

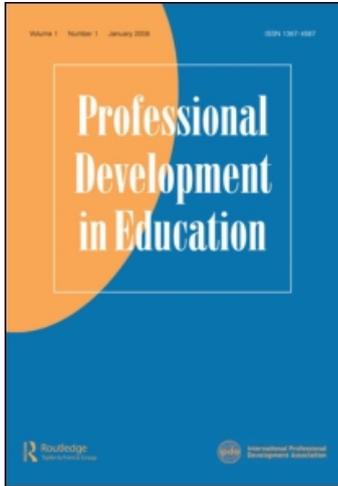
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### Connecting reflective practice, dialogic protocols, and professional learning

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# Connecting reflective practice, dialogic protocols, and professional learning

James Nehring<sup>a\*</sup> Wilfredo T. Laboy<sup>b</sup> and Lynn Catarius<sup>b</sup>

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In recent years, elements of reflective practice have been popularized in state school professional development. As reflective practice has moved into the mainstream, dialogic protocols have been developed by numerous organizations to structure discourse for deep understanding, enhance professional practice and advance organizational learning. This case study reports on the use of a dialogic protocol as a tool to advance educator reflective practice. It finds that the protocol significantly alters prevailing discussion patterns to promote the construction of new knowledge. It recommends further exploration of dialogic protocols by practitioners and researchers as a potentially powerful tool to enhance professional learning.

## Introduction

In recent years, elements of reflective practice (Schon, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Senge, 2000) have been popularized in state schools through large-scale initiatives such as Professional Learning Communities (Solution Tree, n.d.), Critical Friends Groups (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.), Whole Faculty Study Groups (Murphy's Whole Faculty Study Groups, n.d.), The National Staff Development Council (n.d.), and Lesson Study (Lesson Study Research Group, n.d.). Local initiatives that hybridize formal, large-scale programs such as these are no doubt as widespread as they are undocumented.

As reflective practice has moved into the mainstream, dialogic protocols have been developed by numerous organizations (Datawise, Inc., n.d.; National School Reform Faculty, n.d.; Project Zero) to structure discourse for deep understanding, to enhance professional practice and to advance organizational learning. While considerable scholarly attention has focused on reflective practice in schools (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Hord, 1997; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 2000) and the *idea* of

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reflective dialogue embedded in it, less attention has been given to the structure and dynamics of reflective dialogue among educators as a means for professional learning. This paper reports the results of an exploratory study that sought to open the black box of reflective dialogue, as an exercise of professional learning among educators, in order to see what was inside. A protocol known as the Text-based Seminar served as a tool to structure reflective dialogue for this study. The main research question for this study was as follows:

- What may be learned about the dynamics of reflective dialogue, among educators, from an analysis of three group discussions, each guided by a well-established dialogic tool known as a protocol?

Two sub-questions for this study are as follows:

1. In what ways does a protocol influence conversational dynamics?
2. In what ways do conversational dynamics influence the construction of new knowledge?

### Theoretical frame

Reflection, reflective practice, dialogue and reflective dialogue signify an intellectual tradition with deep historical roots that cross academic disciplines. In the literature reviewed below, reflection and reflective practice emerge as close examination of one's own thought and behavior, learning from experience, and an experimental disposition toward ongoing activity. Likewise, dialogue and reflective dialogue emerge as reflection with others characterized by careful listening, active questioning and an openness to potentially profound change to one's beliefs.

#### *Reflection and Reflective Practice*

John Dewey wrote:

... to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the next meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealings with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind. (1938, p. 87)

Dewey viewed reflection as a formal process that arises from some occasion of 'perplexity, confusion, or doubt,' draws on 'data-at-hand' and past experience, and requires a willingness 'to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching' (1933, pp. 15–16). Later educators and cognitive psychologists of the twentieth century developed definitions of reflection with similar elements. Freed (2003) reviewed definitions of reflection in Boud *et al.* (1985), Boyd and Fales (1983), Brody (1994), Dewey (1933), Kolb (1984), Marsick and Mezirow (2002), Mezirow (1994), Saban *et al.* (1994) and Schon (1983, 1987), and derived the following summary definition: 'a rethinking of experiences so that perspectives change and practice (action) is improved' (Freed, 2003, p. 44).

Schon (1983) seized on the occasional and experiential aspects of reflection described by Dewey to identify a mode of thought and behavior within professions known as 'reflective practice.' Drawing explicitly on Dewey, Schon described thought processes that arise from concrete situations appropriate to a working professional ('reflection') as distinct from the thought processes arising from generalizations appropriate to academics in related disciplines ('technical rationality'). Drawing on Schon's (1983) notion of reflective practice and Lewin (1946), Argyris *et al.* (1985) systematized the thinking and behavior of reflective practice with the notion of 'action science.' Action science, together with Lewin's earlier term 'action research', has subsequently blossomed as a leading methodology linking the professions and the academy. An online search for 'action research' limited to the year 1980 returned 24 hits from Education Full Text, Educator's Reference Complete, ERIC, and ProQuest Education Journals. The same search limited to the year 2007 returns 405 hits. Reflective practice is central to action research. Through the use of systematic reflection, Argyris and Schon (1978) also introduced the notion of 'double loop learning,' signifying the wholesale reframing of a problem. Thus, reflection and reflective practice have come to signify, additionally, a means by which to fundamentally alter one's beliefs about some aspect of reality.

### *Dialogue and reflective dialogue*

Dialogue and reflective dialogue signal reflection with others through language. Leading psychologists of the twentieth century understood cognitive development as a social process, thus placing dialogue at the center of learning (Piaget, 1955; Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky 1978; Bruner, 1985; Lave & Wenger, 1990). With the influence of twentieth-century psychology, dialogue and reflective dialogue became the focus of greater scholarly attention as a formal means not only for learning in the conventional sense but for the very construction of reality. The power of dialogue and reflective dialogue also gained the attention of management researchers who saw them as tools for organizational problem-solving (Schon, 1983; Senge, 1990; Isaacs, 1999). Isaacs, applying the idea of reflective dialogue to organizational learning, defined reflective dialogue as 'a sustained, mindful inquiry into the processes, certainties and structures underlying human thought and action' (1994). In recent years, dialogue and reflective dialogue as a deliberate learning modality have spread across numerous fields of endeavor, including natural science, political science, the arts, medicine, religion and business management. Ironically, reflective dialogue, which traces its origin to educational philosopher John Dewey, has re-emerged within the field of education by way of business management theory (Senge, 1990, 2000; Hord, 1997).

### **Review of research**

In 1993, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding for The Dialogue Project at The Center for Organizational Learning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to 'explore the validity of dialogue, and to contribute to the development of

practical knowledge about it' (Isaacs, 1994). The Project distinguished dialogue from 'mere talk':

While the term 'dialogue' is ubiquitous, what we have come to mean by it is practiced relatively rarely, and often more by chance than by design. Much of what is called dialogue at the UN, for example, or across negotiating tables, is rarely or never dialogue according to our definition. Such exchanges involve a trading off of views and positions, a discussion where the effort is to win and avoid losing. The experience is little different when groups of people in almost any setting seek to talk together seriously. People fear being judged inadequate by their 'tribe', tend to hold and defend non-negotiable positions, play habitual roles, act in a polarized fashion, press for conformity and seek to avoid losing face. (Isaacs, 1999, p. 3)

The Dialogue project initially established three sites at which to cultivate dialogue in organizational settings in the United States and study its impact: a healthcare community in Grand Junction, Colorado; Urban leaders in Boston; and management and union steel workers in Kansas City. Applying grounded theory to close analysis of site data through cycles of action research, the project yielded a wealth of findings. Of particular relevance to the present study is the identification of key components for the design of dialogue:

- **Voice:** Creating a place for all relevant perspectives and attitudes to be spoken so that they may be heard.
- **Listening:** Attention to the spoken and unspoken nature of the conversation and the 'acoustics' of the space in the room.
- **Respect:** Acknowledgement of the value of differences and participants' identities.
- **Suspension:** Willingness to raise and consider assumptions and perceptions without being bound by them (Isaacs, 1999).

The Dialogue project yielded several publications, including *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* by Peter Senge (1990), who served during the Dialogue Project as Director of the Center for Organizational Learning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The work of the Dialogue project migrated to the field of education most directly through the research of Shirley Hord. Hord worked in what she described as 'a learning organization that matched Peter Senge's descriptions of such an organizational arrangement' (1997, p. v) and began to study schools that possessed similar characteristics, finding, in a qualitative study of an elementary school (Boyd & Hord, 1994a, 1994b, reported in Hord, 1997) that staff learning through dialogue was an essential element. A literature review by Hord (1997) established the term 'professional learning community' within the field of education, and, with it, the centrality of reflective dialogue to teacher practice.

Work by Joan Talbert and Milbrey McLaughlin also helped lay the foundation on which professional learning community initiatives with their reliance on reflective dialogue have been constructed. Examining the organizational contexts in which teachers worked, Talbert and McLaughlin found that high-quality instruction 'is more than a product of individual capacity imported into the teaching

context; it is also a product of opportunities within teaching contexts for teachers to learn new standards and strategies of practice' (1993, p. 50) Subsequent research in schools in California and Michigan (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) confirmed and extended Talbert and McLaughlin's earlier findings—demonstrating, in particular, the effect of departmental culture on instructional practice, identifying robust teaching with a culture of collaborative reflective practice. McLaughlin and Talbert's recent book, *Building school-based teacher learning communities: Professional strategies to improve student achievement* (2006), merges their many years of research on organizational context with findings of other researchers over a 20-year period establishing reflective dialogue as a centerpiece of exemplary teacher practice.

Although much has been written about the related notions of the professional learning community and reflective practice in schools, empirical research into the dynamics and structure of reflective dialogue within professional learning communities is scant. A review of empirical research on professional learning communities by Vescio *et al.* (2008) identifies 11 empirical studies published between 1990 and 2005. Although use of reflective dialogue within the professional learning community was a requirement for inclusion in the review, none of the studies cited focused on the dynamics and structure of reflective dialogue *per se*, focusing instead on the impact on student achievement, school culture, and collaboration.

Two searches limited to peer-reviewed journals in education using the term 'reflective dialogue' on Wilson Web and ProQuest Education Journals, English language, yielded 24 unique hits. Articles not based on empirical research were excluded, as were articles only peripherally relevant to reflective dialogue and were reports on forms of reflection other than interpersonal communication (self-reflection with journals and computer tutorials, for example), leaving five studies.

An Irish study (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008) conducted sessions with groups of student-teachers who took turns showing videotaped segments of their teaching. The group then discussed the segment with the guidance of a facilitator who provided discussion prompts of an increasingly critical nature ranging from, for example, 'the most positive aspect of the lesson' to 'suggest an alternative to the approach used' to 'critique the impact of the particular contextual factors (e.g. socioeconomic groupings, ethnicity, gender) on the impact of the lesson.' Over the course of a year of such sessions, student-teachers demonstrably increased their capacity for reflection and critical dialogue.

Stegman (2007) audio-recorded lesson de-briefs between six student-teachers in music education and their cooperating teachers over the course of a semester. During the de-briefs, student-teachers were asked to identify and discuss successes and problems. Cooperating teachers facilitated these discussions by offering suggestions, observations, commentary and advice.

Whitehead and Fitzgerald (2006) studied teacher mentors and trainees engaged in co-planning of lessons and lesson de-briefs using video recordings. In a second phase of the study, data were collected from pupils who watched and discussed video recordings of lessons in groups. The authors contrast their 'generative' approach to

knowledge creation through shared inquiry that benefits mentor, trainee and pupils, with a more conventional 'restrictive' approach focused narrowly on the trainee's improvement of practice through transmission of the mentor's expertise.

Murphy (2004) reports that nursing students who received training in written and oral reflection skills showed significantly enhanced clinical reasoning skill, as measured with a researcher developed assessment instrument, compared with a control group that received no training.

Boody *et al.* (1998) report findings from an action research study involving five teacher educators who reflected regularly as a group on the degree to which personal beliefs guided their actions as teacher educators. The authors found that reflection on the alignment of intent and practice is a more powerful facilitator of change than reliance on individual reflection.

Together these studies suggest that reflective dialogue as a deliberate professional learning strategy is a significant catalyst for improved practice in the fields of education and nursing. At the same time, they raise questions about the conduct of reflective dialogue. In all five studies, limited guidance was provided for the facilitation and conduct of reflective dialogue among participants and little analysis of both facilitation and conduct are provided in the reports. Their absence leaves unexplored the dynamic relationships among facilitation, participant behavior and outcomes. Also, only one of the five studies focuses on the learning of seasoned professionals as opposed to novices. The present study explores the dynamic relationships in the conduct of reflective practice within groups of seasoned professionals.

Two additional recent studies are based on the use of reflective dialogue in K-12 classrooms. While the present study is focused on learning among experienced professionals, the K-12 studies are of interest because they address the dynamics of reflective dialogue, a feature wholly left out of the literature on professional learning. Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) conducted a case study of a high school English class's use of the Paideia Seminar, a learning tool very similar to the Text-based Seminar featured in the present study. Based on a qualitative analysis of three seminar sessions held by one teacher during a semester, the authors found a tension between 'dialogic discussion' (their term, roughly synonymous with reflective dialogue as understood here) in which group members freely share and new meanings are created, and 'teacher-fronted' discussion, in which 'a teacher stimulates discussion by asking questions and listening to student answers. Her purpose might be to bring students to an understanding that she already possesses, or at least to lead students to discuss issues she considers important.'

Robinson (2006) also studied the Paideia seminar, focusing on its utility as a tool for enhancing reading comprehension among high school students. Based on a case study involving three seminars conducted by one teacher, the author found evidence of higher-level reading and thinking skills among the students.

The last two studies underscore the catalytic power of reflective dialogue for deep learning and suggest that the dynamics of reflective dialogue differ appreciably from the dynamics of other more conventional discussion approaches.

**Methods and analysis**

Using a well-established protocol called the Text-Based Seminar (Thompson-Grove, n.d.), researchers convened three separate groups of educators—high school principals, school district leaders and university graduate school of education instructors—to discuss a text relevant to all three groups. Each discussion was audio-recorded and each participant completed a questionnaire in conjunction with the discussion. The questionnaire solicited responses to the text prior to discussion, responses to the text and discussion immediately after the discussion, and suggestions, immediately after the discussion, for concrete steps that the participant could take in his or her professional practice. Examination of the questionnaires and discussion transcripts began with three complete readings, accompanied by methodological and substantive memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Review of memos revealed three phenomena relevant to the research questions that merited further investigation: evolution of participant thinking, apparent in questionnaire responses; a distinct variety of comments, apparent in the discussion transcripts; and frequent references to the text and other participants, apparent in the discussion transcripts. To further examine these three phenomena, three analyses were designed and applied to the data. The three analyses were, respectively: Characterization of Participant Thoughts, based on a comparison of responses to questionnaire Items 1, 2 and 3; creation of a typology of participant comments and subsequent coding of all three discussions to the typology; and tabulation of references to the text and references to other participants during discussion. Table 1 presents the three phenomena and the corresponding analyses.

What follows is a description of the dialogic protocol used for this study, a description of the text used for all three discussions, a description of the Participants for all three discussions, and the three analyses outlined above.

*Description of the dialogic protocol used for this study*

To guide the discussion, researchers chose a dialogic protocol called the Text-based Seminar (Thompson-Grove, n.d.; see Appendix 1). This protocol was developed by

Table 1. Phenomena apparent in questionnaire responses and/or discussion transcripts

Phenomenon relevant to research questions, apparent in questionnaire responses and/or discussion transcripts	Analysis designed to further examine phenomenon
1. Evolution of participant thinking apparent in questionnaire responses	Characterization of Participant Thoughts, based on a comparison of responses to questionnaire Items 1, 2 and 3
2. Distinct variety of comments apparent in the discussion transcripts	Creation of a typology of participant comments and subsequent coding of all three discussions to the typology
3. Frequent references to the text and other participants, apparent in the discussion transcripts	Tabulation of references to the text and references to other participants during discussion

the National School Reform Faculty, an organization rooted intellectually in the tradition of reflective practice as articulated by Schon (1983) and Argyris *et al.* (1985). The facilitator's guide for the Text-based Seminar emphasizes that the purpose of the discussion is to construct new knowledge from evidence-based dialogue. One of the researchers served as facilitator for all three discussions.

The Text-based Seminar requires a guiding question, which according to the *Facilitator's Guide* should be: 'substantive, clear, relevant to the participants' experience, and likely to push their thinking in new directions. Above all, constructing a response to the question should require close reading of the text' (*Facilitator's Guide*). In response to the *Facilitator's Guide*, researchers chose the following guiding question for the Text-based Seminar:

- How does this text speak to your ongoing professional practice?

#### *Description of the text used for all three discussions*

As part of an ongoing university-school district partnership, a previous research study had been conducted to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by high school principals as the school district moved from a single, large, comprehensive high school to six, small, thematic high schools. Principals were interviewed using a common protocol, the data were analyzed and a summary of the analysis was prepared with data presented in both narrative and tabular form. The research summary was used as the text for the text-based discussions in the present study.

#### *Description of the participants for all three discussions*

To discuss the research summary, three discussion groups were formed consisting of persons for whom the summary would be relevant. Group 1 was the high school principals themselves. Group 2 was the school district's leadership cabinet. Group 3 was university instructors in the Graduate School of Education within the university that is partnered with the school district.

#### *Analysis 1: Characterization of Participant Thoughts, based on a comparison of responses to questionnaire Items 1, 2 and 3*

Participants in all three discussions completed a questionnaire before and after the discussion. Before the discussion, participants were asked to identify two passages from the text that are 'particularly significant or meaningful for your ongoing practice', and to explain their choices. Immediately after the discussion, participants were asked to identify 'two additional insights or questions raised by the discussion that are relevant to your ongoing professional practice', and to again explain their choices. Participants were also asked to 'identify one specific professional practice which, based on your review of the Data Summary and the discussion, you now think you might either initiate, continue, alter, or cease.' Responses to

these prompts provide a window onto the evolution of a participant's thoughts as he or she interacts with the text and with other participants revealing both the dynamics of the participant's thinking process as well as the degree to which new knowledge is constructed. A review of the responses reveals a variety of evolutionary patterns in the participants' thoughts. A short characterization of the thought evolution of each participant as suggested by questionnaire responses is displayed in Appendix 3.

One common pattern among these examples of thought evolution begins with a question or idea framed in the Item 1 response, which is then informed and clarified through discussion, as revealed in the Item 2 response, and then synthesized in the Item 3 response. For example, one participant in the District Leadership discussion offered the following (excerpted) responses:

... if staff members didn't see the need to change, no transformation will occur. Collaboration and team planning across teams is an issue at my ... school. The issue is to increase student achievement—collaboration is a method to get there. (Item 1 response)

Should academic achievement be the goal or should it be the logical outcome of other goals that have been implemented i.e. common planning, change in instructional practice etc. (Item 2 response)

... continue to develop the culture of high expectations for both staff and students. This effort needs to be authentic and not shallow. Students and staff need to be educated on what exactly this means. It seems to be an overused fuzzy term. (Item 3 response)

In this example, the participant raises a question about the relationship between professional collaboration and student academic achievement before the discussion in response to the text. The question is sharpened during the discussion, with the participant wondering afterwards whether student academic achievement is the goal or the outcome of other goals. In Item 3, the participant synthesizes these evolving thoughts into an action emphasizing the importance of authenticity and clarity for the students and staff in the pursuit of high academic expectations.

In another example, this one from the principals' discussion, a topic identified by a participant in Item 1 becomes problematized through discussion, raising anxiety. Then, in Item 3, the participant frames the anxious thought as a dilemma and commits to managing it. An excerpt follows:

Physical/environmental change alone doesn't change culture of school among students. Attendance remains poor, discipline remains huge issue. Resources to produce cultural changes (programs for pregnant teens, anger mgmt. courses, parent involvement, alt. ed. options) not available. Challenge of passing vision to students. (Item 1 response)

... as an administrator, to increase student achievement, I need to be more focused in instruction + curriculum—but how, when I am 24/7 on discipline/attendance/paperwork that goes w/it? (Item 2 response)

... stop playing 'uniform police' and spend more time in practices that will improve achievement—observations, coaching, walk-throughs. Focusing on 'big picture' of achievement, vision, moving forward, not being mired down in small nuances that are not directly related to instruction and learning. (Item 3 response)

A third example, from the district leadership discussion, reveals yet another pattern. In this example, there is a dramatic shift in topic from the Item 1 response to the Item 2 response. The Item 3 response then builds on the Item 2 response, more or less abandoning the Item 1 response. An excerpt follows:

... I believe education is meant to empower students. Effective education encourages students to promote well developed, valued opinion to affect positive results beyond the classroom. (Item 1 response)

The challenge of buy in at all level to enhance student achievement (Item 2 response)

... continue to collaborate with individual schools, staff, student, parent & community to support positive results. (Item 3 response)

The participant enters the discussion with a focus on student empowerment through education that develops thoughtful opinions. The discussion shifts the focus to student academic achievement, and the proposed action step continues this more narrow focus on academic ‘results.’

All three of the examples above suggest a significant evolution in participant thinking, influenced both by the text and the discussion. While most of the participants—like these three examples—display significant change in their thinking in response to the text and discussion, a few reveal little or no change such as the following participant in the district leadership discussion excerpted below.

Our role as central office administrators is to provide support for the schools and to eliminate distractions so that principals/staff can get the job done. (Item 1 response)

... continued understanding/affirmation of my role at central office in support of schools. (Item 2 response)

... ongoing support for administrators and staff. (Item 3 response)

This series of responses, while showing that the discussion affirms prior thinking, reveals no evidence of deeper understanding or greater complexity.

An analysis of the questionnaire responses by all of the participants reveals that, although the patterns of thought evolution vary, the vast majority demonstrate significant change. The evidence from this analysis provides insight into the first subquestion of this study; namely, in what ways do conversational dynamics influence the construction of new knowledge? This analysis suggests, overall, that the Text-based Seminar strongly influenced participant thinking in various ways. However, one might reasonably ask whether the changes in thinking rise to the lofty level of ‘construction of new knowledge’ or whether they represent merely the addition of new information. To answer this question, we consider the kinds of changes in thinking indicated in Appendix 3. Some of the changes suggest relatively minor alterations of thought, such as ‘affirmation’ and ‘clarification’. Others, however, suggest changes that are transformative: ‘deeper understanding’, ‘problematize’, ‘grows more complex’, ‘dramatic shift in topics,’ ‘synthesis.’ It appears then that, while a few participants were relatively unaffected, for many a significant transformation of thought occurred as the result of the discussion, going well beyond the mere addition of information and suggesting strongly that new knowledge was, indeed, constructed.

*Analysis 2: creation of a typology of participant comments and subsequent coding of all three discussions to the typology*

In order to better understand the dynamics of the Text-based Seminar, transcripts were reviewed, using constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006) to identify patterns in participant comments. The guidelines for the text-based discussion were reviewed also to identify additional potential comment types. The reviews resulted in a typology of 15 comment types (see below). All comments made during all three discussions were coded according to these 15 comment types in text-based discussions (frequency is indicated below by a number in parentheses next to each comment type):

1. Affirming an interpretation offered by another participant (6).
2. Building an interpretation from two or more passages (13).
3. Connecting the text and/or discussion to one's ongoing practice or the group's ongoing practice (18).
4. Connecting the text to a relevant experience but not an issue of ongoing practice (5).
5. Connecting two or more comments by others to suggest a new idea or question or interpretation of the text (10).
6. Introducing a new text reference to amplify an idea offered by another participant (9).
7. Introducing a new text reference to illuminate a question or problem the group is wrestling with (0).
8. Other (1).
9. Out of bounds: debating a work issue on grounds not related to text (0).
10. Out of bounds: extended commentary drawing primarily on personal experience or matters not related directly to the text (4).
11. Posing a question to another participant or the group as a whole (6).
12. Re-interpreting a passage previously referenced by another participant (9).
13. Responding to a question posed by another participant to oneself or the group as a whole (2).
14. Struck by something in text not overtly connected to another participant's comment (5).
15. Struck by something text is silent on (2).

The most frequent type of comment was 'connecting the text and/or discussion to one's ongoing practice or the group's ongoing practice.' For example, the district leadership discussion was, at one point, focusing on academic achievement prompted by a reference in the text. There had been some concern raised that the text did not focus enough on student achievement, which prompted the following statement:

If it's not coming up as one of the top ranked areas then it's perhaps something that we should be looking at as we work with the individual schools. (DL Discussion group)

Through this statement, the text and the discussion surrounding it were explicitly connected to the group's ongoing practice.

In another example of this type of comment, the education instructors were considering how the dilemmas of the school principals might inform the leadership courses they (education instructors) were teaching. One member of the group said:

And when we're thinking about our own professional practice, and we're thinking about how we help our students to understand the change process, it seems so much easier when you're talking about forming a new school, like a new charter school where you can bring on board people that are like minded, than the types of comments that are in here. I mean they're clearly saying that they want to build consensus for a vision, but they're having to do it on the job. (EDU discussion)

Here again, a topic arising from the text gets connected to the ongoing practice of the participants in the discussion.

Most of the comment types established for this analysis involved references to the text or other participants or the ongoing discussion. Of the 15 comment types, eleven (Types 1–7 and Types 12–15) are directly responsive to the text and/or the comments of other participants. Two of the comment types (Types 9 and 10) are irrelevant to the text and are therefore labeled 'out of bounds.' Two other comment types (Types 8 and 11) may or may not be responsive to the text or the ongoing discussion. What is striking is that of the 90 comments offered in all three discussions taken together, only four were definitely unrelated and only seven more were potentially unrelated, meaning that 79 of the 90 comments were directly responsive to either the text or the comments of other participants. The conversation overall shows a high degree of fidelity to the guidelines of the Text-based Seminar that were shared orally and in writing with participants in all three discussions. In particular, the substantial referencing of other participants' comments and the construction of new ideas from participant comments shows a remarkable pattern of active listening and openness to new ideas that represents a clear break from the dominant, unproductive discussion patterns identified by Isaacs: 'a trading off of views and positions, a discussion where the effort is to win and avoid losing ... defend non-negotiable positions, play habitual roles, act in a polarized fashion, press for conformity and seek to avoid losing face' (Isaacs, 1994, p. 3). Whether the conversation fully meets the criteria Isaacs sets for reflective dialogue—voice, listening, respect, and suspension—would require a different analysis, but it is safe to say that all three Text-based Seminars examined here are well along the path toward Isaacs' ideal.

### *Analysis 3: tabulation of references to the text and references to other participants during discussion*

To examine the frequency of participation by individual participants in all three discussions, comments by individuals were tallied. The frequency of comments referencing the text and/or other participants was also tallied. The resulting tabulation appears in Appendix 4.

A number of patterns stand out from this analysis. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that 45 of 63 comments explicitly referenced either the text or other

participants or both, corroborating the finding above of fidelity to the Text-based Seminar guidelines that recommend referencing the text and building on the comments of others. Also noteworthy is the breadth of participation, with 26 of 27 participants speaking at least once—suggesting some attention to the guideline ‘Watch your own airtime’. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that in two of the three discussions there was one person who spoke five or six times, possibly dominating the discussion.

## **Findings and recommendations**

Several key findings emerge from the analysis, as follows:

1. For many of the participants in all three discussions, a significant transformation of thought occurred as the result of their interaction with the text and each other through the Text-based Seminar. For many, the transformation of thought went well beyond the mere addition of information to bolster existing ideas. Indeed, the evidence suggests that many of the participants emerged from the Text-based Seminar with new knowledge constructed from the experience.
2. All three seminars demonstrated high fidelity to the guidelines of the Text-based Seminar. Comments remained rooted in the text for the duration of each seminar as participants would regularly ‘refer to the text’. Also, previous comments were regularly acknowledged as speakers would ‘build on what others say’.
3. All three discussions showed evidence of active listening and a remarkable openness to new thinking, suggesting that the group was on a path toward the kind of powerful reflective dialogue envisioned by Isaacs.
4. The three discussions stand as a striking departure from ‘normal’ discussion, in which, according to Isaacs, participants ‘hold and defend non-negotiable positions, play habitual roles, act in a polarized fashion, press for conformity and seek to avoid losing face’ (Isaacs, 1994, p. 3).

Overall, the combination of text, discussion among colleagues and the use of the protocol caused ideas to happen that would not have happened if any one of those ingredients were missing. The persistent referencing of text and comments by fellow participants evident in all three discussions, promoted by the protocol, created, for many participants, new meanings woven from many threads.

As reflective dialogue becomes more prevalent as a strategy for professional learning among educators, it becomes increasingly important for the practitioner and research communities to gain greater understanding of its effectiveness as a learning tool. The results of this study suggest that the Text-based Seminar is a promising tool for the efficient promotion of professional learning. As professional learning developers and providers construct new protocols, they will do well to consider the elements of the Text-based Seminar that promote evidence-based discussion and careful listening. As researchers continue to study reflective dialogue, focus on the structure and dynamics of dialogic protocols merits further investigation.

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## **Appendix 1. Text-based seminar**

### **Guidelines**

#### **Purpose**

Enlargement of understanding of a text, not the achievement of some particular understanding.

#### **Ground rules**

1. Listen actively.
2. Build on what others say.
3. Don't step on others' talk. Silences and pauses are OK.
4. Let the conversation flow as much as possible without raising hands or using a speaker's list.
5. Make the assumptions underlying your comments explicit to others.
6. Emphasize clarification, amplification, and implications of ideas.
7. Watch your own air time – both in terms of how often you speak, and in terms of how much you say when you speak.
8. Refer to the text; challenge others to go to the text.

#### **Notes to facilitators**

Text-Based Seminars can be remarkably engaging and productive for both students and adults. A Text-Based Seminar facilitator has two primary tasks: posing the framing question and keeping the group focused without pushing any particular agenda.

Facilitating a seminar is not terribly difficult, but it can be challenging. A few tips might make the job easier:

1. Invest time in creating the framing question. It needs to be substantive, clear, relevant to the participants' experience, and likely to push their thinking in new directions. Above all, constructing a response to the question should require close reading of the text. We recommend that the framing question be genuine for everyone, including the facilitator, so that the entire group is engaged in the inquiry. Framing questions are often based on a quote from the text, which begins to establish a pattern of using the document as a basis for the conversation.
2. In addition to the framing question, create a few follow-up questions that seem to raise the level of participants' thinking. If the groups takes off, you may never use them (or you may create new ones that come from the conversation itself), but it's a good idea to have something in your hip pocket, especially if you aren't very experienced at this kind of facilitation.

3. Unless the entire group does Text-Based Seminars routinely, it is useful to go over the purposes and ground rules before you begin. Because so many conversations (in school and out) are based more on opinion than evidence, and aim toward winning the argument rather than constructing new knowledge, it is often important to remind the group of the basics: **work from the text** and **strive to enlarge your understanding**.
4. Give the group time (about 15 minutes) to re-read the text with the framing question in mind.
5. The most common facilitation problems in this kind of seminar come from two kinds of participants: the folks who have to win, and those who want to express opinions independent of the text and will use any quote they can find as a springboard. Usually, a reminder of the ground rules will pull them back, although it is sometimes necessary to redirect the conversation if you are dealing with a particularly insistent ‘winner’. With the ‘winner’, asking the group to examine closely the assumptions underneath the arguments or opinions being presented sometimes helps. When someone doesn’t stick to the text, it is often helpful to ask the group to look for evidence of the opinion being expressed in the text. What you **don’t** want to do is ask these two types of participants a direct question, or ask them to cite the evidence in the text for their opinions (although you might be tempted to do so). The goal is to redirect the conversation away from these folks, not to get them to talk more!
6. It is sometimes useful to keep running notes of the conversation, and to periodically summarize for the group what has been said.
7. It is also sometimes useful (especially if you are nervous) to have a ‘plant’ among the participants – someone who will model ideal participant behavior at an early point in the seminar.
8. It is sometimes useful to keep running notes of the conversation, and to periodically summarize for the group what has been said.
9. As is always the case when facilitating, try to keep the conversation balanced. Don’t let one or two people dominate. If there are many quiet people, asking them to speak in pairs for a few minutes on a particular point can sometimes give them an entry into the conversation when you come back to the large group. Sometimes you just have to say, ‘let’s have someone who hasn’t said much yet speak’, and then use **lots** of wait time, even though it may feel somewhat uncomfortable to do so.

## **Appendix 2. Participant questionnaire**

### **Questionnaire**

*[Name of university] and [Name of school district] Public Schools Research Study: Outcomes of Action Research in an Urban School District/ Public University Partnership*

*Please do NOT write your name on this questionnaire.*

This questionnaire is intended for you to record relevant thoughts during the collaborative review of data collected from the Interviews with High School Principals (Data Summary). Please do NOT write your name on the questionnaire. At several points during the collaborative review, you will be invited to record your thoughts below. When the collaborative review is completed, the questionnaire will be collected.

1. As you read the data summary, identify two passages that strike you as particularly meaningful or significant for your ongoing professional practice. In the spaces below, briefly quote each passage (identifying the page number on which it appears), and in just a few sentences explain why you find the passage meaningful or significant
  - a. First passage
    - i. Brief quote with page number:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
    - ii. A few sentences explaining why you find this passage meaningful or significant
  
  - b. Second passage
    - i. Brief quote with page number:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
    - ii. A few sentences explaining why you find this passage meaningful or significant
  
2. After discussing the Data Summary with others, please indicate in the spaces below two additional insights or questions raised by the discussion that are relevant to your ongoing professional practice.



**Appendix 3. Characterization of questionnaire responses**

Questionnaire	Comment
DLA	Item 3 is a synthesis of questions framed in 1, then informed by discussion evidenced in 2.
DLB	Item 3 is a synthesis of questions framed in 1, then informed by discussion evidenced in 2.
DLC	2 and 3 are identified as affirmations of 1. No evidence of deeper understanding is apparent.
DLD	Topics of interest shift dramatically between 1 (empowering students to make a difference) and 2/3 (student achievement)
DLE	Modest shift in focus between 1 and 2/3. No evidence of deeper understanding is apparent.
DLF	Incomplete
DLG	Response to 2 suggests discussion clarified a problem identified in 1, for which an action item is identified in 3
DLH	Anxiety over a topic signaled in 1 is confirmed and heightened by the discussion as evidenced in 2.
DLI	Dramatic shift in topics from 1 to 2. Response to 3 returns to topics in 1.
DLJ	2a suggests discussion revealed a roadblock to excitement about leadership expressed in 1. 2b speculates about source of problem. 3 is blank.
DLK	Concern raised in 1 is clarified and confirmed in 2 with an action step outlined in 3.
DLL	Significant shift in topic from 1 to 2. 3 returns to topic 1
DLM	Topic identified in 1 is developed through discussion as evidenced in 2, with related action step identified in 3.
EDUA	Ideas raised in 1 are deepened and clarified through discussion in 2 with follow-up action identified and problematized in 3.
EDUB	Insights identified in 2 build on issues raised in 1 and illuminate actions suggested in 3.
EDUC	Problem raised in 1 gets insight in 2 and connects to practice in 3
EDUD	Moderate shift in topic from 1 to 2 is somewhat synthesized in 3
EDUE	Understanding of problem identified in 1 is deepened and affirmed in 2, leading to action in 3.
EDUF	Topics identified in 1 are clarified in 2 with related action identified in 3
Prin A	Topics identified in 1 are somewhat affirmed in 2 with partial synthesis in three. Evidence of deeper understanding is not strong
PrinB	Challenge identified in 1 is affirmed and deepened in 2 leading to synthesis in 3.
PrinC	2 affirms issues raise in 1. 3 restates 2 with some action orientation.
PrinD	Topics in 2 problematize topics identified in 1, creating anxiety. 3 frames anxiety as a dilemma.
PrinE	Understanding of problems identified in 1 is deepened and grows more complex in 2 with complex action identified in 3.
PrinF	Items in 1 and 2 somewhat disconnected. 3 appears as a shallow gesture toward synthesis.
PrinG	Challenges identified in 1 gain clarity in 2 with synthesis and action in 3
PrinH	Ideas stated in 1 affirmed in 2 with generalized action in 3. Not much detail or complexity.

**Appendix 4. Frequency of participation and frequency of text/participant references**

Table A. Principal Discussion

Frequency of participation by	
Participant A	2
Participant B	4
Participant C	2
Participant D	3
Participant E	3
Participant F	1
Participant G	2
Participant H	1
Comments referencing text	14*
Comments referencing other participants	9*
Comments w/out ref. to text or other partic.	3
Total comments	20

\*Some comments referenced both text and other participants.

Table B. District Leadership Discussion

Frequency of participation by	
Participant A	4
Participant B	1
Participant C	1
Participant D	2
Participant E	6
Participant F	1
Participant G	2
Participant H	1
Participant I	1
Participant J	1
Participant K	1
Participant L	2
Participant M	0
Comments referencing text	8*
Comments referencing other participants	13*
Comments w/out ref. to text or other partic.	8
Total comments	23

\*Some comments referenced both text and other participants.

Table C. School of Education Instructor Discussion

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 Frequency of participation by
 

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Participant A	5
Participant B	3
Participant C	3
Participant D	3
Participant E	4
Participant F	2
Comments referencing text	5*
Comments referencing other participants	8*
Comments w/out ref. to text or other partic.	7
Total comments	20

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\*Some comments referenced both text and other participants.