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Introduction

During the 1991-1992 School Year, my eighth as a teacher, a new Math Assistant Principal thrust on me, and our department, this crazy idea called Cooperative Learning. I wasn't familiar with it and I had no intention of complying with the mandate to create two such lessons a week. I had in the past used pairs and groups, but it was not cooperative learning. The following year I left the N.Y. City Board of Education and taught a year in a Catholic School in Troy, New York. At the same time I began working on a Masters Degree in Educational Administration. One of the first classes I had to take was a Cooperative Learning class. I spent the Fall learning and experimenting; by Spring I was using Cooperative Learning two to three times a week. To this day I am still tinkering with cooperative learning lessons; how to make them better and how to use cooperative learning in every lesson.

Flash Forward to July 2003. I had my first Cohort meeting. A new regime, a new boss, and 12 principals, only two who I knew. The new boss (Alan Dichter) told us, through e-mail, to bring a problem that we wanted to discuss because we were going to have a descriptive consultancy (What?). The meeting began, we were given an agenda. It states 9:00 – Postcards, 9:30 – Norms, 10:00 – Hopes and Fears, 10:30 – Descriptive Consultancy. I think, “What the heck is this?” I go and sit with the two principals I know and we complain and vent. Well that first day wasn't bad. Three of the protocols were successful. They allowed me to think, listen and speak. Little did I know at the time, that this would be my new cooperative learning.

I left that day impressed. This was something different and I liked it. I thought back and I remembered my last Principal talking about protocols and attempting a few. I had participated in “postcards” before, as well as “clearing” and the “tuning” protocol.

Over the next nine months in approximately fifty meetings or professional development sessions, I used, or participated in using at least fifteen different protocols. Each session used at least one. Now my feet are wet and I am ready to get down to business.

How does my work address facilitator standards?

I've divided my work this year into six distinctive but interrelated parts.

1. How I approached the first two weeks of the school year, beginning the last week of August when I met with my Assistant Principals and my new teachers and the first week of September when we had four days of Professional Development.
2. The formation and evolution of the Professional Study Groups.
3. My work with the Professional Study Group Facilitators.

4. The work on Small Learning Communities including the theme teams, the site based focus groups, and the Office of Secondary School Reform training sessions.
5. My work with my LIS and the members of our cohort.
6. My training as a facilitator.

The First Two Weeks

The first two weeks of work was about setting expectations for the entire year. Each time I met with my Administrative staff we had professional development. We always started with an opener, we used clearing or connections, and on the first day I used postcards. We established norms for the school year and practiced the text based dialogue as well as the final word and the tuning protocol. What I established during the first week was the norm we would use for the rest of the year. There was direction to our cabinet meetings, we were going to initiate professional development, we were going to use protocols, and we were going to turn key these skills to our Professional Study Groups.

This was the beginning of the development of my facilitator toolbox. We were using protocols to look at our work as professionals; designing the agenda for professional development week with input from each of the Assistant Principals. We established that the protocols would be our routine and our way of being developed professionally. We also touched on two other standards that week. Building Democratic Community with Voice and Respect for all. The format for discussion allowed new members and existing members of the cabinet to have a voice. I was able to ensure that all participants were heard while retaining a certain amount of respect for the existing community and group. I allowed for a certain amount of respect for the existing community and group, surfacing and managing controversy and paradox. I was very transparent with the group; we were here to learn and to promote the learning of the teachers.

The work we did the first week helped us to develop an excellent Professional Development Plan for the four days of professional development for the teachers.

During that first week of Professional Development, we began using several protocols. We set out themes for the year, accountable talk, balanced literacy and our main mode of professional development for the year, professional study groups. We introduced some of the protocols we would be using including text connections, text-based dialogue, final word, norms, written feedback, clearing.

Professional Study Groups (PSG) and PSG Facilitator Training

The Professional Study Groups arose from 1) a need to have a format where teachers take some responsibility for their own learning. 2) a need for Professional development where all voices could be heard 3) years of useless department and faculty meetings. Frequently agendas are thrown together at the last moment. Teachers spend half the time complaining or venting. 4) having no venue for the 50 minutes of mandated professional development a week because we were on a split session.

We designed the PSG's to have no more than 2 teachers from each subject area. Where possible, we mixed new teachers with seasoned teachers. Each group had between 10 and 12 participants.

The Professional Study Groups began as administratively run groups. Norms were sets; protocols were distributed, reviewed and used. The groups started with an icebreaker. The first day we used connections, afterwards each meeting started with connections or clearings. Our work was to be focused on looking at student work. We began the first several meetings by reviewing articles. We used "Text Connections", "Final Word", and "Text-based dialogue protocols".

There was however something lacking. There was a lack of consistency among the Assistant Principals, it was obvious after two professionals study group meetings that three Assistant Principals had no interest in facilitating these groups and one assistant principal was incapable of doing so. I recruited from the teaching staff. I created a group of master teachers to take over as facilitators. These master teachers would meet twice for each PSG meeting. Once to prepare for the meeting (always a test run of the protocol and subject material being covered), and a second time to debrief the PSG meeting. The master teachers continued to facilitate their PSG through January. In January I switched the facilitators again. I was now involved in a more formal training for facilitators, we also received a planning grant to become Small Learning Communities. New teachers were emerging as leaders. Three teachers and two Assistant Principals joined me in the facilitator training. Much of the work of the PSG was now focused on Small Learning Communities. It was a natural move to have these emerging leaders take over as facilitators. Within the PSG's many of the NSRF Facilitators standards were met: we worked to develop trust within the groups, set standards/norms without fail, talked less listened more, ensured all voices were heard, we were assertive about the need for facilitation in effective groups, we held our values, we were aware of group development, addressed conflict, used structures and protocols to deal with difference and dissidence. We were transparent whenever possible to maximize growth of participants, developed the habit of making controversy public, we had a sense of our own authority and used it carefully, we worked with paradoxes and their management, used protocols to look at student and professional work. We participated in using differentiated learning for professionals. We used varied and appropriate structures to maximize participation and ensure that all voices are heard. We increasingly shifted responsibility for participation and learning to the group.

The transformation of Departmental and Faculty meetings into Professional Study Groups, professional development with a real objective to learn, will be a two-year process. I believe great strides were made this year to condition the teachers into thinking Professional Development as opposed to boring meetings. Within this context, standards/norms for these meetings were set. All participants learned to talk less and listen more. The PSG and the protocols allowed new teachers as well as senior and experienced teachers to have the opportunity to speak. Each successive meeting allowed the groups to develop into coherent working units. Within the PSG we were able to manage controversy and address conflict. I was able to make changes that improved the PSG to let all participants know that they were becoming part of a team. There was a true understanding on my part in my use of authority; I sacrificed control over each group to allow each group to develop as a team. We used the professional study groups to look at student work. We spent three months looking at student work. Teachers learned from it, we returned at the second to last meeting to looking at student work. I introduced a new protocol "The Timberlake Tuning Slice". Teachers did a tour of the building

looking at student work that was posted throughout the building. We then used the tuning protocol to discuss the work that was in the halls. This turned out to be an excellent exercise that brought closure to looking at student work for this year.

Small Learning Community

With the receipt of the Small Learning Community Planning Grant, professional development in our school changed immediately. We needed to move away from looking at student work to exploring models and articles about Small Learning Communities. Again, we used “text connections” and “final word” to review articles: I also held three luncheons with the staff where I introduced the Small Learning Communities Planning Grant. I used the tuning protocol to present the Small Learning Communities concept to the staff. This worked wonderfully to diffuse venting and complaining and allowed me to pick and choose which questions I would answer. The next meeting held for the Small Learning Communities was a Saturday workshop run by Anthony Conelli and Alan Dichter. They ran through a gambit of protocols on a sub-zero January day. At this meeting we used the following protocols: postcards, NSEW, Hopes and Fears, norms, text discussion, tuning protocol and reflection. Staff that volunteered for this day came away immensely satisfied and impressed. It was made clear at this meeting and all future meetings that we were here to maximize the growth of the participants. That we were here to make them smarter. Two theme teams and a site based focus team (SBFT) were established. The two theme teams met and established norms for their work. They began with hopes and fears and then they went to work. The SBFT would have a presentation each meeting by the Theme teams (using the tuning protocols) but they didn’t become effective until we decided to use the “Consultative protocol”. We brought various school wide issues to the SBFT meeting. Two important items we brought to the team for consultancy were: How do we program our special needs students? What do we need to support this? And, How do we integrate the discipline policies of all three schools?

The protocols and the questions we tried to answer clearly tread a fine line between the teachers’ personal needs and the groups need. Each topic in itself is controversial and could have created a rift in the staff. Instead, we were able to come up with positive steps to implement ideas about each.

LIS and Cohort Work

The work done with my cohort and LIS (Alan Dichter) was also very beneficial. The continued practice with the use of protocols has helped me appreciate them more. As we grew in expertise, the exchange of information became better. What was especially noteworthy of our work was the “Visit Protocol”. This allowed us to address issues at other schools (and our own). I found this most beneficial in that I was able to focus on the school I was visiting and still bring back information to help me in my school. In addition, the visit to my school included a look at my Professional Study Groups. This helped me in reaffirming that this was a good idea and that I should continue with it.

While I was not the lead facilitator in these visits and at the meetings, it allowed me to view a facilitator at work over a period of time. This enabled me to see the NSRF – New York Facilitator Standards in action.

Facilitator Training Session

Facilitator Training was tremendous. Initially I was worried about the time commitment. The time was well spent. To be able to assemble a team of teachers from my two new schools and to allow them to participate was a great thing. This training could be the difference between success and failure in my new schools.

The most important aspect that came out of this training was not how comfortable I have become with protocols, but how the other five participants are becoming comfortable with the use of protocols. I have seen evidence in their meetings, their classes and their attitudes. I see them developing trust with and within their groups, team building in context, setting standards and norms, listening more, involving everyone, using structures and protocols to deal with difference and dissidence, designing of agendas with input, using varied and appropriate structures to maximize participation and to shift the responsibility for participation and learning to the group.

For myself the last presentation in our training the “Success Analysis” was a fantastic experience. Of course it was focused on one of my goals for the year and this helped. Clearly this was an excellent tool, which I will use again and again to determine the success of various programs in the school. Also I might use “Success Analysis” to help evaluate my Assistant Principals (and myself) for end of term reports.

Now What

Where do I go from here? Last Thursday, I needed to meet with the Guidance Counselors. There has been no discussion of their role in the new schools (two have signed up). Instead of just telling them, and allowing them to vent and complain or dictating what I thought, I decided to use a “Descriptive Consultancy” protocol. I presented them with two possible ways to redesign the guidance departments. I let them know what I was thinking, that the thinking went beyond just next year. I told them nothing was written in stone. This turned into an excellent meeting with concrete ideas shared. Little time was wasted. The group took ownership of the problem and understood that changes would be made.

A year ago, nothing would have come of this meeting. I would have had to do all the work designing a plan and no one would have been happy. Now the guidance counselors are going to design a plan and present it to me.

I am at the point where I cannot create an agenda for a meeting or for Professional Development without thinking of which protocols I will use. I understand that I have only begun my journey. I know that I need to work harder to include a reflective piece in each of these meetings. I know I need to share these reflections with the staff. This will be my next step in my own improvement and personal Professional Development. I can't wait to start planning for next year's meeting, next year's Professional Development, and next year's Professional Study Groups.