The What, Why, and How of Protocols

Excerpt from Learning That Lasts

What are protocols?
A protocol consists of agreed upon guidelines for reading, recording, discussing, or reporting that ensure equal participation and accountability. When everyone understands and agrees to using the procedures of the protocol, participants are able to work more effectively both independently and collaboratively, often in ways they are not in the habit of doing. Protocols hold each student accountable and responsible for learning. They teach students how to lead their own learning.

Why use a protocol?

Text-based Protocols for Reading & Annotating
Protocols for reading and annotating hold all students accountable for building background knowledge about a topic and for analyzing what they read by annotating the text with questions, comments, paraphrase or summary. These protocols also allow the teacher to assess which students are struggling with the text and may need further support for comprehension. Finally, these protocols allow students to gather their thoughts prior to discussion or writing about their reading.

Protocols for Collaboration and Discussion
Protocols for collaboration and discussion invite students to value different perspectives and new insights. These protocols make room for listening as well as contributing to discussion. Following guidelines for timekeeping, turn taking, and focusing on the topic are essential for productive discussion. These are not skills that come naturally to many students. Sentence stems for accountable talk and asking questions, norms for honoring diverse perspectives, and procedures for synthesizing contributions to a discussion hold individuals and groups accountable for pushing their thinking further. Discussion protocols can be embedded in a workshop or daily lesson, or, in the case of a Socratic seminar, can be the entire lesson for the class period.

Protocols for Consultation and Decision Making
Protocols for consultation and decision making make it safe to ask challenging questions, to take intellectual and emotional risks, and to problem solve difficult situations. Such protocols build trust as participants learn from each other and devise strategies and solutions collaboratively. In groups facing difficult challenges or struggling with conflict, protocols are an essential tool for mediation, embracing diversity, and overcoming fear.

Protocols for Sharing and Presenting
Protocols for sharing and presenting focus on fairness and equity. They enable all members of a group to see or hear the work done by individuals or small groups in an efficient way. Time keeping and turn taking norms must be reinforced in order to maximize equity of sharing.

Protocols for Critique
Protocols for peer critique are essential for teaching students how to offer and receive kind, helpful, and specific feedback on writing or problem solving. Critique protocols often take an entire class period; in that sense the protocol is the lesson for that day. It is important for the teacher to model following the critique
protocol with a student’s writing or with their own to demonstrate specific phrases for offering critique and the role of the author in receiving critique. A procedure for students to record their critique, plan for revision based on critique, and reflect on the value of the critique also improves this protocol.

**How to establish protocols for daily, active pedagogy**

The skeleton that holds up any protocol includes

- organized steps for the procedure (what participants must do)
- time frames for each step (when participants do each step and for how long)
- norms for participants (who participates and how they treat each other)
- specific roles for procedures (the job description for each person involved)

This skeleton must be explicitly taught and rehearsed the first time a protocol is used. During successive uses, it will likely need to be reinforced multiple times. Teachers are often most successful when they choose three to five protocols that anchor their instruction and focus on these. Providing table tents or an anchor chart with the bulleted steps of the protocol and/or “role cards” that describe each person’s role in the protocol will help students stay on task and do the protocol with fidelity. Using protocols as the routine of every independent reading time, discussion, or collaboration will allow students to learn more effectively and, importantly, to develop the habit of taking responsibility for their own learning and for contributing to the collective understanding of the group.