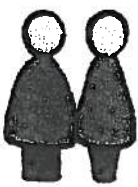


CHAPTER 3

Crucial Considerations: Description, Interpretation, Evaluation, and Context

NO TWO PROTOCOLS FOR looking at student work are quite the same. Some are effective for large groups, some for smaller groups. Some are designed to support looking at many samples of student work at once, some invite focusing on only one or two pieces, and so on. However, there are two aspects of protocol design that deserve special attention:

- *The mode of looking*. The degree to which the protocol encourages participants to "describe" or "interpret" or "evaluate" the work being presented
- *The role of context*. Whether and how the protocol allows for the presentation of the context of the work (that is, background information about the student who created the work, the assignment, the classroom conditions under which it was carried out, and so on)

In this chapter we will discuss each of these aspects and how it can shape the conversation depending on how it is used.

DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, OR EVALUATION?

How do description, interpretation, and evaluation differ? Consider these brief definitions and examples:

Description involves identifying in very literal terms various aspects of the work being observed. Generally, there is little disagreement among group members about comments that are truly descriptive. Descriptive comments from a group that is examining a piece of student art might sound like this:

- I see a yellow circle.
- I see that the yellow circle is surrounded by blue.
- The page is fully colored—there is no white space left.

Interpretation involves assigning some meaning or intent to what is in the work. For example, the following comments involve interpretation (or speculation):

- There's a sun in a deep blue sky.
- I see a full moon in the night sky.
- That yellow circle looks like a round, shiny UFO in outer space.
- I think that the student was afraid of leaving any blank space on the page.
- I can tell that this was done by a boy from the way the spaceship is drawn.

Evaluation attaches value or personal preference to the work being examined. For example:

- The sun is drawn skillfully.
- I see a very creative student at work here.
- I really like the way she filled up the whole page.*

How Are These Different "Modes of Looking" Used?

All such comments have their place and value. However, many of the protocols for looking at student work give particular emphasis to one or more of these kinds of comments and so require participants in that protocol to distinguish carefully among them. Some protocols, such as the Collaborative Assessment Conference, give clear directions for participants to describe

*Thanks to Steve Seidel for permission to elaborate on the examples he presented in "Learning from Looking," in N. Lyons, ed., *With Portfolio in Hand* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), pp. 69–89.

what they see in the work before they interpret or speculate about the meaning of what they see. The Collaborative Assessment Conference never invites evaluation. As a result, conversations guided by the Collaborative Assessment Protocol are often more open ended, raising issues and questions for the group to consider together.

Other protocols explicitly ask participants to make evaluative comments. For example, the Tuning Protocol invites "warm" feedback, meaning feedback that identifies strengths in the work, and "cool" feedback, which identifies gaps or areas of weakness. Both warm and cool feedback are types of evaluation. Depending on the focusing question, these judgments may be about the design of the assignment or project, or about the student work itself. (In fact, any process that involves measuring students' efforts against particular criteria will require the participants to articulate some evaluations.) The prominence of evaluation makes discussions guided by the Tuning Protocol—or similar protocols—more focused on solving specific problems than on exploring a broad array of issues or questions.

The Consultancy is neither primarily descriptive nor evaluative, but rather asks participants to interpret the dilemma they have heard the presenter describe. In some cases, suggestions offered by participants might be seen as (or might actually be) evaluative.

What's Challenging About Making Distinctions?

Distinguishing among description, interpretation, and evaluation is not always easy, even when a particular protocol spells out very specifically which kind of response participants should offer. An apparently straightforward description—such as identifying colors in a piece of artwork—can start to seem like interpretation when one person's orange looks brown or red to other observers of the work. In examining a piece of student writing, one person may feel that a comment about the "bad spelling" is an objective description; another may feel that such a comment is clearly evaluative. Rather than thinking of these three kinds of responses as hard-and-fast categories, it might be helpful to imagine description, interpretation, and evaluation arrayed along a continuum. Comments can be more or less descriptive, more or less interpretive, more or less evaluative. Over time, groups usually develop their own collective sense of what kinds of comments are appropriate for specific protocols.

Of these three types of responses, interpretations and evaluations come easily for most. By contrast, description—specific, literal, careful description—often proves more challenging. In "Learning from Looking," Steve Seidel (1988a) offers thoughts about why:

> I suspect that two tendencies in our culture mix dangerously and make what should be a simple act of description far more difficult than one might anticipate. First, we tend to move very quickly and rarely stop to dwell at length on what is before our eyes. A trip to a museum to watch people looking at the art often confirms that most of us spend very little time looking at a single painting. Face to face with a Rembrandt, an extraordinary opportunity to observe the work of a master, to dwell on what many consider a major accomplishment of Western culture . . . most of us spend little more than a minute or two.
>
> Further, we seem to be in the habit of making very quick judgments, even of things that might benefit from some reflection. We often expect of ourselves and our companions that we will know our thoughts, feelings, and opinions of a film before we've even crossed the street outside the theater. Exemplified by the film critics' Siskel and Ebert's "thumbs up" or "thumbs down," there is a "let's look at it once, declare it good or bad, and get on to the next" mentality that dominates our behavior perhaps a bit more than we might like to admit. (p. 84)

To these general cultural tendencies are added the pressures and norms of the teaching profession. It is, in fact, part of an educator's responsibility to identify what students are doing well and what they're doing poorly, and to address the wrongs quickly so that individual students don't fall behind in the curriculum that has to be covered. Circumstances often force everyone who works in education into the habit of making fast, almost automatic, evaluations when looking at student work.

But many protocols for looking together at student work are designed to help everyone slow down. These protocols invite participants to take a step back and to look calmly, carefully, and patiently in order to see what the student put into the work—before attaching personal interpretations and evaluations to it. Protocols that focus on description are not always the most appropriate way to accomplish the group's goals. However, given its often surprising benefits, your group might want to consider experimenting with such a protocol rather than relying wholly on ones that emphasize interpretation and evaluation. In fact, participating in more descriptive protocols can help participants give more substantive and specific feedback when they do use protocols that focus on evaluation.

Because being descriptive without bringing in interpretation or evaluation is, initially, so challenging, some groups find it helpful to practice a brief activity that focuses on the distinction before beginning a protocol. For example, the facilitator might pick out an object in the room, say, a poster, and ask participants to carefully observe the object and then to write down five or so descriptive comments without evaluating and interpreting. In pairs

or as a group, the participants parse their comments: Which ones are purely descriptive? Which involve some degree of evaluation or interpretation?

Why Do These Distinctions Matter?

In their first encounters with protocols that involve description, many teachers and administrators become frustrated with the apparent "triviality" of the conversation. In other protocols that require participants to distinguish between interpretation and evaluation, similar frustrations can emerge: What does it matter, really, if one is evaluating the work rather than offering interpretations of its meaning?

There are at least two reasons for honoring these distinctions when they appear in protocols and for incorporating them into protocols you might develop. First, as we have illustrated, the mode of looking will influence the kind of conversation a group has and will determine the goals the group can achieve together.

Second, by requiring distinctions in the kinds of responses participants make to student work, protocols enable them to develop a greater consciousness of what, exactly, in the student work they are responding to. In most protocols, the point of making these distinctions is usually not to get participants to develop perfectly descriptive or perfectly evaluative responses. Rather, attending to these distinctions helps participants to develop an awareness of their own "automatic" or "natural" responses to student work, which may involve assumptions that have no or little relation to the actual work the students have done.

With practice, many rewards come from attending in such detail to particular aspects of student work and how individuals and groups respond to it. Among those rewards are a renewed sensitivity to the complexity of students' thinking and more finely honed observational skills when looking at student work with and without colleagues.

CONTEXT

By *context* we mean all the background information about the work being presented, the assignment that gave rise to it, and the student(s) who created it. What was the assignment? How was it graded? What criteria or rubrics were used to assess it? How much time were students given to work on it? What resources were available? Is this the kind of work the student usually does? Did the student seem to have difficulty with any part of it or seem to put a lot of effort into it? Did the student do this work at school or at home? Alone or in collaboration with a partner or group? Was help available at home? What did the student have to say about it while working o[n] it and after it was completed? All these concerns are part of the work' context.

How Is Presentation of Context Used in Protocols?

Whether and how context is presented to a group gathered to examine the work is a matter that varies according to the protocol being used. Some protocols call for the presenter to describe the work's context at the beginning of the session as the work is introduced to the rest of the group. The Tuning Protocol is a good example of such a process: Immediately after the general introduction, the presenter typically spends 5 minutes or so telling the group about the assignment, goals, criteria, and other aspects of the context for the work before the group begins to examine it. The Consultancy also begins with the presentation of contextual information about the presenter's dilemma.

Other protocols call for the context to be withheld initially. The group begins looking at the student work before any context is provided. In the Collaborative Assessment Conference, for example, the presenter shows the group the piece of student work but tells them nothing about it. Only in the second half of the protocol, after group members have thoroughly examined, described, and asked questions about the work, does the presenter tell them about the assignment, the grade level, who created the work, and how.

Why Is the Role of Context Important?

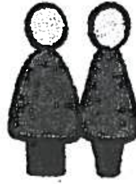
When educators first look at a piece of work, some of the first questions that spring to mind have to do with context. People naturally want to know about the assignment, the grade level, the background of the student, and so on. In a protocol that initially withholds that context, group members might feel frustrated at not being able to ask those questions. "Why should we guess about how old this student is or what he or she was trying to draw when the teacher can just tell us?" some people wonder. "That seems like a waste of time."

The answer is straightforward: Not knowing the context forces participants to look at the work more closely—without relying on preconceptions (or jumping to conclusions) about what a student of a certain age ought to be able to do, or how a certain kind of task ought to be responded to. It also gives the presenter the chance to hear fresh perspectives on students and their work. Often people who know neither the context nor the student will find in a piece of work evidence of important and powerful learning

that presenters may miss because they are looking for something else or because they expect particular students to produce certain kinds of work.

Finally, withholding the context gives all the group's participants a chance to examine their own assumptions and preconceptions about how students carry out and convey meaning in their work. Many group members are surprised by one or several aspects of the context when it is revealed: The vivid artwork turns out to be the effort of a student whom they had never suspected of having artistic abilities; a student's reflection reveals that a research paper that seemed to the group to involve a lot of effort and care is in fact far less meaningful to the student than is the community service project that accompanied it. And so on.

As you consider choosing or designing a process for looking at student work, weigh carefully the role of context. The context you decide to share, and when you decide to share it, will have an impact on the kinds of issues and questions that arise. These subtle but powerful differences in approach and emphasis argue for careful, thoughtful, and repeated use of one protocol before moving on to others. As one district curriculum coordinator relates, "It takes three, four, five times with a protocol before the light goes on."



CHAPTER 4

Three Ways of Looking Together at Student Work

IN THIS CHAPTER WE DESCRIBE three established structures for looking collaboratively at student work:

- The Tuning Protocol
- The Collaborative Assessment Conference
- The Consultancy

In Table 4.1 we give a quick overview of the key points of comparison and contrast between these three methods of looking at student work. A more detailed description and a bulleted agenda for each protocol follow.

You might use the following descriptions of the Tuning Protocol, the Collaborative Assessment Conference, and the Consultancy in several ways:

- If your group is in the early stages of deciding how to focus its efforts around looking at student work, you might try out one or more of these protocols in order to explore the opportunities provided by different formats.
- You might start with one of these models and alter or extend parts of it to better suit the goals of your particular group.
- You might use these protocols as models for developing your own unique protocol (as described in Chapter 5).

A word of caution: If most members of your group are novices at looking collaboratively at student work, you might want to begin by choosing one of these protocols and using it several times before modifying it or deciding to use a different one. These protocols are tools and, as with any