The Tuning Protocol: a Process for Reflection on Teacher and Student Work

What is it students are asked to do and what is the quality of the work they produce? The tuning protocol asks a teacher to present actual work before a group of thoughtful critical friends in a structured reflective discourse aimed at tuning the work to higher standards.

In his essay Three Pictures of an Exhibition, the Coalition's Joseph McDonald describes the warm and cool responses participants are asked to proffer. Warm, supportive responses identify what is positive in the work, showing those investments of belief in the performer that arise from a caring history." More objective, cool responses address the substance of the work, objectively evaluating what is presented (not who presents it); does the test measure what is really valued? Though it is often used to critique the design and context for exhibitions, the tuning protocol is designed as a way to present student work, in the form of several contrasting samples of written work or a videotaped presentation. Participants then address questions about the extent and the quality of the work, and the standards to which it is held. It may help to think about qualities of work, rather than make an overall judgment of quality" CES's David Allen says. For example the Prospect Center's descriptive review process asks participants to describe what is there, as well as point out what is missing or weak- a variation of warm and cool. In the outline below, the time allotments indicated are the suggested minimum for each task.

I. Introduction (2 minutes)
Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule

II. Teacher Presentation (10-15 minutes—throughout which participants are silent)
Teacher-presenter brings samples of student work and describes context for student work Context for student work (assignment, scoring rubric, standard, etc.)
Teacher-presenter poses her or his focusing question for feedback

III. Clarifying Questions (3 min)
Participants ask clarifying questions about what teacher-presenter has just said

IV. Examination of student work and generation of feedback (10-15 min)
Participants look at work and take notes on where it seems "in tune" with the goals and where there are problems (keeping the teacher-presenter’s question in mind)
Participants write down warm and cool feedback and probing questions

V. Pause to reflect on warm and cool feedback (2-3 min.)
Participants may take a couple of minutes to reflect silently on what they would like to contribute to the feedback session

V. Warm and Cool Feedback (15 minutes)
Participants share feedback
Facilitator may remind participants of teacher-presenter’s focusing question

VI. Reflection/Response (15 minutes)
Teacher-presenter speaks to those comments and questions she or he chooses to address
Facilitator my intervene to focus or clarify. Participants are silent.

VII. Debrief (10 minutes)
Facilitator leads an open discussion of the tuning experience the group has shared

The Tuning Protocol: a Process for Reflection by David Allen, is available from the Publications office of the Coalition of Essential Schools  (401)-351-2525   (401)-351-2525.
Guidelines and Norms for facilitators

1. Be assertive about keeping time. A protocol that doesn't allow for all the components will do a disservice to the presenter, the work presented, and the participants' understanding of the process. Don't let one participant monopolize. 2. Be protective of teacher-presenters. By making their work more public, teachers are exposing themselves to kinds of critiques they may not be used to. Inappropriate comments or questions should be recast or withdrawn. Try to determine just how "tough" your presenter wants the feedback to be. 3. Be provocative of substantive discourse. Many presenters may be used to blanket praise. Without thoughtful but probing cool questions and comments, they won't benefit from the tuning protocol experience. Presenters often say they'd have liked more cool feedback.

Norms for Participants

1. Be respectful of teacher presenters. By making their work more public teachers are exposing themselves to kinds of critiques they may not be used to. Inappropriate comments or questions should be recast or withdrawn. 2. Contribute to substantive discourse. Without thoughtful but probing "cool" questions and comments, they won't benefit from the tuning protocol experience. 3. Be appreciative of the facilitator's role, particularly in regard to the following the norms and keeping time. A tuning protocol that doesn't allow for all components (presentation, feedback, response, debrief) to be enacted properly will do a disservice to both the teacher-presenters and to the participants.