

Eileen's Dilemma: The Magic of Critical Friendship

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“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.”