Reflection in Action

Critical Friends Groups in an Early Childhood Setting:
Building a Culture of Collaboration

SHANNON JOHANSON AND LISA KUH

Teacher research is a team sport; an endeavor most successful when teachers are in dialogue to formulate questions, analyze data, and come to new understandings about children, childhood, teaching, and learning. Yet as Shannon Johanson and Lisa Kuh explain, in early childhood settings, "It is a challenge not only to find time to discuss teaching, but also to develop an intellectual community to share expertise and conversations that go beyond discussing the typical daily routines, scheduling, staffing, and regulations."

Fortunately, Johanson and Kuh offer a structure that promotes collaboration: Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). Drawing on data collected at the Child Study and Development Center at the University of New Hampshire, they describe how CFG meetings encourage collaborative communication among teachers about teaching and learning. They describe how CFGs operate, including descriptions of protocols and norms. Their work is a valuable resource for teachers who want to form and strengthen their research team.

—Ben Mardell

Shannon Johanson, MEd, is an infant teacher at the Child Study and Development Center at the University of New Hampshire. She conducts teacher research, most recently exploring the adoption of Critical Friends Groups, a professional development initiative in her school. Shannon.Johanson@unh.edu

Lisa Kuh, PhD, is an associate professor in the Family Studies department at the University of New Hampshire, and worked with Shannon to implement Critical Friends Groups and study this process. Lisa.Kuh@unh.edu

A s an infant teacher in a university laboratory school setting, I value working alongside my colleagues—teachers who are committed to the profession and strive to improve their practice. However, the complex reality of an early childhood center can interfere with implementing new ways to engage together in professional development. It is a challenge not only to find time to discuss teaching, but also to develop an intellectual community to share expertise and conversations that go beyond discussing the typical daily routines, scheduling, staffing, and regulations. Conversations that focus only on logistics can create barriers to professional activity that focuses on teaching and learning (Horn 2005).

A fundamental aspect of the philosophy at our center is collaboration. We have a strong desire to work together and learn from each other, but previously we had few formalized opportunities to do so. We engaged in the process of Reggio Emilia-inspired documentation of children's work and learning through anecdotal observations, photographs, and videos (Rinaldi 2006), but lacked regular opportunities to follow through with analysis of how the documentation might enrich our practice and work with children. We needed time to devote to exchanging ideas about the documentation, children's work, and our teaching, which was subordinated among all of our other duties. We participated in monthly staff meetings and bi-annual professional development retreats, and were encouraged to attend outside conferences for continued professional development. Individual classroom teaching teams had weekly "team meetings" for about an hour to focus on curriculum, children, student interns, and the classroom environment. But even though we met occasionally in committees to discuss cross-classroom topics such as special rights and diversity, we needed more time and opportunity to work with teachers across classrooms.

In a graduate leadership seminar I participated in a Critical Friends Group (CFG), a form of professional development where educators regularly come together to examine teaching practices and children's work. I also learned that

Teacher Researcher Shannon Johanson examines work while facilitating a small CFG group.

this approach was being implemented in a local public school. I began thinking this might be an exciting way for our staff to engage professionally and personally with teachers in other classrooms. I wanted to bring this new form of professional development to my school in order to shift the way we collaborate, so I discussed the subject with Lisa Kuh, a professor at our university (and co-author of this article) who is a professional development consultant for our center and an experienced CFG facilitator. Lisa was already engaged with CFG work at other sites as part of her research. Our center director suggested that we work together to focus my own teacher research efforts at our school.

Lisa and I spoke with the director about piloting CFG work at the center. Our director agreed that CFGs were potentially important work, and dedicated a staff meeting as a CFG trial run to see if other teachers and administrators would be interested in delving into this project. Lisa agreed to partner with me and help implement the process. This study documents the process of implementing a Critical Friends Group in our early childhood laboratory school setting. I used an action research approach to address these questions:

> **How will the teachers at my center respond to the implementation of this professional development initiative? Does it promote collaborative communication and thinking across classrooms?**

Review of literature

Professional development is typically presented as "training," perhaps connected with standards, literacy goals, and accreditation processes. Such training frequently takes place outside a school's walls and may or may not make its way back into classrooms. In addition, during school meeting times teachers often negotiate matters that do not directly affect teacher practice and children's opportunities to learn (Horn 2005; Little 1999; Lortie 1975). More research is needed on what teachers discuss when they do meet and the kind of collaborative structures that stimulate ongoing activity in which teachers thrive professionally. While there is a robust body of literature on professional learning communities or communities of practice in elementary through high schools, there is little research that focuses on the impact of collaborative professional development in early childhood settings, particularly as related to Critical Friends Groups (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; DuFour & Eaker 1998; Lee & Smith 1996; Wenger 1998).

The School Reform Initiative describes CFGs as "a forum in which members challenge deep-seated assumptions about teaching and learning, gain different perspectives about their students, surface troubling issues of equity in schools, and take up questions connected to the purpose of school" (Thompson-Grove, Frazer, & Dunne n.d.). CFGs utilize various protocols in order to guide conversations (McDonald et al. 2007). Protocols are structures that guide conversations, usually with specific timing for each step of the process. There are protocols that are particularly suited for use with text, and others for looking at student work,

for observing teachers, and resolving dilemmas and problems of practice. While protocols alone do not define CFG work, their use highlights "elements of a conversation whose boundaries otherwise blur: talking and listening, describing and judging, probing and giving feedback" (McDonald et al. 2007, 7). The structures create a safe environment in which to ask challenging questions, and create equity in participation while keeping teachers focused on children's learning (Blythe, Allen, & Powell 1999; Curry 2008; Dunne, Nave, & Lewis 2000).

Methods

Setting and participants

The Child Study and Development Center (CSDC) is a laboratory school affiliated with the Family Studies Department at the University of New Hampshire. The mission of the CSDC includes a focus on early care and education as well as an academic mission to support student interns who work at the school. The school serves 122 children from infancy to kindergarten and includes a half-day nursery and a full-day educational child care program. The nursery program follows the university's calendar and consists of three separate half-day programs, while the full-day center program runs yearlong. CSDC practices an emergent, negotiated curriculum while incorporating aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education.

Each classroom is led by a team of two or three teachers. The staff includes 20 professionals, including 17 full-time teachers and 3 administrators. The teachers are all highly qualified, holding at least an associate's degree (1 teacher) while most have a bachelor's degree (10 teachers) and several hold graduate degrees (6 teachers). All teachers and administrators participated in a Critical Friends Group in some form.

Research plan

My role as the teacher researcher was to introduce CFGs to the staff, participate in the planning sessions preceding the meetings, and collect and analyze data as the meetings proceeded. I did not directly participate so that I could observe and record the process. Lisa led the preconferences and facilitated the meetings.

Meeting structure and operation. We held a total of four meetings devoted to using the CFG process. The first was in November, the second in January, the third in February, and the fourth in May. The research in this article is based on data from the first three meetings. Critical Friends Groups typically include about 8–12 people. Since we team teach, only one teacher from each team attended a particular meeting so we could maintain classroom coverage. Initially we used a "fishbowl" observation technique for our first and second meetings so that the whole staff could be included in the CFG, although we did not necessarily have everyone actively participate. We eventually moved to smaller groups. Nine

participants formed the group, while the rest of the available staff observed, encircling the group at the table. This technique was a way to give the whole staff a first exposure to this work while retaining an ideal number of active participants. While each of the three documented meetings had a different mix of participants, a core group of 3–4 individuals was present at each session. The configurations of our groups varied slightly given scheduling and coverage constraints, but all teachers participated multiple times over the course of a year.

The first CFG occurred at a whole staff meeting, with nine participants at the table and ten silent observers. We used the Consultancy Protocol (see Appendix C) for Harlee to present a dilemma about a child with special rights whom she felt was being excluded. The Consultancy requires the presenter to write up a short presentation and guiding question that they present to the group in about five minutes. Participants may ask a round of clarifying questions, then a round of probing questions. These are followed by a group discussion on the implications for teaching and learning. The goal of a Consultancy is to help the presenter think more expansively about the issue.

The second session occurred two months after the first. The group included five of the same participants from the first session and four who had previously just observed. Jamie, a teacher of 3-year-olds, presented a video of a child whose lack of social interactions and communication skills had her team concerned. We used the Issaquah Protocol (see Appendix C), which features structured rounds where participants first describe what they hear and see, then make interpretive comments about the dilemma, and finally discuss the implications for teaching. The group listened to Jamie provide some context and then watched the video. Afterward, they raised questions about practices while Jamie listened and took notes before reflecting back to the group.

CSDC participants raise probing questions and next steps during a CFG meeting.

The third session included children's work samples from the part-time nursery program's 4-year-old classroom. There was no outside fishbowl circle for this meeting, just participants around a table. Pam and Jackie presented a dilemma about journals and children's reticence to engage with them. They wanted feedback on how to infuse their half-day nursery program with more literacy experiences.

Typically, a Critical Friends Group engages in important first steps prior to providing participants with feedback on children's work or presentation of dilemmas. This establishes trust and builds a strong foundation upon which the group can work. Each meeting was preceded by a preconference between the presenting teacher, the meeting facilitator (in this case, Lisa) and me; we discussed the dilemma, helped the presenter formulate a meaningful guiding question, and determined which protocol would best match the question. There are a variety of protocols from which to choose. Protocols are also carefully selected to provide teachers with new ways to view a dilemma. Some protocols allow warm and cool feedback to the presenter; others foster descriptive observations; yet others prompt participants to ask deep, probing questions that make the presenter think; and finally some protocols lead participants toward concrete problem-solving suggestions. The careful selection of protocols to match particular dilemmas or questions helps participants to engage in deep thinking about a topic as they adopt new language.

Lisa also helped us prepare for the CFG process by setting group norms for our work together (see Appendix A) and helping us distinguish between clarifying and probing questions. Clarifying questions provide nuts-and-bolts information participants can use to ask deeper questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol (Thompson-Grove, Frazer, & Dunne n.d.). Probing questions are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. At each CFG session we reviewed these different kinds of questions. Another important piece of our CFG sessions is an update from the previous session's presenter to hear how they might be implementing the feedback received and how their thinking may have shifted. This check-in occurs at the beginning of our meetings before we jump into the next CFG.

Data: Collection, sources, and analysis

My data collection methods included:

- Audio recordings and transcriptions of meetings
- Field notes
- Questionnaires
- Teacher reflections

I audio recorded each CFG meeting and took field notes during the sessions to capture "real time" observations (Glesne 1999). My field notes indicated facial expressions and body language that couldn't be conveyed through the record-

ings. The audio recordings of each meeting were transcribed. After each session, everyone involved filled out a brief questionnaire to provide feedback on the process, their thinking, and their involvement. I also typed the questionnaires and sorted participants' answers into categories to get a sense of the group wrestling with each question. There were four broad main categories: time, communication, structure, and procedures. Transcriptions and questionnaires were coded using an emerging coding system to identify themes, actual dialogue, and teacher reflections (Erickson 1986). During this process we identified themes such as teachers feeling powerful, making their voices heard, feeling guided by the protocols, and awareness of others and teaching practices. This enabled us to corroborate and verify the themes from meeting transcripts, questionnaires, reflections, and field notes that directly related to teachers' response to participation in CFG work over time.

Findings: Learning new ways to talk together

Our findings can be grouped under one overarching conclusion, that **involvement in a Critical Friends Group is a deep process that encourages collaborative communication among teachers, fostering engagement in teaching and learning.** A frequent comment at the end of meetings and in reflection sheets was, "It's so rich to be able to hear what colleagues are doing and to be able to have deep conversations." This recurring theme of "deep" engagement caused us to wonder just what constitutes "deep" work in collaborative professional development. The themes we discovered as characteristic of this "deep process" were:

1) valuing effective conversations through protocols,

2) content that matters, and

3) finding the time and making it count.

Valuing effective conversations: The protocol as a voice to follow

Many groups develop ingrained patterns of interacting; we were aware of who among us was a "first talker" and who spoke less frequently. **Protocols that reinforce conversational equity helped teachers put aside preconceived notions of participation**, as second and third talkers offered profound perspectives. As I observed in my field notes,

One participant stated that she heard insightful ideas from teachers that don't typically speak up, and it was "eye-opening to hear their thoughts."

Other participants wrote in their reflections:

"There are days or even weeks when I don't see some of these teachers except for when I pass them in the hall. This gave me a place for the collaboration I wanted in a lab school."

"I like how the process is slowed down and structured so people don't feel that others are monopolizing."

The **protocols helped establish a conversational flow in the meetings, and increased participation by assuring each person had a turn to contribute.** In my field notes, I recorded that

One participant jumped in out of turn when giving feedback. Lisa reminded her of the protocol, asking her if she could wait until others had a chance to speak.

Regarding this, one teacher wrote in a reflection:

"It was difficult when I was anticipating my turn to ask a question and others took their turn ahead of their time."

However, there was a learning curve with the process. **Learning how to participate within the protocol framework was difficult in the beginning.** As I recorded in my field notes,

During our first meeting, Harlee took a risk by being the first presenter, who was then asked probing questions. She was asked how to help children in her classroom be aware of a peer with special needs and to support that child without teasing, fear, or "being mean." The protocol requires the presenter, after having a chance to tell the group the context of the dilemma and the guiding question, to sit quietly and listen. Harlee mouthed to me "This is hard!"

She later explained that it was difficult not to immediately give a long answer to a probing question, as they are meant to make the presenter think and are not easily answered. However, when reflecting on the process, Harlee referred to the protocol as a "voice to follow."

There were also several indications that participants were concerned about "doing" the protocol correctly. As these field notes relate,

During the meeting I heard, "I'm not sure if this is right . . ." and "I don't know if this is right, it's so hard." Another participant said at the end of the meeting that it was hard for her to wait to speak, but she appreciated guidance from the facilitator. Another teacher stated, "I'm learning that it's okay to just listen or be quiet."

When Harlee described the protocol as "a voice to follow" it stood in contrast to the overly-clinical way one might view conversational tools; rather, it **validated teacher discourse and made it more effective.** As teachers gained more experience with CFGs they practiced using new language directly related to their work with children.

In addition, it was evident that **an experienced CFG facilitator was critical to effective conversations.** As noted above, participants were inexperienced in the use of protocols, but could look to Lisa as a guide. First steps, such as setting group norms and learning some of the basic structural elements, cannot be overlooked; they establish a sense of security between group members. Closing the loop or reporting back also proved essential to our working together. Teachers wanted to hear what happened next for the presenters and their children. These reports both validated and sustained CFG work for all participants.

Content that matters

CFGs filled a need for meaningful professional development and collaboration as teachers shifted their mindset from school logistics to focusing on substantive issues of teaching and learning. As I recorded in a meeting transcript, the participants asked such questions as

I wonder what would have to change in Harlee's classroom for the children to adopt more advocacy for each other?

The tone of that question moved the group toward talking about helping young children advocate for each other, and beyond suggestions for stopping teasing and correcting "misbehavior." Other CFG sessions involved examining how teachers gave feedback in intern journals, reviewing and revising the kindergarten progress report form, and supporting IEPs while retaining philosophical values.

In their reflections, teachers also wrote about the following.

• Rethinking what is "right" for a child, parent, and a teacher:

"One new insight was to rethink our expectations versus parent expectations for literacy."

"I'm thinking about how the information I communicate with families can be interpreted."

• How we define "success":

"I'm thinking about success and defining it on many different levels."

"Defining success for each child in our class—what does that look like to us (as teachers) and to the parents?"

What messages we intentionally or unintentionally give to parents and children:

"This made me realize how much pressure we put on ourselves and how we might need to educate/communicate with parents to counteract this."

"This made me think about how I document children's behavior and share with parents, in a case where a parent does see the situation differently."

"Do parents read what we say as 'good' while we are writing/talking about a problem/concern?"

The focus on meaningful content had another impact. **CFGs increased cross-classroom interaction, and knowing that teachers truly cared about what happened in each other's classrooms created a feeling of community.** During the third meeting, participants had the opportunity to examine actual children's work in the form of writing samples. While the teachers came away with concrete suggestions and a course of action regarding literacy curriculum, their presentation had another result. The half-day programs are often isolated from the rest of the center; this CFG helped nursery teachers gain insight about their program compared to the rest of the school.

Likewise, as I recorded in field notes,

Harlee was thankful to everyone for "being supportive, offering great questions, and caring about what is happening in our classroom."

When Harlee thanked everyone for their feedback, she acknowledged her colleagues' support for her thinking and her work. **The opportunity to collaborate and get feedback from colleagues was "validating."**

Another presenter wrote in a teacher reflection that

> *"A light bulb went off when I answered a clarifying question about the total hours of the nursery program compared to the full day program."*

As I observed in my field notes,

> *There was a clear sense of relief and a new understanding that the nursery program might not accomplish the same things as the full-day program, based purely on time. Pam came away hoping to redefine her expectations of what is reasonable to be accomplished for her classroom as a whole.*

Teachers also pondered how they could apply the questions and comments they heard to their own classrooms, children, and families. In a reflection, one teacher wrote,

> *"I learned that this could bring all teachers together to think about what is happening in other parts of the school . . . moving forward from not only thinking about one classroom but all of us together in a thoughtful community."*

Even before the CFG meeting actually occurred there was meaningful professional development and collaboration in the preconference. Often the preconference was as rich as the actual feedback session. The first preconference made me realize how important it was to have a question that the presenter really wanted to dive into and learn more about. The preconference is a place to tease out the heart of the dilemma, allowing the presenter to tell her story while the facilitator poses questions to help formulate the overall guiding question. Once the question is determined, the facilitator can work with the presenter to find a protocol to match her needs. The preconference process builds trust between presenter and facilitator along with a sense of trust in the protocol, which is the foundation for CFG work.

Finding the time and making it count

In her reflection back to the group toward the end of one session, Jamie listed multiple insights gained from using the Issaquah protocol, noting that

> *"It provided a time, which can be hard to find in a hectic day, to delve deeply into a concern."*

Teachers realized that this time, although seemingly short, gave way to a meaningful, useful process. As with many child care centers, there was continued conversation about how we might utilize our time outside the classroom more effectively to collaborate across teams and balance other types of work. This conversation was now fueled by the desire for more CFG work. Teachers even proposed a change in schedules to have more productive time away from the classroom. This new schedule would give all teachers a once-a-week, three-hour afternoon time block for collaboration. One of the possibilities for this

time was to hold one or more CFG sessions. In addition, while the "fishbowl" technique was a great way for everyone to experience the process, by the third meeting the group was ready for full participation. We subsequently divided our staff into two mixed team groups, often asking both groups to work on the same dilemma or issue. Afterward, we came together as a whole group to share what we found. We learned that **carving out time and determining who will meet and when is an essential first step in collaborative professional development.**

Conclusions and implications

There is a need for more research on CFG use in an early childhood setting, not only in environments similar to ours, but also in schools where there might be more policy constraints and professional development needs. Much of the research related to CFGs deals with elementary and secondary education (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth 2001; Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten 2011). There are multiple qualities that a community of teachers needs in order to participate in this type of collaborative professional development. However, teachers in a range of situations would benefit from protocol-driven conversations, meaningful content, and attention to time and equitable participation.

Sometimes it can feel as if early childhood educators are in their own bubble. Teachers may gain practical ideas and insights from colleagues with whom they feel close, but in reality, the separations between classroom and teams can be hard to bridge. McDonald et al. (2007) state that "professional communities of practice inevitably need learning that only its own members can supply." Critical Friends Groups worked for us because of shared understandings, while also providing the opportunity to examine preconceived notions and emerge with new understandings. McDonald et al. (2007) make the point that looking at children's work is simple yet deep, in the way that Thoreau's looking was simple at Walden Pond. The process is simple, but elemental and sometimes difficult. The heaviness that comes with examining children's work and teachers' classroom dilemmas became manageable through the use of protocols. As with many new experiences, the only true way to learn this work was by practicing it (McDonald et al. 2007). This was clear throughout the process, as participants gained confidence in communicating with new structures. The work we began

Shannon's Reflection

Participating in this action research helped me establish myself as a leader and a risk taker within my school community. One of the essential pieces of this work was balancing my role as teacher researcher while promoting this idea to my colleagues. There was a sense of the unknown, embarking on this research and yet hoping for buy-in. Lisa's expertise on the subject aided its success. However, it became apparent that in order to have more than one CFG occurring at the center we needed an additional facilitator. After this first year of using CFGs, I became a trained CFG facilitator in order to support the growth of this work in the years to come. I have progressed from watching and gathering data to participating more fully and bringing my voice to the table as a facilitator. We hope to send other teachers for facilitator training as well. This will allow us to be flexible with group composition, distribute expertise within the center, and become more self-sufficient in managing our facilitation duties.

during this research made a lasting impression on all involved. The CFGs support change in how teachers effectively work together within the limited time and constraints of the profession. The conversations we have in CFGs are thought-provoking and insightful professional development opportunities, and will in turn directly impact children's learning.

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Appendix A: Center Norms

The norms, which we posted and reviewed before each CFG meeting, are as follows:

1. Open Communication
   - Practice active listening
   - Give feedback with care and respect
   - 10/48 rule with person(s) closest to the issue (wait 10 minutes to address an issue, but address it within 48 hours)

2. Positive Energy
   - Respect all ideas and opinions
   - Assume goodwill
   - Suspend judgment
   - Put some humor in your day

3. Advocacy
   - Balance individual, team, "wing," and center goals and needs

4. Responsibility and Equity
   - Clarify and follow through with responsibilities and duties in our work together as a center. Maintain equity in our work.

Appendix B: Reflective Questionnaire

Questionnaire for CFG #1
   - What new learning or insights did you gain about the topic we discussed?
   - What new learning or insights did you gain about the way we worked together and used the protocols?
   - What do you now wonder? What new questions have come up for you?
   - What type of future participation with Critical Friends Groups would you be interested in? (If any.)

Questionnaire for CFGs #2 and #3
   - What new learning or insights did you gain about the topic (children's work samples or dilemma presented) we discussed?
   - What was it like to work in this way? (Using a protocol, following a time guideline, not always being able to speak when you desire.) What aspects of this worked or didn't work for you?
   - What do you now wonder? What new questions have come up for you and how might you take our work from today and incorporate it into your own practice?
   - How would you see yourself continuing in CFG work? (Presenting a dilemma, participant, no longer interested, etc.)

Appendix C. Consultancy and Issaquah Protocols
(www.schoolreforminitiative.org)

Consultancy Protocol

Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans, and Faith Dunne

A Consultancy is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma. Outside perspective is critical to this protocol working effectively; therefore, some of the participants in the group must be people who do not share the presenter's specific dilemma at that time. When putting together a Consultancy group, be sure to include people with differing perspectives.

Time

Approximately 50 minutes.

Roles

Presenter (whose work is being discussed by the group), Facilitator (who sometimes participates, depending on the size of the group)

1. The presenter gives an overview of the dilemma with which s/he is struggling, and frames a question for the Consultancy group to consider. The framing of this question, as well as the quality of the presenter's reflection on the dilemma being discussed, are key features of this protocol. If the presenter has brought children's work, educators' work, or other "artifacts," there is a pause here to silently examine the work/documents. The focus of the group's conversation is on the dilemma. (5–10 minutes)

2. The Consultancy group asks clarifying questions of the presenter — that is, questions that have brief, factual answers. (5 minutes)

3. The group asks probing questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded to help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about the dilemma presented to the Consultancy group. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question s/he framed or to do some analysis of the dilemma presented. The presenter may respond to the group's questions, but there is no discussion by the Consultancy group of the presenter's responses. At the end of the ten minutes, the facilitator asks the presenter to restate his/her question for the group. (10 minutes)

4. The group talks with each other about the dilemma presented. Possible questions to frame the discussion: What did we hear? What didn't we hear that they think might be relevant? What assumptions seem to be operating? What questions does the dilemma raise for us? What do we think about the dilemma? What might we do or try if faced with a similar dilemma? What have we done in similar situations? Members of the group sometimes suggest actions the presenter might consider taking. Most often, however, they work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. The presenter doesn't speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes. (15 minutes)

5. The presenter reflects on what s/he heard and on what s/he is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that particularly resonated for him or her during any part of the Consultancy. (5 minutes)

6. The facilitator leads a brief conversation about the group's observation of the Consultancy process. (5 minutes)

The Issaquah Protocol

Developed by Nancy Mohr, Deborah Bambino, and Daniel Baron

The Issaquah Protocol entails using a process that models the developmentally appropriate order for questioning in coaching/consulting situations. It can be especially useful for coaches to look at their own work, and, at the same time, model and reinforce the steps they would use in the field.

Time

Approximately 60 minutes.

Group Format

Can be used with 10–50 group members. If 10–15, use a regular large-group format with rounds for each step (people can pass, knowing that you will come back to them at the end of the round). If 15–50, use small groups that first talk with each other and then respond as a group to each part of the protocol. Some people like a minute or so between steps to collect their thoughts and make notes before each new round begins.

Facilitation Tips

It is important to reinforce and reflect on the different kinds of questions and statements used and how these relate to work as a coach.

Protocol

1. Presenter—someone presents a dilemma or problem they are working on. It must be an authentic dilemma and not be one for which the answer is already known. The presenter must be open about the issue. If the presenter can frame the dilemma as a question, the feedback will likely be more focused. (5–7 minutes)

2. Group asks clarifying questions. Truly informational, meant to more fully understand what is going on; clarify any places of confusion. (3 minutes)
Note: These are the first kinds of questions we should ask in our work—showing our interest in learning more about what is going on and not leaping to judgment.

"Rounds" begin

3. Active listening by the group. (WHAT?) These are statements that restate what has been said already: "I heard [the presenter's name] say . . ." "What I'm hearing is . . ." (Go-round: 5–7 minutes)

Note: The purpose of active listening is not only to understand better what you are saying but to help the person hear what it sounds like and give him a chance to confirm if it is what he means to be saying.

4. Interpretive listening by the group. (SO WHAT?) "What this means to me is . . ." (Go-round: 5–7 minutes)

Note: The purpose of interpretive listening is to get at what meaning you are making from what you are hearing in order to help the presenter think/rethink about what she is conveying.

5. Presenter check-in. Quickly, are we hearing you correctly? If not, what would you change/add? (2 minutes)

Note: It is easy to think we know what we've heard and then find out we're wrong. Always good to check back.

6. Probing questions by the group. We now go deeper into what is going on and ask questions that help the presenter identify the tensions, paradoxes, and assumptions in the problem or issue, without asking or implying that there should be some reconciliation. Participants write questions on a card or sticky note, then go around the room and read their questions aloud, one at a time, as the presenter listens. They then give the presenter their questions. The presenter chooses the question that is the "most probing" and responds to it. (10 minutes)

Note: It is important to not get to probing questions until we have done the previous steps — the ones which build up our "right" to go further, since we now have a little understanding about what we are hearing.

7. Presenter response. Which probing question made you think the hardest? Why? (2 minutes)

8. Suggestions by the group. (NOW WHAT?) Finally, and only then, ideas to try, "What if she . . . ?" "One thing I might consider/try/do . . ." (Go-round: 10 minutes)

Note: Suggestions are only made when it is clear that they are welcome and that we have established a level of shared understanding about what is going on. It is a good idea to limit suggestions — too much is too much. As with the other rounds, the presenter is silent and takes notes.

9. Presenter reflects back. What is the presenter thinking of doing now, what concrete steps can be taken (if only first steps), and how to bring it back to the group for further work together. (5–7 minutes)

10. Debrief. Start with presenter, then all participants. (5–7 minutes) What was it like to go through these steps? What kind of feedback did you get? What was it like to use this process? How useful was it?

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for facilitation, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at www.schoolreforminitiative.org