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**LEARNING LOOP**  
A Teaching and Learning Lab Newsletter

## Using Protocols to Facilitate Discussion

An oft-heard desire from instructors is that they wished their students spent more time talking to each other in class discussion and less time responding individually and definitively to the instructor's prompts. Following up with a question or making a connection to an earlier comment can help, but in those cases the flow of information continues to pass through the instructor. One way that some faculty members have redirected that flow is to use discussion protocols. This issue of the Learning Loop examines **the purpose and function of discussion protocols** and highlights two use cases within HGSE.

In education, 'protocols' often refer to guidelines for structuring group discussion. Also referred to as discussion strategies or routines, protocols outline procedures for the students to follow. They often include assigned roles, specific directions, and details on timing. Additionally, most protocols include a brief description of the learning goals they are meant to support. Instructors use protocols for a variety of purposes, including:

- To enhance the structure and clarity of an open-ended task, such as brainstorming or generating ideas;
- To distribute participation by encouraging students to take turns and to alternate between speaking and listening;
- To assign clear roles and tasks so that students can maximize opportunities for collaborative work.

Instructors who are unfamiliar with using protocols may feel that they lead to an overly structured discussion that is less free flowing and organic. However, this structure can be useful when the discussion topic might be controversial or when students feel reluctant to participate. For example, instructors can use protocols to highlight multiple perspectives about an issue or to prevent one voice from dominating the conversation. Protocols can also encourage students to ask questions or give honest feedback.

### CASE STUDY: Sarah Leibel



Lecturer [Sarah Leibel](#) finds protocols to be invaluable teaching tools that can serve to promote equity, supply structure, and infuse energy into the classroom. She notes, “Protocols can really democratize a space, ensuring that everyone has a voice and has access to the conversation.” She finds that protocols scaffold conversations such that they unfold in an efficient manner that allows students to interact with readings and each other in deeper ways. Leibel also appreciates the way that certain protocols get students up and moving. “I want to build community quickly in the room, have many different people interact, and have many ideas surface.”

Leibel recommends developing a go-to set of protocols to use consistently throughout a course so that students become familiar with them and can jump right into the activity. Starting from the learning objectives, she selects a protocol that will serve her purpose. She almost always modifies it to fit the particular needs of the class session, and she makes sure to convey clearly to students the protocol's key aspects such that they know the “rules, roles, turns, and time”—language about group learning that she learned from HGSE Adjunct Lecturer [Rhonda Bondie](#).

Among Leibel's favorites is the [Final Word](#), a text-based protocol that supports students in engaging deeply with key passages. Individuals are first given a few minutes to select a passage that fits a given prompt, ranging from a general “whatever was most important to you” to a specific “something that connects to this part of today's learning objective.” They then form groups of 3-4, with one student leading off by reading their passage and briefly sharing why it stood out. Moving around the circle, each student responds to the passage and the initial presenter's thoughts, keeping comments under one minute in length. Once all group members have spoken, the presenter gets the final word: a chance to react to the comments and share how his/her thinking may have evolved in response. Other group members then take turns presenting their passages, following the same Final Word protocol. While these discussions unfold, Leibel sees her role as “looking, listening, and circulating,” gathering tidbits from small group discussions with the goal of sharing individual student voices with the whole class. She uses this opportunity for formative assessment, homing in on what students do and do not understand. Leibel closes the activity with a crisp, clear share-out that surfaces connections groups have made to the major ideas of the text.

## CASE STUDY: **Gretchen Brion-Meisels**

In Partnering with Youth in Educational Research and Practice (S501), Lecturer [Gretchen Brion-Meisels](#) uses protocols to “equalize student voice” in her classroom and provide students with a “structure to engage” with the course material. She has been working on minimizing her own voice in the discussion and breaking away from the typical pattern of “initiate, respond, evaluate,” where the instructor asks a question, a student provides an answer, and the instructor gives feedback or affirmation about the response. She explains, “the protocols provide a really clear structure—almost a lesson plan for the conversation—to help me figure out where the conversation is going and how to scaffold it so it gets there.” At times, she modifies protocols to best advance the learning goals for students, including modifying the amount of time allocated to different protocol rounds or changing the discussion prompts to suit her purposes. She also will step in or out of

the protocol as the facilitator: "I ask questions to the group that I feel might push our thinking."



Photo credit: [The World Café](#)

Brion-Meisels recently used the [World Café protocol](#) in S501 to "move the conversation forward across groups and get people talking." The purpose of the World Café is to have students engage in small group discussion about a series of questions that begin with personal reflections or descriptive questions about a topic, then build to questions that require analysis or synthesis. This is a protocol that she particularly likes on weeks when students have read different sets of texts; she finds that the World Café allows students to connect ideas to the readings and bring their knowledge together. Brion-Meisels learned this protocol from one of her teaching fellows, Krista Goldstein-Cole, and she often refers to [the World Café website](#) to gather resources and suggestions.

During the World Café, students enter the classroom and sit at tables with a paper "tablecloth." They receive a "menu" with the protocol's procedure and discussion norms. On occasion, Brion-Meisels also enhances the "café" feel in her classroom by providing food and playing music. Students work in groups of 4 or 5 to discuss one question for 10 to 15 minutes, then switch tables and sit with new people. There are 3 to 5 rounds, but each table assigns one person to be a "host" to stay with the same table for the whole time and summarize the insights from prior conversation. During each round, the tables assign a "scribe" to record the group's ideas by drawing or writing on the paper tablecloth, although all discussants are invited to contribute to the tablecloth at any time. She explains that "usually by the end, the ideas have spread across the room because everyone is moving."

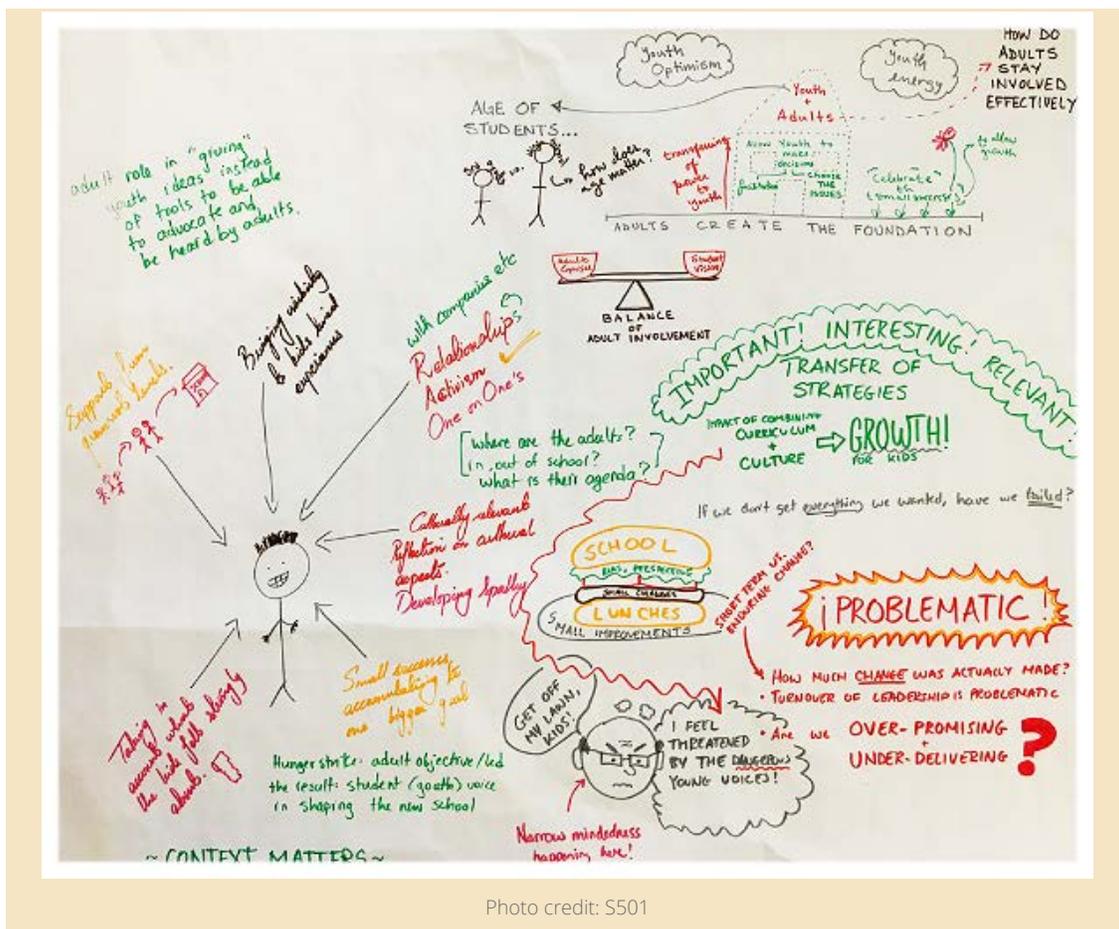


Photo credit: S501

To conclude, Brion-Meisels modifies the original World Café protocol by bringing the whole class together to summarize their conversation. She often poses questions such as, “What are the big points coming out from the readings? What tensions arose? What are the insights that overlap? What do we want to hold on to for our own work?” She compiles the key ideas into a single visual or written document and provides this to the class as a resource for their work. Brion-Meisels finds the protocol supports insightful learning through student conversations: “I think we all walk away with a lot of new questions and at least one concrete set of ideas.”

## Resources

There are protocols for just about every purpose you can imagine, but finding the right one can be quite a challenge. [Our handout](#) can help you identify some high-quality protocols to fit common needs, and it also provides the links to several rich repositories.

The instructional consultants at the TLL are available to help you in the process of selecting, adapting, and enacting a protocol to fit your particular instructional goals. [Contact Josh Bookin](#), Manager of Instructional Support, if interested in working with us on your use of protocols.

