passion for, and the lack of equity brings out a lot of emotions, which are sometimes good, and some times not so good. I always told my students that "*feelings*" are never wrong. How people feel about any experience, is important. In facilitating groups, I think about how the participants feel during and after any of my sessions. The fact that I spend a lot of time carefully selecting the opening activity, the follow up activities and always ask for feedback is an attempt to ensure participant satisfaction. Making sure to set norms that allow everyone to voice their opinions, and provide a forum where all ideas are valued and respected is part of the planning of all of my professional development sessions.

As mentioned earlier, taking consideration of differentiated professional development and addressing all levels of experience and expertise is something I plan for, since I acknowledge the fact that in most instances, I will have a mixed group of participants in my work. As a leader, supervisor and facilitator, I hold myself accountable for developing and moving forward the different groups I work with. Creating facilitators and developing new habits of work with the people I work with is ultimately my goal. "*Building capacity*" seems to be the motto for our Regional office and I see myself as part of the team which has set out to do so. I am hoping that through my work with the principals, assistant principals and teachers, I can influence the work in our Region. I expect that they carry the work forward and that it ultimately ends up in

the classrooms, where our students can demonstrate work habits that are parallel to those found in the “Principles of Learning” and the behaviors related to the structure of protocols.

Through my work on Small Learning Communities, advisories, differentiated instruction, and other characteristics of successful small schools, I plan to continue to facilitate professional development sessions by using protocols. Although I know that this is a very challenging and enormous task, it is with a lot of energy, enthusiasm and determination that I continue to plow forward in the work. Knowing that with every professional development session and workshop I facilitate, my experience and expertise grows and therefore better prepare me for what’s to come.

The professional development sessions developed and implemented by the assistant principals of mathematics and social studies demonstrated that they have learned and applied what they have learned in the sessions they have had with me. Continuing to work with the group of assistant principals and seeing them plan for next year is very exciting. Although they all say how much work it was to plan that one half day of professional development, they are equally enthusiastic about preparing for next year. Their latest feedback reflects their growth as educators and facilitators.

### ***Now What?***

I plan to continue to work closely with Alan as I develop and sharpen my facilitative skills. There are a lot of questions about the structure, and direction of our Region. Many of us speculate about this or that, but one thing I plan on is working with Alan in “*building capacity*” with our networks of schools.

Continuing to work with the group of assistant principals is also something I look forward to. Making them leaders and facilitators are just two of my goals with this group. Being able to achieve this will be a test to my facilitative skills. In addition to working with this group, I also need to work with my principals and find ways to make them better facilitators so that they can have the difficult conversations about instructional philosophies with their staffs. Creating forums for other important work such as conversations about portfolios, advisories, roundtables and interdisciplinary instruction are just a few of the many topics and issues I would like to tackle next year. At the same time, I hear Alan saying; “I rather we do one thing well, than do may things half ass”. Time versus depth is of course one of the many paradoxes we as leaders have to struggle with. The one thing I know is that with my protocol toolbox by my side and the lives of many students in our Region at stake, I proudly move forward to take on the challenge and make a difference.