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Book review: Going Online with Protocols: New Tools for Teaching and Learning

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'Going Online with Protocols: New Tools for Teaching and Learning' by Joseph P. McDonald, Janet Mannheimer Zydney, Alan Dichter and Elizabeth C. McDonald
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Review

As I read this book, I found myself questioning whether I was genuinely keen to start 'going online with protocols', as the title of this book advises, or if I was simply excited that there was a real name for what I had been previously referring to as 'online group activities'. On reflection, I believe it was both of these reasons that persuaded me to read this book with a great deal of personal interest. Joseph McDonald, Janet Mannheimer Zydney, Alan Dichter and Elizabeth McDonald, authors of *Going Online with Protocols*, claim 'this book is about new tools for teaching and learning in the 21st century' (p.1). Regardless of whether this book is actually about 'new tools' or whether it is about existing tools that have been rehashed as teaching strategies, it is written with enough salesmanship to convince any teacher to give these ideas a try - including me.

The authors define 'protocols' (for the purposes of this book) as "prearranged constraints designed to sharpen communication, enhance collective thinking, and build knowledge" (p.2). The book explains that there are various rationales behind each protocol. Examples of these reasons include: giving everyone a voice, eliciting constructive critique, breaking the ice, gaining an expert's perspective, encouraging creativity and reflection. The Tuning Protocol, for instance, gives a presenter 10 minutes to present an idea to the group. Then, the rest of the group gets 10 minutes to 'tune' the proposal by offering 'warm' and 'cool' feedback (strengths and weaknesses of the idea). The facilitator ensures that the warm and cool comments are balanced. Finally, the original presenter gets an opportunity to reflect on the comments and to share their thoughts with the group.

Although the protocols discussed in this book share common features of the protocols long associated with science, medicine, and diplomacy (p.2) this book's *use* of protocols, is rooted in organisational theory. In an effort to create more

effective communities of practice, organisations have looked to protocols to share knowledge, encourage quality and foster continuous improvement. The definition of protocol used by the authors stems from American school reforms in the early 1990s. American schools started using protocols as part of a restructuring movement that worked to create schools that were 'more student-centred, more intellectually ambitious and team based' (p.16). Protocols, it was thought, could combat complacent, boring teaching strategies by helping teachers reflect on, collaborate on and develop their own signature pedagogies. More recently, protocols have migrated from being used in teacher training to being used in student learning - at least in the United States. Those teachers who have experienced the use of protocols in their own professional development and now use protocols in their own teaching practice are referred to as 'protocol teachers'.

This book is very accessible. It is short and well organised. Chapter 1 offers an introduction to protocols and gives a clear rationale for this book. Chapter 2 provides a backdrop to protocol-based teaching and learning. Chapter 3 addresses online teaching and learning, citing the challenges and benefits of going online. Chapters 4 through 7 outline 21 different protocols (including variations of each) to use in online teaching. The authors begin with protocols for getting to know one another (Chapter 4). Then, protocols for engaging in problem solving and collaboration are outlined (Chapter 5). Protocols for reviewing and consolidating learning are presented (Chapter 6). Finally, new ideas for protocols solicited from the authors' 'protocol-savvy friends' are posited for development and reflection (Chapter 7).

Set against a backdrop of the rapidly growing field of online education, *Going Online with Protocols* invites two 'types of adventurers' to convene: 1) those who consider themselves to be protocol teachers and 2) those who are online teachers. At first, this invitation seemed slightly ambiguous. It was clear that the authors intended for this book to offer ideas to both sets of 'adventurers'. It was also clear that the book intended to help online teachers incorporate protocols into their existing pedagogies. However, it was less clear what else - other than some extra protocol ideas - protocol teachers were supposed to gain from the book. Two ideas were mentioned later in the text that made this clearer. First, one of the authors - Janet Mannheimer Zydney, who is also an experienced protocol teacher - was asked to start delivering one of her courses online. Her story is included in the book as an example of what it means to 'go online with protocols'. Second, the book describes Web 2.0 learning environments, where digital technologies are a standard feature of teaching and learning. The popularity of digital classrooms may offer more opportunities for protocol teachers to extend their pedagogies into virtual learning contexts. So, in each of these ways, it appears there are benefits for protocol teachers to accept the authors' invitation to 'jump into the future' (p. 98).

Truly, this book stirred the innovative and adventurous waters of my own pedagogy (online, face-to-face, blended and otherwise). However, it also aroused my own critical reflection around some of the authors' claims. It is understandable that this book is USA-centric. The authors are American; their work is done within an American context; the pedagogy they are touting is rooted in American Industry. As an online teacher working in a British learning environment, I found myself wondering whether our geographical differences would translate into virtual differences in adopting protocol strategies for use with my own students. This led me to consider how exactly these authors defined online education and what assumptions they had made of online learners and teachers. While I accept that online learning can be done as the main mode of learning (as was the case with Sarah Stern, pp.29-32) and as part of 'blended settings' (see p.5), my experience of teaching and learning in online spaces is somewhat different from the picture that these authors paint.

First, my experience of online teaching and learning is not as bland and 'do-it-yourself' as the example these authors put forward as typical online teaching (i.e. Kamenetz, 2010). Yes, I am aware that there are teachers who see virtual learning environments simply as a place to post PowerPoint slides and other downloadable resources. But, I am also aware of far more teachers who actually 'teach' online through a variety of rich, collaborative strategies. Second, my experience of online teaching and learning has not introduced me to a student who does exactly what I tell them to do and who participates in every activity and who tunes into the asynchronous classroom at just the right times to engage in a structured activity. (Wouldn't that be nice, even if a tad boring?!) It seems that a protocol approach to online teaching rests on the assumption that such a student exists. Third, in my experience, some students perceive online activities within a blended learning environment as an optional resource. I have a hunch (much like Sarah Stern's realisation) online education is a convenient alternative to campus-based tuition for many students. This means to me that online students may have other commitments that they need to manage alongside their learning. Therefore, benefits of going online with protocols (as noted in this book), such as harnessing the power of diverse groups, forcing participation, making and reading of texts and realising multiple modes of participation - while very exciting to consider - are not feasible outcomes for many online teachers. In my experience, it is quite an achievement to have even half of my students tuning in and participating in the online activities. I suspect many other online teachers would agree. This is not an excuse for not using protocols. Rather it is a reality of offering convenient learning options to students and a factor that might help shape the development of certain protocols (e.g. having a back-up plan if only a couple of students participate).

The authors made further claims that prompted closer consideration. The first of these was a suggestion that using protocols saved time (for the teacher). However, the example given to show how a protocol could save time, seemed to be as equally, if not more, time intensive than not using a protocol at all. Janet, one of the authors, uses a protocol called 'Save the Last Word for Me' (c.f. p.35). This requires Janet to post directions asking half of the students to post a quote from the text that they do not quite understand. Mid-week, she asks all of the students in the group to comment on at least one quote, explaining what they think it means. Then, on the last day of the week, the original group is asked to disclose what they have learned from reading the quotes and to say what they had originally found intriguing about the quotes. What a great idea in so many ways! However, what doesn't quite add up is that this strategy follows on from a discussion about the challenges of having to be present on a nearly everyday basis for teachers who do not use protocols. I am not sure that this particular protocol is actually a solution to this challenge as Janet still had to check in at least three times per week to give directions to the group.

A final consideration that gave me cause to reflect was one of ethical responsibility. The authors claimed that using protocols will "make it safe" for students to voice their understandings of ideas and to be challenged on these understandings (p. 28). Another named benefit was that certain protocols could broker power distribution within the group. It was also claimed that protocol teaching fosters trust among the group. These notions of trust, safeguarding and mediating power seem to be pretty ambitious selling points for using protocols. Although I see - and am intrigued by - the plausibility of some of these arguments, I feel this text could be enriched with a discussion around ethical responsibility. The notion of creating a safe environment for students to inhabit is a primary goal of most teachers. However, it does carry with it a certain level of responsibility. What happens when things become unsafe? Who is ultimately responsible for managing risk? While a tight focus on the task might democratise relations within the group, it isn't a sure fire strategy for mediating dominant students or for eliciting participation from those who are not keen to contribute.

The 'benefit' that protocol teaching 'forces different kinds of participation' (p.28) implies that the teacher's power is still intact. As for the issue of trust, on the one hand protocol teaching is purported to foster trust (p.27) but on the other hand, teachers are advised to build trust at the beginning of the course to make protocol teaching easier (p. 105). This is a classic case of 'chicken and egg' which could be made a bit clearer in the text.

I enjoyed reading this book. It seems the authors were not only colleagues and collaborators, but also friends who enjoyed this journey together. I savoured the ideas and imagined how they might work as part of my own online teaching practice. I appreciated the opportunities this book provided to reflect on possible cultural differences in online education, the opportunity for protocols to act as prosthetics for teaching and the ethical implications of it all. The authors claim that this book 'was written for everyone interested in teaching' (p.1) and I would mostly agree. Unfortunately, the term 'protocol teaching' is not common in British learning and teaching contexts, or least those who I asked were not familiar with the term. However, efforts to facilitate structured online learning activities that encourage participation, collaboration, problem solving, creativity and reflection are widely acknowledged as excellent online teaching practice. In my own professional development I have experienced online activities that are similar to some of the protocols listed in the text. I would be interested to know how this particular book and the American knowledge around protocol teaching fits into a global understanding of teaching and learning.

On a final note, the authors of the book offer an invitation to their readers, not only to come together as online adventurers and to take the jump into protocol teaching, but also to use the chapters in this book as one would use a wiki: to play with, edit and share ideas with others (p. 9). Indeed, it is a fitting metaphor. Perhaps it is to be expected that I find myself wishing there was a protocol to help me do just this.