Thoughts About Learning from Student Work

The guidelines (summarized below) help participants to stay focused on the evidence before them and listen to multiple perspectives, rather than getting bogged down in assumptions.

When looking for evidence of students thinking
- Stay focused on the evidence that is present in the work.
- Look openly and broadly; don't let your expectations cloud your vision.
- Look for patterns in the evidence that provide clues to how and what the student was thinking.

When listening to colleagues' thinking
- Listen without judging.
- Tune in to differences in perspective.
- Use controversy as an opportunity to explore and understand each other's perspectives.
- Focus on understanding where different interpretations come from.
- Make your own thinking clear to others.
- Be patient and persistent.

When reflecting on your own thinking
- Ask yourself, "Why do I see this student work in this way? What does this tell me about what is important to me?"
- Look for patterns in your own thinking.
- Tune in to the questions that the student work and your colleagues' comments raise for you.
- Compare what you see and what you think about the student work with what you do in the classroom.

When you reflect on the process of looking at student work
- What did you see in this student's work that was interesting or surprising?
- What did you learn about how this student thinks and learns?
- What about the process helped you see and learn these things?
- What did you learn from listening to colleagues that was interesting/surprising?
- What new perspectives did your colleagues provide?
- How can you make use   of your colleagues' perspectives?
- What questions about teaching and assessment did looking at this student's work raise for you?
- How can you pursue these questions further?
- Are there things you would like to try in your classroom as a result of looking at the student's work?

Developed in the field by educators affiliated with NSRF.

Principles of Looking at Student Work
- Students' work in schools is serious
- Students' work is key data about the life of the school
- Students' work must be connected to serious changes in curriculum, instruction and professional development

General Guidelines for Participants
When looking at student work in order to learn from it, having a shared set of guidelines helps everybody participate in a manner that is respectful as well as conducive to effective feedback. Below is one set of guidelines. The group should go over the guidelines and the schedule before starting the protocol. The facilitator should remind participants of the guidelines and the schedule when needed at any time during the process.

1. Be respectful of the presenter, and of the student and his or her work. By making their work more public, educators are exposing themselves to kinds of critiques they may not be used to receiving. If inappropriate comments or questions are posed, the facilitator should make sure they are blocked or withdrawn.

2. Contribute to substantive conversation. Resist blanket praise or silence. Without thoughtful descriptions, questions, and comments, the presenter will not benefit from using the protocol to understand the student, the student work, or his/her own practice. Be specific when giving feedback or making comments.

3. Keep the conversation constructive. There is a productive middle ground somewhere between feedback that only affirms and feedback that does damage. It is the facilitator's job to make sure that a healthy balance is maintained. At the end of the session, the presenter should be able to revise the work productively on the basis of what was said.

4. Be appreciative of the facilitator's role, particularly in regards to following the guidelines and keeping time. A complete protocol is sometimes run on a tight schedule. A protocol that doesn't allow for all of the steps to be enacted properly will do a disservice to the presenter and to the participants.

5. Try to keep your comments succinct, and monitor your own air time.

6. Maintain confidentiality.

7. Don't skip the debrief at the end.

General Guidelines for Facilitators
1. Be assertive about keeping time.

2. Be an advocate for the presenter.

3. Encourage substantive conversation.

4. As a Facilitator, decide whether you will also participate, and make the nature of your participation clear to the group. Many facilitators participate in the actual process of giving feedback only if the group is small (fewer than four people, including the presenter).