Clarifying and Probing Questions Protocol for PLCs

This protocol can be used to support the giving and receiving of constructive feedback in Professional Learning Communities.

The following process has proved highly effective in Professional Learning Communities.

**Step 1**  Teacher A has an allocated amount of uninterrupted time to share how his/her commitment to action has been going and identifies both the successes and the challenges that were encountered. While this is happening, the role of the other PLC members is to listen carefully and record any notes that may be helpful when it comes to developing their clarifying or probing questions.

**Step 2**  Once teacher A has finished sharing, there is an opportunity for all other members to ask a maximum of two clarifying questions each. The purpose of this is to support members to gain greater clarity of the context which will then help them to develop an effective probing question.

**Step 3**  All other PLC members then take a few minutes to develop and record (on a separate piece of paper or sticky note) one probing question to ask Teacher A.

**Step 4**  Each member then takes a turn to ask his/her probing question to Teacher A and then hands them over the piece of paper with the question recorded on it. While this is happening, Teacher A just listens.

**Step 5**  Teacher A now has each member’s probing question in front of them and chooses ONE ONLY to respond to. While Teacher A is responding, other members are just listening. Although it may be tempting to turn it into a conversation, all members must refrain from interrupting with opinions, personal stories or advice.

**Step 6**  The same process is then repeated for each PLC member. The advantage of having a record of each probing question is that individuals can take them away for further consideration at a later date.
Clarifying and Probing Questions Explained

The distinction between clarifying questions and probing questions is very difficult for most people working with protocols. So is the distinction between probing questions and recommendations for action.

The basic distinctions are:

- **Clarifying Questions** are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that the participants can ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol.
- **Clarifying questions** are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter’s dilemma. They have brief, factual answers, and don’t provide any new “food for thought” for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the presenter have to think before s/he answers? If so, it’s almost certainly a probing question, not a clarifying question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:

- How much time does the project take?
- How were the students grouped?
- What resources did the students have available for this project?

**Probing questions:**

Probing Questions are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a probing question doesn’t have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself saying “Don’t you think you should …?” you’ve gone beyond probing questions. The presenter often doesn’t have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

Since probing questions are the hardest to create productively, we offer the following suggestions:

- Check to see if you have a “right” answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don’t ask it.
- Refer to the presenter’s original question/focus point. What did s/he ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
- Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter’s agenda.
- Sometimes a simple “why...?” asked as an advocate for the presenter’s success can be very effective, as can several why questions asked in a row.
- Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don’t avoid risk, but don’t push the presenter into the “danger zone.”

In summary, good probing questions:

- Are general and widely useful
- Don’t place blame on anyone
- Allow for multiple responses
- Help create a paradigm shift
- Empower the person with the dilemma to solve his or her own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Avoid yes/no responses
- Are usually brief
- Elicit a slow response
- Move thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourage taking another party’s perspective
Some final hints for crafting **probing questions**.

Try the following questions and/or question stems:

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you feel is right in your heart?
- What’s another way you might...?
- What would it look like if...?
- What do you think would happen if...?
- How was...different from...?
- What sort of an impact do you think...?
- What criteria did you use to...?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before? What might you see happening in your classroom if...? How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- What was your intention when ....?
- What do you assume to be true about ....?
- What is the connection between...and...?
- What if the opposite were true? Then what?
- How might your assumptions about...have influenced how you are thinking about...?
- Why is this such a dilemma for you?

Some examples of **Probing Questions**:

- Why is a “stand-and-deliver” format the best way to introduce this concept?
- How do you think your own comfort with the material has influenced your choice of instructional strategies? What do the students think is quality work?
- You have observed that this student’s work lacks focus – what makes you say that?
- What would the students involved say about this issue?
- How have your perspectives on current events influenced how you have structured this activity?
- Why aren’t the science teachers involved in planning this unit?
- Why do you think the team hasn’t moved to interdisciplinary curriculum planning?
- What would understanding of this mathematical concept look like?
- Why did allowing students to create their own study questions cause a problem for you?
- Why do you think the expected outcomes of this unit weren’t communicated to parents?
- What was your intention when you assigned students to oversee the group activity in this assignment?
- What evidence do you have from this student’s work that her ability to reach substantiated conclusions has improved?
- How might your assumptions about the reasons why parents aren’t involved have influenced what you have tried so far?
- How do you think your expectations for students might have influenced their work on this project?
- What do you think would happen if you restated your professional goals as questions?
- What other approaches have you considered for communicating with parents about their children’s progress?