



Consultancy Protocol

Framing Consultancy Dilemmas

Developed by Faith Dunne, Paula Evans, and Gene Thompson-Grove as part of their work at the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Purpose

The structure of the Consultancy helps presenters think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma. The Consultancy protocol has 2 main purposes – to develop participants' capacity to see and describe the dilemmas that are the essential material of their work, and to help each other understand and deal with them.

Framing Consultancy Dilemmas and Consultancy Questions

A dilemma is a puzzle: an issue that raises questions, an idea that seems to have conceptual gaps, or something about process or product that you just can't figure out. All dilemmas have some sort of identifiable tension in them. Sometimes the dilemma will include samples of student or adult work that illustrate it, but often the dilemma crosses over many parts of the educational process.

1. Think About Your Dilemma

Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling or that you are unsure about. Some questions for helping you select a dilemma might include:

- Is it something that is bothering you enough that your thoughts regularly return to it
- Is it something that is not already on its way to being resolved?
- Is it something that does not depend on getting other people to change - in other words, can you affect the dilemma by changing your practice?
- Is it something that is important to you, and is it something you are willing to work on?

2. Do Some Reflective Writing About Your Dilemma

Some questions that might help are:

- Why is this a dilemma for you? Why is this dilemma important to you?
- What (or where) is the tension in your dilemma?
- If you could take a snapshot of this dilemma, what would you/we see?
- What have you done already to try to remedy or manage the dilemma?
- What have been the results of those attempts?
- Who needs to change? Who needs to take action to resolve this dilemma? If your answer is not you, you need to change your focus. You will want to present a dilemma that is about your practice, actions, behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions, and not someone else's.
- What do you assume to be true about this dilemma, and how have these assumptions influenced your thinking about the dilemma?
- What is your focus question? A focus question summarizes your dilemma and helps focus the feedback.

3. Frame a Focus Question for Your Consultancy Group

- Try to pose a question around the dilemma that seems to you to get to the heart of the matter.
- Remember that the question you pose will guide the Consultancy group in their discussion of the dilemma.

4. Critique Your Focus Question

- Is this question important to my practice?
- Is this question important to student learning?
- Is this question important to others in my profession?

Some Generic Examples of Dilemmas — with framing questions

- My teaching team seems to love the idea of involving students in meaningful learning that connects students to real issues and an audience beyond school, but nothing seems to be happening in reality.
Question: What can I do to capitalize on my team's interest, so we can translate theory into practice?
- No matter how hard I try to be inclusive and ask for everyone's ideas, about half of the people don't want to do anything new — they think things were just fine before.
Question: How do I work with the people who don't want to change without alienating them?
- I am completely committed to the value of play for children's learning in my early childhood classroom, but am often feel pressured to spend more and more time on academic work.
Question: How do I incorporate play into my 1st grade classroom, while keeping the demands of the academic curriculum in mind?

Preparing to Present using the Consultancy Protocol

Come to the session with a description of a dilemma related to your practice. Write your dilemma with as much contextual description as you feel you need for understanding. One page is generally sufficient; even a half page is often enough. If you prefer not to write it out, you can make notes for yourself and do an oral presentation, but please do some preparation ahead of time.

End your description with a specific question. Frame your question thoughtfully. What do you REALLY want to know? What is your real dilemma? Name the tension(s) in the framing question. This question will help your Consultancy group focus its feedback. Questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" generally provide less feedback for the person with the dilemma, so avoid those kinds of questions.

Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling — something that is problematic or has not been as effective as you would like it to be — anything related to your work. Consultancies give presenters an opportunity to tap the expertise in a group, and if past experiences offer any indication, you will be able to rely on the people in your Consultancy group to provide respectful, thoughtful, experienced-based responses to your dilemma.

A couple of caveats — we have found that Consultancies don't go well when people bring dilemmas that they are well on the way to figuring out themselves, or when they bring a dilemma that involves only getting other people to change. To get the most out of this experience, bring something that is puzzling you about your practice. It is riskier to do, but we guarantee that you will learn more.

Note: See Consultancy Protocol to process dilemmas.



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Participant Handout

Developed by Faith Dunne, Paula Evans, and Gene Thompson-Grove as part of their work at the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Purpose

The structure of the Consultancy helps presenters expand their thinking to get new ideas to bring to a particular and concrete dilemma by tapping the knowledge and experience in a group.

Steps

1. Presenter: provide an overview of the dilemma with which you struggle. Frame a question for the group to think about. *5-7 minutes*
2. Group: ask clarifying questions that have brief, factual answers to help you better understand the context, situation, dilemma. Think about who, what, when, where, why. *2 minutes*
3. Group: ask probing questions to help presenter think in new ways, from new angles, about the dilemma. (See Pocket Guide to Probing Questions). Presenter listen and record questions. *4 minutes*
4. Presenter: choose from the list of probing questions which prompt new thoughts that you would like to think about out loud. For instance, question that lead you to say: "I never thought about it that way." Consultants: listen with no discussion. Presenter restate focus question *3-5 minutes*
5. Group discussion: Talk with each other about the dilemma presented. In this step, you might restate what you heard is the dilemma, the problem. Direct your talk to each other, not the presenter. *7-10 minutes*
Presenter: listen. You may even move your chair to the side so you are not part of the discussion by mistake yet can still hear everything.
The group works to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. Take notes on thoughts you want to remember and/or reflect on with group.

Time

Approximately 50 minutes

Materials

Something write notes with and on Artifacts presenter wants to share if applicable

Roles

Presenter of dilemma
Facilitator ensures that group stays focused on analyzing dilemma
Group of Consultants

Possible questions to frame the discussion:

- What did we hear?
- What didn't we hear that might be relevant?
- What assumptions seem to be operating?
- What questions does the dilemma raise for us?
- What do we think about the dilemma?
- What might we do or try if faced with a similar dilemma? What have we done in similar situations?

After you have understood and analyzed the dilemma, you can write suggestions on a note card to give the presenter.

6. Presenter: share reflections and new thoughts with group.

Group listen. No discussion. *3-5 minutes*

Debrief

Presenter: How did this process work for you? What was challenging?

Group: reflect on process and new learning. *5 minutes*



Pocket Guide to Probing Questions

Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove (adapted from Thompson-Grove and Edorah Frazer).

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that 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 she/he answers? If so, it's almost certainly a probing 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 (or POWERFUL, OPEN) 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 asking "Don't you think you should ...?" or "What would happen if ...?" you've gone beyond a probing question to giving advice. The presenter often doesn't have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

A good probing question:

- Allows for multiple responses
- Avoids yes/no responses
- Empowers the person being asked the question to solve the problem or manage the dilemma (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Stimulates reflective thinking by moving thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourages perspective taking
- Challenges assumptions
- Channels inquiry
- Promises insight
- Touches a deeper meaning
- Creates a paradigm shift
- Evokes more questions
- Is concise
- Prompts slow response

Since effective probing questions can be difficult to frame, 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 she/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.
- Try using verbs: What do you fear? Want? Get? Assume? Expect?
- 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.”
- Think of probing questions as being on a continuum, from “recommendation” to “most effective probing question” as a way to distinguish between suggestions, advice giving, and probing questions. Consider these questions from a Consultancy, during which a teacher presented a dilemma about increasing students’ commitment to quality work:
 - Could you have the students use a rubric to assess their work? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
 - What would happen if students assessed the quality of their work themselves? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
 - Why should students be invested in doing quality work? (probing question)
 - What would have to change for students to work more for themselves and less for you? (more effective probing question)

Possible probing question stems:

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you feel is right?
- What’s another way you might...?
- How is...different from...?
- What sort of an impact do you think...?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before? What does this remind you of?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- What is your hunch about...?
- 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...?
- What surprises you about...? Why are you surprised?
- What is the best thing that could happen?
- What are you most afraid will happen?
- What do you need to ask to better understand?
- How do you feel when...? What might this tell you about...?
- What is the one thing you won’t compromise?
- What criteria do you use...?
- Do you think the problem is X, Y, or something else?
- What evidence exists....?
- If you were X, how would you see this situation?
- If time, money were not an issue...?