

An Interview with Terry Daugherty, a NSRF National Facilitator

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*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 4th 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.