



## Connections the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty Winter 2010

### **Reflecting on Coach and Coaching**

*Dr. Dave Lehman*

*Interim Director*

*National School Reform Faculty*

It was at an NSRF meeting in Chicago in 2005 that some of us were talking about our use of the terms “Coach” and “coaching” to describe what NSRF Facilitators do with their Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). I began to look for parallels, for connections with “coaching” in athletics as I had been a basketball and baseball Coach in my early days of high school teaching.

Actually it was early in the ‘80s that I first heard the use of “Coach” applied to teaching outside of athletics, specifically in the use of the phrase “Student-as-Worker, Teacher-as-Coach” in the Fifth Principle of the Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. As I began trying to use that pedagogical concept in my own teaching, more actively engaging my students, some of them objected to “student-as-worker” as they were not used to doing as much of the “work” of learning themselves, depending more on me, as their teacher-as-provider-of-information, rather than their “Coach.” Perhaps that Fifth Principle should read “Student-as-Player, Teacher-as-Coach!” And I remember Grant Wiggins referencing his experiences as a secondary school soccer Coach in his seminal Assessing Student Performances: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing (Jossey-Bass, 1993). Here was a clear connection, and a challenge, to what I believe we’re trying to do as “Coaches” with our CFGs:

*“In my third year of teaching, I also coached junior-varsity boy’s soccer.... By mid October we were 0 and 6. As any coach would do, I had to fundamentally alter those initial plans (no matter that the lessons were ‘essential’ and had been planned as part of a logical and thorough soccer ‘syllabus’); I had to carefully analyze performance weakness, make basic adjustments, and work on the major causes of the current failure. But when did a faculty ever think or act this way... When did a group of reading or science teachers ever say, in ‘midseason,’ ‘We’re 0 and 6 and we’d better make fundamental changes in our program, our use of time, and our use of*

*personnel?”(pg. 277)*

Although Wiggins is talking about his experiences with secondary school students, isn't this what we Coaches try to do with our adult CFGs? To have teachers use the Consultancy protocol to take an honest look at their students' achievement? To have teachers use a Looking-at/Learning-From-Student-Work protocol to Coach them in analyzing how to make needed changes in their teaching practice? Wiggins goes on to point out, still drawing on his experiences as a soccer Coach, “As all good athletes and coaches know, judgment and ‘anticipation’ (perception of the unfolding situation) are essential elements of competence...” And as all effective CFG Coaches come to know - reading their teacher/participants and making on-the-spot, in-the-moment, in-flight corrections is an essential element of effective CFG coaching.

Many of us know students who stay in high school basically just to play sports - that certainly was a key factor for me – and they come to count on their Coaches to teach them how to play basketball or baseball or any sport, and for that matter, theater or music. What is it about playing a sport, and Coaching a sport that is so powerful, not only for our young people, but for the adults involved, and that is all too often missing in the classroom? Herb Childress wrote an article in the April 1998 issue of Phi Delta Kappan entitled, Seventeen Reasons Why Football Is Better Than High School, (thanks to one of our NSRF Facilitators, David Leo-Nyquest for this reference). Here, paraphrased, are some of Childress's key points – in football (the author, who dislikes football, says *even* football), teenagers are considered important contributors, are encouraged to excel, and are honored – as we do with adults in their CFGs. In baseball, players can choose their own role (the position they want to work on perfecting), and the more-skilled players teach the less-skilled – and our “players” learn to collaborate, coming to de-privatize their teaching, making it public in their CFGs. In basketball, there is a great deal of individual instruction and encouragement from the adults, from the Coaches, and the numbers support this kind of individualization, this personalization – typically a ratio of 15 or fewer players per Coach! – the size of our CFGs (and why not the number of students in school classrooms?). Granted there is a key difference in that students voluntarily try out for a sports team, for the drama production, or to be in the school orchestra – but students will tell you that it is the teacher who cares about what he or she is teaching, and who cares about them, who knows them, that can make all the difference in the world even in a required course, just like a Coach.

As CFG Coaches we experience similar dynamics and have felt the difference when teachers are required to attend a CFG, or volunteer, and know the difference that they come to feel, to experience when they “do the work,” and are not lectured-to about how to be better teachers. It is often our personalization, our individual attention in Coaching our participants that lead them to say, “This is the best professional development I've ever experienced!” This, too, is what Nancy Mohr wrote about in an earlier Connections article (“Golf Progress Report,” Fall 2002), describing her own experience striving to learn how to play golf, “Golf coaches generally teach through feedback. I quickly learned that the proportion was about 90% ‘warm’

feedback and 10% ‘cool.’” I’ll never forget the time a teacher in a CFG I was Coaching said it didn’t matter about which came first, the warm or the cool feedback; just tell her what we think. The group proceeded to jump right into cool feedback and the teacher was shortly in tears. Ever since I insist on starting with lots of warm feedback.

Nancy went on to talk about her difficulties with change, in learning to do things differently in swinging the golf club – specifically, to follow-through (in itself not a bad idea for teachers in CFGs):

*“The big surprise for me was how I dealt with change.... I found that I was not so eager to do it myself even when the change was my own idea. Learning a different way of hitting a ball meant unlearning what I was use to. It meant getting worse before getting better. It meant feeling annoyed, stupid and wanting to go back to what I was comfortable with, never mind if it worked. Changing meant practicing a lot. Making up my mind to change did not make any difference. Doing it was hard and awkward and I had to do it over and over and even then what I decided to do was frequently not the same as how it came out. And raising the stakes – putting on pressure, comparing myself with others, trying to achieve a standard? That only made things worse. I became painfully aware of the role of self-esteem in learning.”*

How familiar this all sounds when we think of the struggles the teachers in our CFGs go through in trying to change their classroom teaching practice – the unlearning, feeling inadequate for not being able to do it easily, not wanting to, or forgetting to, practice a new way of teaching. And perhaps as Coaches, a little less pressure to attain a particular teaching standard with more self-esteem building in our CFGs is the lesson from Nancy’s Golf Coach.

In his book, written primarily for business professionals, The Heart of Coaching: Using Transformational Coaching to Create a High-Performance Culture the author, Thomas Crane, dedicates the book to his seventh-grade basketball Coach who served as a role model, and from whom Crane learned the following life principles:

- \* Be a good sport, play by the rules
- \* Practice the fundamentals, how you practice is how you play
- \* Give it your best effort, never hold back
- \* Commit to winning, but lose gracefully
- \* Work hard at getting better, you can always improve
- \* Cheer and support your teammates on and off the court
- \* Live life in a spiritual context with a purpose
- \* Be a role model, other people are watching you

Not a bad set of guidelines for classroom teachers and their students, and I see several parallels with what we strive to do as CFG Coaches. There in Crane’s second “principle” is the “practice, practice, practice” of which Nancy spoke in struggling to hit a golf ball. And here I’d like to make a connection particularly to the seventh of these “principles” – Live life in a spiritual context with a purpose – by referring to the writing of professional basketball Coach Phil Jackson in his book Sacred Hoops:

Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior (Hyperion, 1995):

*“The day I took over the Bulls [Chicago’s professional basketball team], I vowed to create an environment based on the principles of selflessness and compassion.... Working with the Bulls I’ve learned that the most effective way to forge a winning team is to call on the players’ need to connect with something larger than themselves. Even for those who don’t consider themselves ‘spiritual’ in a conventional sense, creating a successful team – whether it’s an NBA [National Basketball Association] champion or a record-setting sales force [or a successful, collaborative Critical Friends Group] – is essentially a spiritual act. It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.”* (pg. 4)

And I would suggest that this is what really can happen in a CFG when our Coaching facilitates teachers connecting deeply, even “spiritually,” building a truly collaborative learning community. Phil Jackson goes on to point out something else that’s essential to CFG Coaches, “Another important aspect of what we do is to create a supportive environment for the players where they feel secure and free from constant scrutiny.” (pg. 123) Don’t we try to create a trusting environment where it’s safe for our CFG participants to take risks, to work on areas of genuine concern, to try to get unstuck? Lastly, in describing his first championship team, Jackson notes another essential element of CFG Coaching at its best, “What they [the Chicago Bulls] liked most about the system was that it was democratic: it created shots for everyone, not just the superstars.” (pg. 126) When we are at our best as CFG Coaches, doesn’t everyone “get a shot”? Isn’t everyone’s contribution needed and valued?

Then, too, there are the times when we as CFG Coaches work with a second Co-Facilitator or Co-Coach. Here, once again, Nancy Mohr helps us with a connection to sports, this time to playing doubles in tennis. In her article in the Fall 2003 issue of Connections (published just after her untimely death in September), “Playing Doubles – Moving Beyond the Tag-Team Facilitation,” she reminds us that this is about more than simply taking turns and sharing leadership of a CFG, more than simply dividing up the role of Facilitator:

*“[Just like in tennis doubles!].... it means paying attention to one another – why are they doing what they’re doing – and where are they on the court? [in the room!]. Another important aspect of working with a partner is that there is more than one person to keep an eye on what is going on within the [CFG] group.... While it is helpful to know that one member of the team is perhaps the ‘lead’ in an activity, a highly developed partnership would not just tolerate, but would require that either partner could speak up and say, out loud - ‘Let’s take a moment here to take stock of the group/go around/take a break’ – something that will allow for course corrections without fear of upstaging/being out of turn/being rude/embarrassing one another.”*

Thus, I believe being an effective CFG Coach has a strong connection to being an

effective Coach of a sports team (theatre troupe, orchestra or band). Effective CFG coaching, like other coaching, involves helping teachers to “read” their students, their classroom situations, and modify their teaching on-the-spot – just like an effective sports Coach “reads” his/her players and makes on-the-field adjustments. And, I believe CFG coaching involves the spiritual dimensions of selflessness and compassion, where we strive to create a safe and supportive, democratic climate, enabling all voices in our CFGs to be respected and heard. So I encourage us to continue to learn about our CFG coaching by learning more from other kinds of “Coaches” and their “coaching.”

### **Thrive by Five WA’s Nurturing Families Initiative Communities of Practice Institute**

*By Pete Bermudez  
Lastinger Center for Learning  
University of Florida*



Figure 1 Free-Form Maps served as a way for participants to get to know the work of their respective organizations.

The Thrive by Five (TBF) Communities of Practice (CoP) Institute was held on November 3-5 at the Edgewater Hotel in Seattle, Washington. The institute was designed to train parent educators and other early learning professionals to facilitate CoPs in their respective organizations. A total of 21 participants representing 13 organizations including a team from the Mississippi Center for Education Innovation (MCEI) participated in the intensive three-day experience. An additional two days of training will follow later in the year.

As described by TBF, “communities of practice are based on the adult learning principle of collective learning within a shared domain. Meaning it is people coming together to learn from each other in a deliberate, facilitated manner around a specific, shared interest.” Thus, the following expectations were set for each CoP Facilitator who completed the initial three-day experience:

- Facilitate 3 in-person gatherings,
- Recruit parent educator members,
- Plan logistics for each gathering (securing space, sending out announcements, receiving RSVPs, food if necessary),
- Communicate regularly with Thrive and group (mainly through email/calls),
- Participate in larger learning community (through online community when implemented and on calls), and
- Participate in evaluation (post gathering data survey and reflective survey for the participants).



Figure 2 Participants engaged in “fishbowl” consultancy. American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were provided for the hearing impaired.

Throughout the institute, participants were introduced to the concept in ways that enabled them to actually experience the power of collaborative work and the ways that CoP can serve as a form of job-embedded professional development for parent educators. During the institute, participants learned about and practiced a variety of protocols for creating and maintaining a collaborative context for adult learning. These included techniques and strategies for setting community agreements, shifting conversations towards personal practice, engaging in reflective dialogue, and supporting each other on dilemmas of practice that included equity issues affecting vulnerable children and families.



consultancy and support each other in our various roles with school districts.

Our day of retreat began with much anticipation and excitement from the coaches about an opportunity to renew their skills and their souls in the work they do. I also, as a National Facilitator was excited and anxious to work with these coaches who I knew affect many professional lives in schools. It is critical to me that our skills are honed and that our spirits are bolstered for the promotion of reflective democratic dialogue and effective tools for learning in a professional community. Connections seemed like a great way to start the day to center ourselves on transitioning from the outside to a small retreat house on a lake surrounded by a small wooded reserve. It set the tone for the rest of the day with a respect and appreciation for attending to our human need for quiet reflection and renewal. A world café around the questions of what is your passion, what is your purpose as a CFG coach and what is your hope for those you lead, renewed our spirit of dedication and sealed our resolution as a group. We had a chance to revisit our norms and used chalk talk to facilitate renewal of our ground rules. The morning ended with two activities that were given as a choice and the group divided evenly to engage in some new experiences with data driven dialogue and a fun scavenger hunt activity designed to share practices with the CFG protocols.

After a satisfying lunch and a chance to explore our beautiful lake and wooded area, we utilized the surroundings and the great weather to conduct our opening activity for the afternoon outside. The Paseo, or Circles of Identity, protocol was facilitated to help the group strengthen their personal professional identities and reflect on how our perceptions of other's identities shape our decisions and behaviors. The beautiful outdoors helped to soothe the sometimes uncomfortable and tension provoking reflection that the protocol may elicit. As we learn more about each other, we are able to support each other better. This activity also helped to further solidify our identity as a group and set the stage for how we might support each other in our work for the coming year.

The day was quickly closing upon us and we reflected on our charge for the coming year and when we could continue coming together. A quick write for the closing was a good bookend to the day reflecting quietly again about our days ahead and what we want to look forward to. As we come upon the culmination of another five-day coaches training in the fall, we look forward to the growth of our coaches' support group with new members. This renewal of the coaches is vital to the continued development of the CFG work in our area. Several members have expressed interest in also becoming National Facilitators. This is a testament to the power of the tools and the needed promotion of the reflective dialogue in our school communities.

From the mouths of the coaches their reflection on the day gratified my own sense of purpose to renew our coaches' sense of self and purpose. Noteworthy feedback were: "the data driven dialogue was just what I needed", "I was especially pleased with the data driven protocol and the world café for two very different reasons: the data driven allows you to go deeper while the world café opens up thinking and allows

you to go broadly”, “I feel like I learn something new to try out each time we meet”, “I especially like the de-briefing to clarify questions about using the protocol – what to do if.. what would you do when...”, “I need to grow personally to grow as a coach”, and “especially liked the idea of marrying passion with work for both teachers and learners”. I have personally grown as a coach and National Facilitator and am fed by the opening up and growth of our local coaches. With each encounter with our coaches support group, my hope is restored.

### **Eileen’s Dilemma: The Magic of Critical Friendship**

*By P. Tim Martindell*

*Coordinator of Secondary ELA*

*Fort Bend Independent School District*

“Tim, I have my dilemma ready to present to the group, but I’m afraid you will find it trivial compared to the other dilemmas,” said Eileen, a veteran teacher and English language arts district level content coach. She frowned as we walked towards the meeting that Friday afternoon. “I’ve been practicing how I will present the dilemma, but I may become emotional.”

In my role as coordinator of secondary English language arts for a large suburban school district, I supervise an existing group of five “helping teachers” – content area coaches – whose jobs involve frequent school visits and on-site professional development for teachers. The group had been meeting for several years. They wondered what to expect from me as their new “boss.” They soon learned that my vision for our *mutual* professional learning would be to create a highly effective team of critical friends.

Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a coaching model that uses structures or protocols to quickly facilitate deep level reflective conversations. In these conversations, educators discuss professional dilemmas, bring examples of student or teacher work for critical feedback, and gain insight into better serving the learning needs of individual or collective groups of students. In short, the protocols, when well facilitated, move discussion from “surface” topics like dress codes to deeper reflection on personal teaching practices.

At our meeting that Friday afternoon, the five other helping teachers leaned forward in rapt attention as Eileen outlined her dilemma. Though they had worked together for several years, they had not previously been asked to share intimate aspects of their practice. The air was thick with apprehension.

Eileen’s voice wavered as she admitted that she was often paralyzed by self-doubts about the quality of her work. She told the group of an internal voice that was constantly questioning whether her demonstration lessons were ready to share, or needed more work. With a touch of humor, Eileen said that deciding to end her marriage was the only time she has been really decisive.

One member of the group acted as facilitator, guiding the group through the structured series of clarifying and probing questions used in Critical Friends Groups.

“What kinds of decisions cause you the most trouble?”

“Besides the decision to divorce, can you think of any other times you have been quick to make decisions?”

“What do you value most in your work? What makes your demonstration lessons worth sharing?”

“How might the group support you?”

The conversation quickly deepened as Eileen scooted back from the table to observe, and the group took on her issue with a laser-like focus. As the discussion of the dilemma continued, Eileen sat silently taking notes and reflecting on what she heard.

“I wonder how Eileen might counter that internal voice?”

“We might as a group support her by working together on projects so she doesn’t feel such individual responsibility for making decisions.”

“I wonder what we can all learn from this dilemma.”

When Eileen’s turn came to speak, she outlined the new insights she gained by allowing others to examine her issue. The group debriefed the process, discussing their own reactions to the dilemma and possible universal lessons learned. The members left the meeting as more of a “professional learning community” than when they arrived.

That is the magic of a critical friends group.

Reflecting back on my educational journey, I realize that my most powerful educational experiences came not from direct instruction, but from times when colleagues facilitated and coached my learning. In examining my own switch in philosophical and practical teaching, I realize that John Dewey’s “qualities of experience” describe events set in motion many years ago that precipitated my personal change. These qualities are (1) continuity – that our ideas about the past, combined with our experience of the present and our dreams for the future, provide the capacity to learn in social situations, and (2) temporality -- the ability to view experience from various vantage points over time. These qualities resonate with what I have come to know. Continuity and temporality can help schools align current educational theory, which promotes professional learning communities like critical friends groups, with proven pedagogy, philosophy, and practice.

When I next crossed paths with Eileen, she was beaming. She told me that one of the

content-area teachers she was coaching had complimented her on a demonstration lesson she had conducted. The content area teacher tried Eileen's strategy, and the students' test scores on the unit soared.

"I'm demonstrating decisively, Tim," she said. "I keep replaying my mental tape of the things my critical friends said. And when that negative inner voice nags me, I just tell it to pipe down."

### **An Interview with Terry Daugherty, a NSRF National Facilitator**

*by Michele Mattoon*

*Training Coordinator*

*National School Reform Faculty*

*Tell us a little bit about yourself. How were you introduced to NSRF? How did you get CFGs started in your school?*

I have been a Middle School Science teacher, deep down to my core, for 37 years. I began teaching by using a hands-on, self-paced, Inquiry based Science curriculum. Beginning my career in that environment always caused me to use a unique filter in which to judge what I wanted to do in my classroom. I have taught in the same school for 35 years. Many of those years did not require me to look outside my door to others. I had even compared teaching to running a small business.

My NSRF exposure came after I had experienced another type of PLC training. I did not see that PLC training relating well to what I was working on to improve my work in the classroom. A year later, I was invited to what I thought was a Mathematics summer workshop. It turned out to be a summer CFG training by NSRF, paid for by a Mathematics Professional Development grant.

I spent the first 3 days of training, looking for what I call the "killer app". The "killer app" is something that I can use in my classroom that would make this training valuable to me. Thankfully, by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> day, I discovered my true "killer app". It was the whole concept around the CFG (Critical Friends Group) to help support teachers to improve our instruction in our classroom. I was so focused on the protocols, I totally missed the power of the CFG as tool for teachers to transform their practice. That was a true "Ah-ha!" moment for me.

I came back to my school with another trained colleague. We decided to get our principal to allow us to show some of the protocols to the staff during staff meetings. We also invited teachers to an after school meeting where we tried out a 'Looking at Student Work' protocol. We sat in a room together and looked at some unknown student's work and speculated what we were seeing. When we were finished, we may have had the same look as the first people who discovered fire. We were amazed at what we had learned from each other about this student by doing this collaborative work.

The next year those of us in that room began a monthly CFG. We met and began building a trusting environment so that we could ask the tough questions of each other. We began looking at improving instruction with the purpose of increasing student learning. We did some “fish bowl” lesson tunings at a staff meeting, where the staff sat around us as we did the protocol. We used observation protocols, to help our own classroom practices.

The next year we trained more CFG facilitators and invited our staff to join one of the three CFGs. We urged all new staff to be in one of the CFGs and invited our principal to join our original CFG. We had 80% of our staff participating in CFGs. We had a common language about the work we did. We had high expectations for what we could achieve. We were not as scared to try new things. We began to design our teacher meetings. It was not uncommon to hear, “We need a protocol to use for this.”

We began introducing CFG work in our student’s work. We had students tuning each others work and dilemmas protocols to solve road blocks. They were using World Cafes to guide their future learning and Chalk Talks to help reflect where they had been.

Did this improve student achievement in our school? I don’t know. Did we think we were doing good work? I know for sure we thought were improving. This year our school achieved the “impossible”-- a state Four Star rating. We were already proud of our students, so the rating was “icing on our cake”. Was our six years of CFG work responsible for this? I can not prove that it did, but I believe it had to be connected.

*What has been the impact of CFGs and CFG practices in your work?*

My CFG training transformed me to become a teacher who seeks more student reflection. I expect more transparency with my communication with my students about my intentions and doubts. Instead of asking a student “Why are you doing this,” I am more likely to ask, “What can I do to help you get on task?” I seek true answers to the question, “What is it about my classroom that causes some students to fail, or choose to fail in my classroom?”

I now know many of my fellow teachers much better than “hi” or “any coffee left?” I have been involved in meaningful conversations where we have built both trust and high expectations for each other. I have colleagues who can challenge my thinking in a supportive way. I can do the same for them.

*Can you describe some high points of your CFG experiences?*

The high point in my CFG experience may not sound like one. We were having a very serious leadership discussion, after looking at our latest test results. These results showed no improvement with our poverty and ethnic gap.

I made the suggestion of looking at our results in a more detailed manner and to do more research on what other schools were doing. One of my fellow CFG colleagues gave a very strong challenge to my thinking. She said I was involved in “totally Discourse I” thinking. She meant I was not looking at this problem in a new way that tested my conventional thinking. I was at first surprised and in denial. I then thought deeper and listened to some better thinking that questioned “what were we doing so that some of our students did not learn?” We came up with more unconventional ideas that looked at what we were doing. I was really proud that one of my fellow teachers could challenge our thinking so openly and that it did change our thinking. There was no big faculty split, no hard feelings, no turf wars. We just knew it was part of our growth process.

*What are your goals in terms of your work with NSRF?*

I would like to see a repeat of the experience in my school, in other schools, and in other school systems. I can no longer imagine working in a school that does not operate this way. I would like to change professional development from the model of only “experts” can come in to teach us all a new thing, to a model that says the people who are going to change our practice are the trained facilitator and staff sitting around the table.

### **Protocols in Practice**

*by Dave Lehman*

*Interim Director*

*National School Reform Faculty*

The following are three variations on doing “Consultancies” which I have been using with teachers, principals, school change coaches, those currently in a CFG, and/or those yet to be in a CFG:

#### **(1) Partners in a Fish Bowl**

After having assigned the reading of the “Consultancy” protocol and reviewing the process for developing framing or focusing questions, I typically introduce the Consultancy protocol by inviting a volunteer to share a dilemma or concern for the whole group to engage in as a “practice run” in how to use the protocol. With a group of more than ten I do this in a modified “Fish Bowl.” For example, with a group of fifteen, I have seven of the participants sit in a circle with the volunteer presenter, and the other seven sit behind the initial seven in the inner circle of the Fish Bowl. These seven in the outer circle each serve as a consultant to those in the inner circle, listening closely to the conversation occurring in the inner circle, then at specific intervals they will be asked to confer with their partners in the inner circle.

I will do this first after “clarifying questions,” inviting the outer circle Fish Bowl “consultants” to make possible additional clarifying questions, then again after “probing questions,” and again at one or two points of the discussion period in the

protocol.

In this way everyone participates more actively than just those in the inner circle of the Fish Bowl, yet it keeps the number of those participating directly with the presenter to a more manageable number rather than having fourteen people all try to participate directly in an initial run through of a Consultancy.

These next two protocols are not in our current list of Protocols and are shorter versions of the Consultancy which I have modified from the originals I learned a number of years ago. I often receive comments from participants that they don't have enough time to do these kinds of things with their staff. The two shortened versions of Consultancies address that issue as they can both be done in less than an hour. They also have the added advantage of engaging everyone in sharing and working on each others' dilemmas, concerns, or issues.

### **(2) “Sticky Issues” - Modified, Shortened Consultancy**

Read the Protocol below, then write out the particulars of a situation you would like to lay out to a small group of “consultants,” ending with a “focus or framing question” for your issue/concern/problem. The group might offer some suggestions and resources, and also help you see how to strategize on your own.

*[Here I provide a blank space for half of the page]*

### **(3) The “Sticky Issues” Protocol**

5 minutes all members of a triad make notes on their own Sticky Issue

15 minutes (3 mins) first person briefly outlines issue to responders

(3 mins) responders ask clarifying questions

(7 mins) responders talk about what they heard or are thinking about,

presenter turns around and only listens

(2 mins) presenter talks about what s/he is now thinking

Repeat the 15 minute process for the other two people in the triad

5 minutes debrief the total process

55 minutes total time

### **(4) Two Minute Consultancy**

*[adapted from “Collaborating for Student Success” of the Ohio Center for Essential Schools]*

Objective – to brainstorm silently, in writing only, several possible solutions or

suggestions for individual educators' own current work challenges, problems, or dilemmas

Procedure –

1) groups of no more than 10, no less than 5, around a table

2) each person is given a stack of half-sheets of paper equaling the number of people in this small group (e.g. 10 in the group, 10 sheets)

3) each person is asked to think about a current, job-related challenge, problem or dilemma that is puzzling - for which they do not presently have a solution - and writes it on a half-sheet of paper – e.g. teachers might ask - “How can I get more group involvement out of my students,” or “How can I get my students to be more punctual?”

after allowing a few minutes for thinking, each person should write-out his/her issue and pass it to the person to the right; that person then reads the issue just received, has 2 minutes only to jot down on another half-sheet of paper the first thought, idea, suggestion that comes to mind in addressing the issue, and then attaches it behind the problem sheet just read, with a paper clip [Note – monitoring time is crucial with a warning given with 30 seconds to go]

4) repeat this process every 2 minutes and keep the process going until each person gets his/her sheet back with the attached suggestions/ideas

#### **(5) Possible Discussion Questions**

- What solutions were discovered that you hadn't previously considered?
- Can you see any value in trying some of these suggestions/ideas?
- What suggestions/ideas triggered other ideas or solutions for you?
- What does this teach about reaching out to others for help?

#### **(6) Debrief (total time for a group of 10, approximately 45 minutes)**

Although this protocol seems very directive, participants have virtually unanimously liked it, noting not only that they get several useful ideas and/or confirmation of what they were thinking, but get thoughtful responses from everyone with it being done totally in silence, with the “conversation” occurring only in writing on each persons' half-sheet of paper. Thus, my mantra has become – “*It's not how much time you've got, it's how you use the time you've got!*”

#### **What If and Why?—Literacy Invitations for Multilingual Classrooms**

*By Barb Backler*

*Harmony Education Center*

I read this book, because I have always been intrigued by the K – 6 classroom in Bloomington where the author did her research, and I have always wanted to

document what goes on in there. I think it's exemplary, and I want others to know about it. When I heard that Katie Van Sluys had written about the classroom I borrowed a copy of the book from Rise, one of the two teachers in this classroom community of approximately 50 children ranging from age 5 to 12, and dove in.

The book is about invitations as a catalyst for inquiry, investigation and thinking. "Invitations solicit people to come together to engage in an activity of mutual interest" (p.1). This is just the beginning though. Students can enter the invitations at many entry points and they can engage in many ways of knowing. They often end up with more questions. The invitations are based on students' interests and questions. They can take a variety of directions. They are open to all learners regardless of their age (often there will be primary and intermediate students working together), their previous knowledge, their past experiences and their reading and language flexibility. They are not a set of required procedures but open-ended investigations that depend on the lives, the experiences and the questions of those conducting them. I would describe the invitations as organic. They are constantly evolving. They are all-inclusive by virtue of their structure. And they're critical in the sense that they invite students to explore the world from many perspectives, often challenging norms and inviting action.

Katie talks about an example invitation that started out with two students looking at Mothers' Day advertisements and ended up wondering about how motherhood is portrayed in the media. The students questioned why there were only white mothers and why there weren't any heavy mothers. Another youngster who had lived his first years in England had a coin collection that he was studying. He asked the question: Why is the Queen of England on coins from England, Canada, Belize and Hong Kong? This inspired an invitation called Exploring Currency. There was a two-pocket folder with the invitation: You're invited to explore as many examples of world currency as you can. If you like, use a hand lens to help you take a closer look. Then there were questions: What do you notice about the money? Are the coins and/or paper currency related in any way(s)? If so, how can the relationships be explained? What questions come to mind? These questions were followed by a list of possible resources including web sites.

The author explores 15 different invitations throughout the book, everything from "Families" to "Peace, Power and Action" to "In the News: Beyond Facts, Reading News Critically," allowing the reader to see how the invitations come about, how they are developed, where they go and even how they are revisited by different learners and the same learners at different times during their potential 7 years in this classroom.

When I visited this K-6 classroom earlier this week one of the students, Alex, shared an experience he had had at home during the snow days. His father does excavating at work and had uncovered a ledger that was dated 1936. The students gave Alex their rapt attention as they all tried to guess how old the person who wrote it would be now, whether he/she would still be around, was it a man or a woman. They were

fascinated at the difference in costs of different items. Then Timmy raised his hand. Alex called on him. “We could make this into an invitation.” These students are driven by their own questions, and invitations serve as a tool for addressing their questions and concerns.

Van Sluys doesn’t leave the reader wondering how to create these dynamic invitations. She emphasizes how important it is to know your students well in order to know what they’re thinking about and what they are curious about. The teachers, Ms. R and Mr. G, are very intentional in gathering information about students – what they care about, how they learn and how they think. They listen to students, have conversations with them and listen to them converse with each other, peruse their writings and other products that they make, take notes when they hear their questions in the lunchroom or on the playground, observe their actions and sometimes formally ask the students to record what their present thinking is. Sometimes the teachers will sit down and make charts. Beside each student’s name they record what they know about each student’s cultural life, what experiences and resources each child brings to the classroom. Another time the teachers give each student a template. At the top it says, “What I’ve noticed you’re interested in and thinking about.” The teacher fills this in with her current observations and thinking on these topics. Below this it says, “What have I missed? What are other issues and interests on your mind?” The student brings the teacher up to date on his current ideas.

Critical literacy is a part of the invitations. Many of the invitations include a text set. “Working with multiple texts reveals diverse perspectives, contradictions and tensions that give students reason to question, inquire into and reflect on the world and their position in it.” (p. 69) Van Sluys presents a framework that she developed with other educators that helps teachers be aware of the four important dimensions of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace (questioning the way things are), considering multiple viewpoints (getting into another’s shoes and seeking the voices of the marginalized), focusing on the sociopolitical (consciousness and resistance) and taking action (reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it).

Invitations offer opportunities for young people to explore the world from many angles and determine what it is that they can do to make the world a better place for all. During my visit, I noticed a sign on a cupboard that said: “We have the power and energy to create the world we want to live in.” Today on the front page of our local newspaper there is an article about this classroom and how they have sponsored a child in Haiti for two years. Last year a parent of two of the students in the class had visited Haiti with her sister who was trying to find the mother of the child she had adopted. The sisters saw “unfathomable living conditions” and invited this classroom to sponsor a child, so he could go to school. The students had a garage sale and raised the necessary \$250. Now they have a bulletin board display that highlights their friend, Stevenson Isidor, and the students are intimately aware of the situation in Haiti and want to find out if their friend is safe.

Van Sluys goes on to say that there must also be time for reflection and time to attend

to the process, so that students actually learn the habits of mind that promote this more effective way of learning. “When they know and can talk about what they’re doing, they increase the number of options they can intentionally draw on in the future.” (p.102)

When students engage in a fishbowl strategy and most of the class encircles one group who is working on an invitation, students are asked to observe who is participating, how many turns are taken, what sorts of questions are asked, how participants keep the inquiry going and how plans are made and actions taken.


When students are asked to map their paths of inquiry periodically or if the teacher chooses to map a group’s path, students can see how they are moving the inquiry process forward or if they aren’t.

Sometimes students are asked to sort the questions they hear into data-gathering questions, process questions and critical questions. Students can learn to see that if they are asking all process questions they may be learning how to explore their own experiences without moving toward more critical pursuits. The teachers can help by drawing attention to the type of question that is dominant and help to nudge them forward.

Simply naming what students are doing can help them become aware of learning strategies such as negotiation, thinking aloud and critiquing. Then students can name these strategies for themselves when they need them in the future.

As Dr. Van Sluys points out, the teachers’ role is critical. As she writes, it’s important for Ms. R and Mr. G to know when to observe and when to jump in. Sometimes it helps to join a group and become a co-inquirer. Sometimes it is necessary to offer advice, which might be posing a problem for the group, or it might mean helping the group solve a problem. Teachers spend time observing and paying attention to what students are doing and then they interpret where they are in the learning process. How can they help students understand better how to inquire?

I highly recommend this book as an entry into a remarkable classroom and as an excellent way to familiarize oneself with invitations that allow students to become critically literate citizens of the world. The book would also serve as an outstanding book for Critical Friends Groups to discuss. At the end of each chapter Van Sluys issues an “Invitation for All.” For example, at the end of Chapter 7, Teaching in the Moment, Van Sluys invites teachers: “Think about where you are in the process of inviting students to live as critical inquirers in your classroom. What is your role in the action? Get a tape recorder. Carry it with you as you work with students. Then listen to the recording: What are you saying? What words and phrases are you using? How are students responding? What can you say about the relationships between your contributions and the students’ contributions? What is going well? Where do you see opportunities for growth?” (p. 115)



In the meantime I will try to figure out how I can video-record this classroom and highlight the Invitations along with other aspects that have fascinated me for years: What impact is there on a child who is in the same learning community with the same teachers for potentially 7 years? How is a democratic learning community created? How does exploring critical literacy lead to social action? What is the impact of having a male and a female teacher as co-teachers? What does parent involvement add to the environment for learning?

### **Contacts**

Leslie Burns, NSRF Office Coordinator, [lburns@harmonyschool.org](mailto:lburns@harmonyschool.org) 812-330-2701  
Jena Hanes, NSRF Web Master, [j.hanes@comcast.net](mailto:j.hanes@comcast.net),  
Scott Hutchinson, NSRF Development and Outreach,  
[hutchinson@harmonyschool.org](mailto:hutchinson@harmonyschool.org), 812-330-2701  
Dave Lehman, Interim NSRF Director, [davelehman@mac.com](mailto:davelehman@mac.com); 607-227-4684  
Michele Mattoon, NSRF Training Coordinator, [michelemattoon@comcast.net](mailto:michelemattoon@comcast.net)

---

Thank you for your support and attention. If you have any news, stories, resources or ideas for these Updates from the National Center, please let us know.

On behalf of the NSRF National Center,  
Dave, Jena, Leslie, Michele, and Scott

---

National School Reform Faculty  
Harmony Education Center  
909 East Second Street  
Bloomington, Indiana 47401  
p 812.330.2702  
f 812.333.3435  
e [nsrf@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org)  
<http://www.nsrffharmony.org>

**If you do not wish to receive these messages, simply reply to this message with a request to be removed or send a message to with a [libby@harmonyschool.org](mailto:libby@harmonyschool.org) request to be removed.**

*[Join NSRF as a dues-contributing member](#)*

National School Reform Faculty  
Harmony Education Center  
PO Box 1787 Bloomington Indiana 47402 • 812.330.2702  
[nsrf@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org) • fax 812.333.3435