

Protasis: A technique for fostering professional development

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The term *protasis* is used to describe an epigrammatic expression which, in an appropriate context, stimulates questioning of assumptions and behaviour. By extension, the word *protasis* is applied to a disciplined technique for fostering professional development through the use of protases, and a theory is put forward of when and why protasic techniques work.

1 Definitions

Protasis is a noun meaning *premise* or *assertion*, derived from the Greek word *tasis* meaning tension. It refers specifically to the first statement of a syllogism which is usually a generality ('All men are mortal'). It is followed in a syllogism by the particular ('Socrates is a man') from which a conclusion is reached. In the context of professional development, a *protasis* is the action which takes place when an epigrammatic assertion of generality is juxtaposed with particular experiences and challenges assumptions by catching and focusing attention on a significant inner tension, with the potential of leading to self-questioning, and ultimately, to greater clarity or even change. By extension, the word is applied to a concomitant technique for exploiting protases in professional development.

The method is simple enough. A number of brief assertions are used in conversation, displayed on walls, or introduced in some way. When someone 'objects' or otherwise shows interest, they can be invited to offer specific examples which illustrate their point of view, and they can offer or be offered examples which challenge it. From this, discussion and investigation may develop.

A statement is effective as a protasis when it is epigrammatic, laconic, and provokes disagreement or amazement. It seems to demand explanation or refutation. Often it arouses opposition, which is a sign that an inner tension has been generated. Something inside objects, rebels, or is at least quizzical. To be effective, the tension needs to be sufficient to be challenging and not easily dismissed, but not so great as to be avoided.

The power of the use of protases lies in the internal tension experienced, which needs to be allowed to generate an internal action. By niggling away at the back of the mind, a protasis serves to upset standard ways of thinking, to disturb established patterns and reactions, and thus helps to open the way to change and development. As the Zen saying goes "A good explanation never explains everything" (Shigematsu 1981, number 341) and similarly, in the Sufi tradition it is said that "A solved problem is as useful to the mind as a broken sword on the battlefield" (Shah 1970 p119).

Thus it is part of the protasis technique to resist temptation to expound and explain in detail, because the whole idea is that the individual temporarily acts both as if the assertion is wrong and tries to locate counter examples, and as if the assertion has validity, and tries to locate confirmatory examples, before elucidating consequences. In either case they are working away at extracting the thorn which has somehow disturbed, penetrated or exposed their assumptions.

Any general assertion can serve as a protasis for a syllogism, so the term *protasis* can most effectively be used to refer to the action generated when the individual juxtaposes specific examples from their past experience with the generality to reach conclusions. The context in which the assertion is encountered has significant influence on how much attention is given to considering the protasis in the first place. It is the combination of context and source, the assertion itself, the experiences of the individuals, and the way of working with the effects which together constitute the protasis technique.

Clearly not every assertion has the effect of inducing questioning: a wise aphorism such as "We soon believe what we desire", or good advice such as "The end suggests the means" (Polya 1957) may make perfect sense, but usually evaporates almost immediately, precisely because it does not have a hook or barb to catch attention. Similarly, absurd assertions such as "grass is purple" can be dismissed out of hand.

And yet, in the right conditions, even such an outlandish remark as *grass is purple* might lead someone to question why it is that grass is green, and hence to enquire into the scientific basis of chlorophyll and photosynthesis. It might also lead a more philosophically minded person to enquire into how it is that they know that grass is not purple, and hence into a consideration of knowledge and epistemology. Such an assertion, and hence perhaps almost any assertion, can act as stimulus to enquiry. This example may seem farfetched at first, but it illustrates the point that protasic tension depends on the perceiver as well as on the assertion.

2 Background

The protasic technique has been used for centuries in different contexts, but its use in education makes most sense when coupled with a perspective expressed by "You can't change other people; you *can* work on changing yourself." An immediate reaction *against* an assertion such as the last one is often a sign that something of significance has been touched. A classic response to this particular protasis is to look for counterexamples, for examples in which someone has, or appears to have changed someone else. The political arena is often chosen for such purposes, but the existence of the assertion suggests questioning the appearance of change as having been caused by others. For example, it may be that while many forces acting on a person do come from outside them, the person themselves is the one who actually makes any changes.

In other words, you may be able to train other people to behave in certain ways under certain conditions, but if you want them to develop a well-spring in themselves from which behaviour stems, so that they can cope with changing conditions and contexts, then it is necessary to employ all three aspects of the human psyche: behaviour (enaction), emotion (affect), and intellect (cognition). Put more forcefully as a protasis, "Only behaviour is trainable; Only emotion is harnessable; Only awareness is educable." The third assertion in this triple comes from Gattegno (1970), but placed in the context of the other two, extends his meaning considerably. The three-fold structure corresponds to an ancient metaphor for human psyche based on the horse-drawn chariot (Rhadakrishnan 1953, Katha Upanishad I.3.3-5). The chariot is the body, seat of trainable behaviour through tinkering with structure; the horse is the emotional force, harnessable but not always easy to control; and the driver is awareness, educable but impotent without connections to the other two. The driver is linked to the horse by reins, and the horse to the chariot by shafts, each of which have interpretations in the structure of human psyche. The terms cognitive, affective and enactive are modern psychological terms for more or less the same structure.

Notice that the preceding paragraph plays a double role. It expands a little upon a perspective which contributes to the effective use of protases, but it also offers an opportunity to consider the conjecture that sometimes elucidation has a deadening (*it's all worked out*) effect, while in other circumstances a little elucidation can intrigue, providing a starting point for further work.

If you can't change others, what can you do? You *can* foster and sustain conditions which make change, or development, possible and desirable. You *can* offer situations and challenges which will bring people up against awkwardnesses and inconsistencies in their own thinking; you *can* establish an atmosphere which fosters self-questioning and exploration of deeply held beliefs. Protasic techniques are a good way of doing this.

It is extremely tempting to try to tell people things, to try to design courses to support professional development in which experts come and tell what they know, or in which people are cajoled into reading what others have written and perhaps then writing

summaries of what they have read. These vestiges of Victorian authoritarianism are still to be found in many institutions, because habits die hard, or put more protasically, "Force of habit is a force of habit." Despite Swifts' observation (1726), summed up as "Man is not a rational animal, but an animal capable of reason" we carry on trying to inflict words on people in an attempt to change their behaviour and their thinking. This paper is a case in point. It is incredibly easy in this text-processing age to be drawn into contributing to the ocean of print. The protasic approach is quite the antithesis of more and more words. It depends on a very few words which cut through peoples' defences and start them thinking. Examples have already appeared, and probably make the point most clearly, since if you reflect back on what has been said so far, it is almost certainly the case that the protases are what stand out and are remembered. The purpose of this article is to outline and develop various aspects of a disciplined use of protases.

3 Protasic Techniques

A Conjecturing Atmosphere:

It is crucial to the protasic technique that people receive useful support from colleagues. This is essential for several reasons. First, it is very easy to get wrapped up in a world of your own, and to be blissfully unaware of habitual forms of thought and interpretations. Second, colleagues can be tremendously useful as sounding boards. Third, human beings seem to have a natural propensity for seeking resonance from other humans. We all like to feel that we are making sense, not just to ourselves, but to others as well. A conjecturing atmosphere is established when people are ready and eager to try out ideas when they are unsure, and to listen and question ideas of others, not with the object of proving them wrong, but simply of trying to clarify what they mean. The natural propensity to seek confirmation in others is exploited later in the protasic approach to validation and epistemology.

Explanation and Elucidation

A succinct assertion or premise is just words. In order to make sense of a protasis, it is necessary to locate meaning, not just in individual words, but in their juxtaposition as well. Dictionaries are usually of little use, because the whole point of a protasis is to challenge accepted meanings. By being interpreted in different ways, or placed in different contexts, the words can release different insights. A protasis which admits several different meanings, often at different levels of outer and inner experience, is more likely to have a prolonged and invigorating life than is an unambiguous or clever assertion whose challenge quickly wears off. It is often tempting, especially in the face of a remark such as 'that statement means absolutely nothing to me', to break into explanation. It has been found much more effective however to build up a collective meaning in a group by working on a protasis in the following way.

First, savour the assertion

Let the words roll around in the mind, attracting, as they almost certainly will, various associations and memories of past events. Some will appear to offer counter-examples, and others will appear to be supportive. It is often illuminating to observe your own propensity (to seek counter-examples or to seek confirmations), and then to try to change that tendency by seeking the other. Of course, neither counter-examples nor confirmations are enough in themselves, since the scope of validity of an assertion depends on context and personal meaning (confirmations), bounded by counter-examples.

Second, seek connections, not explanations

After a period of contemplative seeking of connections and associations lasting as briefly as a few seconds or as long as several weeks, participants offer brief-but-vivid accounts of particular events which illustrate for them some aspect of the assertion. The essence of a brief-but-vivid account of some event or situation is that everyone recognises it - not in

specific detail, but in form. Most human experience is universal. Even if we have not been in the same specific situation, there are usually elements which can be recognised. If this were not so, then stand-up comedians and popular psychology tracts would have only a limited circulation. In fact they translate well across cultures. It does take some discipline to learn to describe succinctly, without excessive embroidery, typical events which others also recognise, and to avoid theorising, deducing and explaining. The less these energy sapping behaviours are employed, the better.

Before you try to account *for* something, first agree an account *of* it. It is all too easy and attractive to launch into generalities and explanations before agreeing on the details, but if you are trying to *account for* something, it is important that there is agreement first on the phenomenon being accounted for. So start with brief-but-vivid *accounts of* incidents. Although others may appear to resonate with your generalisations, there will be much more likelihood of resonance and communication if you first share specific vivid details of typical events and situations. Generality emerges most profitably through widespread resonance with other peoples' experience rather than through the uttering of abstracted explanations.

Third, negotiate examplehood and interpretations

As various people contribute brief-but-vivid accounts of situations which are resonated in them by some assertion, it usually turns out that there is a wide variety of interpretation. It is then up to the group to negotiate whether a brief-but-vivid account constitutes an example of some aspect of the protasis or not. Negotiating usually takes the form of recognising in an account-of some aspect which helps to elucidate the protasis, or deciding that the particular account-of is not sufficiently illustrative to be helpful. Some accounts may be rejected, others may be sought in order to add substance to aspects of the protasis not yet illustrated or illuminated. This of course takes time.

Fourthly, maintain a questioning stance

As brief-but-vivid accounts-of are accumulated, the protasis begins to take on richer meaning. There is then a danger (any technique which has potential must have a corresponding danger) that the effect of the protasis will be reduced, even eliminated. An essential part of the discipline is a frequent return to the original assertion, to seek alternative interpretations and meanings. A protasis is effective to the extent to which someone finds themselves feeling appropriately uncomfortable and stimulatingly challenged. An easy resolution may equally well be a defensive response to a deep-seated tension, or an indication that there is nothing of import. The effectiveness of a protasis resides partly in the assertion, partly in the person, and partly in the context in which it is encountered.

Don't look for instant results

A successful protasis works over a long period of time. It usually happens that as time goes on, your perception of meaning changes and develops, becomes richer and more complex, and thereby opens up new aspects for detailed attention. Thus, it is not to be expected that a single meeting will move from first encounter to elucidation. Rather, the technique of sharing and discussing accounts of relevant situations is in order to establish a reasonably harmonious basis of meaning. As further observations are made, the same technique of presenting brief-but-vivid accounts will help colleagues to modify and enrich their meanings of the assertion.

4 Psychological Aspects

Slogans

A slogan, such as appears in advertising, appears to say a lot, but on inspection, actually says very little. Their essential aim is to cue the audience at some time in the future (when making a purchase or voting, for example). They are limiting and enthralling (in both senses). By contrast, a protasis initially may appear to say little, but on inspection is

found to say a great deal, once an action takes place internally. It has the potential to inform not just a single act in the future, but future practice.

Protases can easily become slogans if they are bandied about without reference to or contact with the experiences to which they are linked, but then any words can become superficial jargon if divorced from experience.

Metaphors

There are several common metaphors to describe the working of the protasic technique, with some if not complete accuracy. Since language is based on metaphors which help us to form abstract ideas based on our experience of nature, it is useful to explore explicit metaphors which help to describe the protasic technique.

The grit of sand which certain oysters turn into pearls suggests thinking of a protasis as something which disrupts a smooth flow and which requires working on, or around, in order to return to equilibrium. Often the result of such work is a pearl of great price, in the form of a revised or modified belief structure and corresponding practice. It may also simply amount to a wrinkle, but this too represents growth through adaptation. One result of adopting the perspective on change suggested in section 2 is that there is no certainty that a particular person will elect to develop and grow along predetermined lines. Accommodation of grit may take a variety of outward forms and shapes.

Grit is a form of disturbance, and any metaphor of disruptions or turbulence could be applied to the protasic technique. Images such as a stream diverted by a rock, a sailboat functioning because of the turbulence it sets up in the wind, or the profusion of activity at the boundary of fields and forests, of water and land, can be used as texts for reading aspects of the effect and nature of protasis. It is at the edges, where Vygotsky's zone of proximal development lies, that change and development, creativity and experiment, are to be found.

The garden metaphor for teaching sees teachers planting ideas as seeds in pupils' minds, and nurturing their growth. The same could be applied to the protasic technique, with the protasis as a seed which may germinate if the conditions are right. Certainly people often report that only after many years do they begin to see what the assertion might be suggesting, as if it had lain dormant yet somehow active all that time, a seed waiting for the correct conditions to germinate and so become visible.

A protasis can be likened to an itch which simply has to be scratched. Scratching corresponds to trying to elucidate it, and to reconcile it with other beliefs. The compulsiveness of the itch speaks to the disturbing, inescapable nature of the tension set up by an appropriate protasis. A Zen form of scratching is particularly catching because of its reversal of the usual experience: "Scratch first, itch later". (Shigematsu 1981, number 1171)

Three Factors

It was pointed out earlier that the effective working of a protasis depends on three factors: the assertion itself, the person encountering it, and the source and context in which it is encountered. To be effective, the assertion must have some feature which attracts attention. Common devices include juxtaposition of unexpected ideas ("Sleep is to hunters as excitement is to students" Shah 1970 or "Wounds are to a patient as assessment is to students"), reversing a cliché ("I see what you are saying, but are you saying what you see?"), imposing a surprisingly severe restriction ("Only awareness is educable"), drawing attention to an implicit relationship ("The subordination of teaching to learning" Gattegno 1970), and combinations of these.

A protasic action is set up most effectively when the particular assertion is met in a context which has some importance for the individual, or comes from a source in whom the person has some investment. If you encounter a slogan on a wall which you disagree with, you are likely to dismiss it. If you read an epigram in a book which impresses you, or by someone you respect, then you are much more likely to try to make sense of it. If someone whom you respect draws your attention to it, and seems to imply that there is something worthwhile in it, then a tension is set up between your respect and your

reaction. Sperber and Wilson (1988) build a whole theory of communication around the single observation that we expend energy trying to construe only when we think that someone is trying to tell us something. Protases form a class of stimuli which depend on investment in the source to justify the effort needed to make sense of them.

Typical Responses

There are four types of typical responses to protases, based on pairings between immediate reactions and longer term effects.

Rejection/Rejection

The most obvious case is an immediate, and a long term rejection. This occurs where the assertion is too much at odds with the person's own perspective, and where it comes from a source in which the person has little or no investment. In these cases, the person is usually quiet about the matter, and slips away almost unnoticed. It is possible that with continued exposure, a person might begin to consider the assertion, but that is only likely if respected colleagues or leaders also take it up.

Rejection/Consideration

This is a well known phenomenon, particularly in examples of religious conversion and major shifts of perspective. At a more mundane level, it is often the people who react and complain most strongly at first who are likely to go away and work on an idea. Their initial reaction is merely a manifestation of a penetrating thorn or embedded piece of grit.

Enthusiasm/Consideration

There are some people who react enthusiastically right from the start, and who do go away and consider the assertion over the longer term. Typically, such people find that the assertion crystallises thoughts or feelings that they have already been having, however ill-formed and inchoate. Initial enthusiasm is most usually not a sign of potential active consideration in the future. Most frequently it is an indication of respect for the source rather than an indication of having encountered a significant idea, and so will soon die away.

Enthusiasm/Rejection

It is typical that an initial enthusiastic response is followed by rejection, not in the sense of a conscious act, but rather in the form of forgetting all about it. In other words, the enthusiasm acts as a barrier against truly encountering the challenge implicit in an assertion (e.g.. "Sleep is to hunters as ... "). Energy generated by an initial challenge is dissipated in enthusiasm rather than focused on elucidation. Where the assertion is not found challenging, then it is quite likely to be forgotten, simply because it makes no lasting impact, being too quickly integrated into the old perspective.

Energies

As indicated already, the effect of a protasis, its source and context, and the perceiver, is to generate energy. There is no guarantee what people will do with that energy, but the suggestions made in section 3 have been found to contribute to productive use of energy released. The aim of those techniques is to minimise the opportunities to dissipate energy in criticism, judgements and easy dismissal, by drawing upon experiences and looking for common themes. In any discipline it is essential to have an interplay between the particular and the general; so too in professional development it has been found to be critical to avoid generalities until particulars have been negotiated. Otherwise a lot of energy disappears in making and rejecting general comments which are so interpretable in so many ways as to block all attempts at precision, and simply exercise previously established prejudices.

5 Validation

The aim of this section is to outline an approach to validating both protasis as a phenomenon and the protasic technique as a means of enhancing or supporting the use of protases. The method proposed for validation is consistent with, and an extension of, the

discipline involved in the protasic technique itself, and is just one component of a complex supportive environment for fostering professional development of any kind.

Epistemology

What does it mean to say that the protasic technique is effective? One approach would be to undertake psychological studies of large numbers of people, subjecting them to various kinds of assertions under various conditions, to observe their subsequent behaviour, and to interview them and their colleagues in order to try to detect traces and effects of the particular protasis. This detached approach is, however, out of keeping with the spirit of the protasic technique as outlined here, because it is based on a cause-and-effect view of how actions come about. Protases are but one component of an action which may or may not take place. Techniques for working with protases can at best enhance the possibility that an action will take place, but cannot guarantee it.

It is difficult to see how to describe a protasis, the state of the recipient and the relation between recipient and source as predictors of protasic effectiveness in terms which are not ultimately tautologous. Since the concern here is with its effectiveness as a technique for fostering professional development (in conjunction with many other techniques), it is appropriate to suggest that validation of effectiveness should be undertaken in a manner consistent with the discipline to which it contributes.

That discipline is based on noticing opportunities to react creatively, and choosing how to behave in the situation. It has been elaborated in some detail elsewhere (Mason 1984, 1986, Mason and Davis 1987, Mason 1996, 1997). What is relevant here is the underlying epistemology which supports and justifies the discipline, and gives rise to the methodology for validation.

The prime assumption in this epistemology is that people try to make sense of the world. They do this by telling themselves stories, by trying to account for the things that they notice. Feyerabend (1991 p141) put it that "All you can do, if you really want to be truthful, is to tell a story", and Bruner (1996) sees it as the core and essence of being human. What do we tell stories about? We tell them about the fragments of our experience, that is, about what we notice, about things which stick out in our minds for some reason. We account for them, we weave them into a narrative which helps us integrate them, helps remove the sharp edges and inconsistencies, and reinforces our sense of continuity. In short, it helps make sense of experience. It is obvious that we can notice only that which we are attuned to notice, and it is clear that we cannot use or build on what we fail to notice. In a sense then, what we know at any given time, is, effectively, what we are attuned to noticing together with whatever metaphoric resonances and metonymic triggers which take place. Our brains of course form impressions of aspects which we do not consciously notice, and these form the basis for noticing in the future.

The effectiveness of a protasis for a particular individual at a particular time resides in the extent to which the protasic action, which consists of questioning, conjecturing, observing, and experimenting, assists the person to notice more, or more sharply, and as a result of that noticing, to be able to choose alternative responses to common situations.

To validate the protasic technique consistently with the discipline proposed here, it is necessary to look back into your own experience, to see if you recognise times when some assertion got under your skin in some way, either as a child when some adult's remark really got to you, or when a colleague criticised you in some way and you reacted at first and then gradually came round to questioning your behaviour, or in some other way. If you can work with colleagues, describing situations briefly but vividly, in an account-of rather than with explanation and justification, so much the better, since then the protasic method is likely to become meaningful much more quickly for you.

Another activity is to look out for situations in which you find yourself caught, even just momentarily, by some challenging remark. The idea is to catch yourself reacting, and to bring to the situation your sense of the protasic action. As a result, you may find that you are able to allow the protasis to work away inside you instead of rejecting the disturbance out of hand.

Another activity step is to work with a group of colleagues, taking some controversial assertions from a respected source, then working away at them as outlined above.

Having undertaken this discipline for a period of time, acting-as-if the protasic technique has some substance, you may be in a position to judge whether you think that there is something in it for you. It may be that for some reason, it doesn't speak to your experience, or that you are unable to interest colleagues in co-operating. It may be that the protasic technique is not suitable at present, or that you have not come across a sufficiently challenging assertion (though there should be several in this paper!). The most that can be deduced from observations like these is that protasis as you construe it from what I have said is not relevant to you at present. Thus the technique can be falsified only by individuals and groups at particular times in particular situations.

6 Sources

The roots of the technique are as old as recorded history, for it is the catchy but slightly ambiguous or enigmatic protases which tend to survive. The writing on Nebuchadnezzar's wall, proverbs and parables of the prophets, Vedic hymns, Egyptian and Greek myths, Aesop's fables and the 'foolish' tales of Mullah Nasruddin and Til Eulenspiegel, Zen koans and modern folktales all have a protasic element. One-liners such as *Religion is the opiate of the masses*, and koans like *the sound of one hand clapping* find their reflection in the stock in trade of stand-up comics. The ones that stick are the ones that set you thinking.

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