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Appropriating protocols for the regulation of teacher professional conversations

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Processes through which teachers appropriate a conversational protocol are studied.
- Appropriation is situated in local context in interaction with local cultural norms.
- Appropriation is a collective rather than individual accomplishment.
- Appropriation entails changing the tool.
- Appropriation involves the tool's fading from view.

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"Protocols" – structures for the self-regulation of teacher professional conversations – have garnered considerable interest among teachers and teacher educators. Their potential benefits have been featured in practitioner journals (Graham & Fahey, 1999; Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003; Pomerantz & Ippolito, 2015); books guide teachers in their facilitation (Allen & Blythe, 2004; Easton, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007); and the World Wide Web is brimming with materials (e.g., the 295 protocols on the School Reform Initiative site: http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/).

Though the promise of protocols has excited professional educators' imaginations, protocol-structured conversations have received limited attention from the research community (Pomerantz & Ippolito, 2015). Building upon sociocultural theories regarding the appropriation of cultural tools (Wertsch, 1998), and employing linguistic ethnographic concepts and methods, we investigate the ways in which a team of teachers engaged with a conversational protocol and sought to make it their own. We examine the team's discourse prior to the introduction of the protocol; their initial, formalistic use of the protocol; and the interaction of the protocol with local culture in a spontaneous episode of implicit use. We contrast discourse and tool appropriation in these three episodes, and discuss the dynamics of protocol appropriation as situated in and interacting with local culture, a collective accomplishment, differentially taken up by individuals, and entailing adaptation and fading. We furthermore discuss the implications of the teachers' appropriation for realizing the protocol's aims, analyzing the more and less productive aspects of the team's conversations.

1. Teacher professional discourse

Teaching is a complex endeavor, necessitating attention to multiple, simultaneous events and concerns, rapid interpretation of a vast stream of information, and appropriate action. It requires flexibility, judgment and ongoing processes of critical reflection on practice (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). The development of these faculties can be facilitated by discussing with colleagues problems of practice. Indeed, research has demonstrated the potential benefits of on-the-job teacher collaborative discourse for instructional improvement (e.g., Little, 1982; Louis & Marks, 1998). Particularly productive, studies suggest, is discourse that deprivatizes teaching practice (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010; Little, 1990), involves rich representations of classroom experience and student thinking (Kazemi & Franke, 2004; Little, 2003), and engages practitioners in collaborative and reflective inquiry on problems of practice (Horn & Little, 2010; Horn, Garner, Kane, & Brasel, 2016; Louie, 2016; Zhang, Lundeberg, & Eberhardt, 2011).

Drawing on this research, we define productive pedagogical discourse as talk that is:

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(a) focused on problems of practice: teachers discuss issues and concerns that have arisen in their classrooms;
(b) anchored in rich representations of practice, e.g. student work, video clips of classroom practice;
(c) multi voiced: different perspectives are presented and attended to;
(d) involves pedagogical reasoning: the use of evidence, explanations, and reasons to interpret classroom events and weigh and justify courses of action; and
(e) balances support and critique: fostering trust and collegiality, on the one hand, and critical inquiry on the other.

We characterize such discourse as *productive* because it offers opportunities for participating teachers to develop their sensitivity to notice problems, their flexibility in responding to such problems, their judgment in selecting the most appropriate response in the given situation, and their disposition to engage in reflective practice.

Unfortunately, teacher talk is often structured in counterproductive ways, even when teachers are committed to professional improvement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Norms of privacy, individualism and noninterference make teachers reluctant to expose their practice to peer scrutiny let alone share problems (Little, 1990). Often conversations focus on administrative issues and school-wide events rather than on classroom teaching (Little, 2002). When talk does turn to the classroom, participants rarely have at hand a common object of inquiry – a rich representation of practice to collectively explore (Horn & Kane, 2015). Furthermore, a common response to teacher sharing problems is *normalization*, i.e. positioning the problem as a normal, expected and oft-encountered aspect of teaching (Horn & Little, 2010). Normalization is often followed by a storm of advice, which precludes critical examination of the problem and may also position the teacher as a passive recipient of advice or a helpless victim of uncontrolled circumstances (Horn & Little, 2010). The most prevalent meetings in Horn and colleagues' (2016) purposive sample of 24 well-regarded teacher workgroups focused on "tips and tricks", logistics and curricular pacing, activities that were associated with fewer opportunities to learn than the less frequent collective interpretation meetings.

Thus, the available evidence suggests that current norms are not conducive to productive pedagogical discourse. One commonly promoted yet under-researched tool for challenging these norms and cultivating productive discourse is the conversational protocol.

2. Protocols in teacher professional discourse: Theoretical promise and empirical research

Protocols provide guidelines for structuring teacher professional conversations, including delineation of roles, topics, sequences and ways of talking (McDonald et al., 2007). For example, in the particular consultancy protocol discussed below, one teacher (in the facilitator role) guides the team in assisting another teacher (in the presenter role) to cope with a problem or dilemma. Protocols delineate conversational stages, each with associated topics and timings. The consultancy protocol, for example, includes an introduction (5 min), presentation of the case and clarification questions (10–15 min), analysis (10–15 min), examination of courses of action (20 min), generalization (5 min) and reflection (5 min) (see Appendix A).

Protocols are designed to facilitate the development of productive norms for discussing practice, to "constrain behavior in order to enhance experience" (McDonald et al., 2007, p. 7). So, for example, some of the key ideas underlying the consultancy protocol, designed to foster collaborative problem-solving and pedagogical reasoning, are (a) that discussion should be centered around an authentic, concrete problem; (b) that problem description and analysis should precede the examination of courses of action; and (c) that participants should focus on how to help the presenting teacher (rather than, for example, their own practice).

Protocols are also promoted as a way of developing "distributed, facilitative leadership" in schools, in part by making "the tasks of facilitation more transparent" (McDonald et al., 2007, p. 13) and by rendering facilitation tasks easier by functioning "as a kind of co-facilitator" (Allen & Blythe, 2004), which carries authority in the group. Likewise, by structuring many elements of the conversation, the protocol absolves the (human) facilitator from having to invent, attend to and actively think about every aspect of the conversation (McDonald et al., 2007).

Given the unpredictability of group learning processes, and the sensitivities that naturally arise when teachers disrupt norms of privacy and share their difficulties, questions emerge about how closely protocols should be followed. Some facilitators advocate cleaving to the protocol "precisely at all times in order to achieve the maximum benefit" (Allen & Blythe, 2004, p. 92). Others, Allen and Blythe among them, favor modifying, adapting or creating new protocols as the situation demands.

The wealth of scholarship on why and how teachers *should* use protocols is not matched by a similar body of empirical research about *what actually happens* when protocols are employed, and the extent to which their presumed benefits accrue. Several case studies (Andrews-Larson, Wilson, & Larbi-Cherif, 2017; Curry, 2008; Ippolito, 2010; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Little & Curry, 2008; Little et al., 2003; Pomerantz & Ippolito, 2015) demonstrate both the potential benefits of protocol-based professional conversations and the challenges they pose. The team in Levine and Marcus (2010) focused more on instruction and student data in their protocol-guided discussions than when their talk was loosely structured. The use of protocols assisted the facilitator in Andrews-Larson and colleagues' (2017) study to pose more focused questions, but not to press for reasoning. In Curry's (2008) study of six Critical Friends Groups, protocols helped the teachers to deprivatize practice, support critical collegiality, maintain a focus on teaching and learning, and even positively affected other arenas of school discourse. However, the reliance on protocols also constrained the pursuit of important issues and produced "ritualized patterns of discourse that potentially narrowed the depth of inquiry" (p. 767). Little (2004), in a review of practices of looking at student work, noted that, while protocols can help get an evidence-based conversation started, they cannot "by themselves … bear the burden of cultural change in schools and in teachers' professional relationships" (p. 110). Paradoxically, meaningful cultural changes happened when participants deviated from the protocol script.

Our study further explores these tensions between procedure and substance, and dilemmas about adhering to the protocol script. We argue that in thinking about these and related issues it is helpful to theorize teachers' engagement with protocols as processes of *appropriation*.

3. Appropriation of tools

We take the concept of appropriation from Bakhtin's (1975/1981) writings about language, which were helpfully