

Part two of a two-part series

# Building collaborative communities: By teachers, for teachers, part 2

Every school has its own unique story, and we share our experience at ACS Athens as a vignette of our practice not a sole recipe for success.

Over the past five years at the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS) we have created an environment of collaborative professional development with NSRF® Critical Friends Group® work at its core, studying the impact of the expanding CFG® work here.

ACS Athens is an international school serving American students and the wider international community who live in Athens, Greece. Part of a wider network of international schools providing quality education, ACS includes students from junior kindergarten (JK) through 12th grade. We are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to offer the IB Diploma Program.

— Penny Kynigou  
and Dave Nelson

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The American Community Schools of Athens refers to its professional learning communities that use Critical Friends Group coaches and NSRF protocols as "Collaborative Learning Communities." As such, in this article, "CFG" and "CLC" are used interchangeably.*

## Introduction

...So you've taken the CFG training, you feel inspired by the excitement of tapping into the spirit and collective intelligence of teachers working together, and you wonder whether it is worthwhile to get a group started at your school? At the American Community Schools of Athens, we have conducted our own action research and have surveyed our CFG members over the past two years to find out their reactions to these meetings and to the impact that their participation has had in the classroom.

At our school, we currently have a thriving CFG culture that has been steadily growing over the past five years, and in last month's article "By Teachers, for Teachers: Part 1" published here in Connections, we shared the story of how we initiated and developed our CFG community, some of the strategies that worked well and the challenges we encountered.

Penny Kynigou and David Nelson are both NSRF National Facilitators and we work at ACS Athens, an American international school which serves families of diverse nationalities living and working in Greece.

Our school has recently undergone reaccreditation with the Middle States Association and as part of this process, the entire school has been involved in multiple action research projects that led each faculty member to review literature and reflect on their current teaching practices.

As coordinators of the ACS Athens Collaborative Learning Community (or CLC, the name we give our CFG groups), we were curious to learn to what extent our participating teachers felt they were gaining from these meetings, and if they found value, to find out what elements they believe make our CFG meetings worthwhile. Was there evidence in the current literature on collaborative groups and organizational growth that supported these findings? In this second article we set out to share what we learned in our action research project.

Over two years of research, we surveyed teachers, gathered reflections at the end of meetings, and collected "CLC stories." Many of those stories expressed how our participants, whether they presented work or were participants in others' work, transferred what they learned in CLC meetings to their classrooms. In these meetings, teachers engage in dialogue amongst themselves to create plans, refine curriculum artifacts, and inquire into dilemmas of classroom practice. Sifting through this data we were able to identify three core beliefs that seem to underlie why the CLC members at ACS Athens feel that these meetings offer them something unique:

NSRF protocols and activities used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth; the diverse makeup of the groups generates a high level of creativity; the focus on inquiry during the meetings was a key component in successful problem-solving.

## 1. NSRF protocols and activities used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth

As we analyzed the collective reflections, we noticed that many commented on how the CFG meetings have been uniquely energy-boosting, fun, relaxing, and rewarding. Many spoke of a sense of safety, the importance of a confidential place where teachers can freely share problems and receive non-threatening feedback. They identified how the friendship and trust developed within the groups help to create greater integration within the school community and a sense of common purpose across all grade levels. Our teachers frequently commented that they valued not only

the support of the group in solving dilemmas but also the act of service, the opportunity to help others by sharing



“Colleagues gain insight from each other in a non-threatening way -- the interactions build friendship and trust among colleagues.”

-Sevi, *Optimal Match Specialist*

Quotes with photos taken from video presentation by David Nelson and Penny Kynigou:

<http://bit.ly/ACSAthensCLCs>

their expertise and contributing ideas.

Without a doubt the foundation of trust is instrumental to each group’s success. When that trust is combined with a shared vision under the careful guidance of trained CFG Coaches, who understand the subtleties of facilitating the NSRF protocols, the processes inspire risk-taking and empathy essential to growth. By opening dialogue with one another about their professional concerns, teachers gain insights from one another in a non-threatening way and they feel empowered as active agents.

This all-important sense of safety is created through the NSRF protocols and the skill-building structure provided in CFG training and put into practice by trained CFG coaches in our school. Recognizing and honoring that teachers’ days are busy and often fraught, every meeting begins with refreshments and the Transitions activity to help teachers release the issues of the day, follow-up from previous meetings, and reconnect to the group. By openly articulating expectations and establishing group norms through the Setting Agreements Activity and then holding each other accountable for those agreements, meetings become significantly more productive. The shared language developed through the  **Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger Activity**, and  **Compass Points Activity**, helps to address moments of interpersonal tension in a productive stress-free manner. Planning during the final day of our initial Coaches’ Training helped us to create a carefully scaffolded set of skills over the year, with participants learning warm and cool feedback strategies, and the proper use and construction of clarifying and

probing questions. These feedback and questioning techniques foster a climate of curiosity and open dialogue about the craft of teaching as educators come together to share expertise and generate possibilities. Meetings act to connect teachers in a shared and purposeful endeavor where each feels that their personal areas of expertise, interest, and experience becomes a valued contribution.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge analyzes the need for learning organizations to cultivate three core learning capabilities among professionals: fostering aspirations, developing reflective conversations, and understanding of complexity. CFG meetings accomplish each of these capabilities by providing a space for educators to foster a shared vision of education, and by encouraging reflection and dialogue in which the group analyzes the complexity of classroom craft. We find, just as Peter Senge states of successful learning organizations, “Team learning de-

velops the skills of groups of people to look beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world.”

In the unique context of CFG work, colleagues have the opportunity to share areas of personal mastery and learn from one another. Senge highlights some of the benefits of such an organization by stating, “When we give up this illusion [that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces] — we can then build ‘learning organizations,’ organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”

Psychological safety is a key factor in freeing up thinking, and strong collegiality helps participants get into a state of flow where they can play with ideas and come up with creative solutions. The collegial relationships fostered within the CLC groups widens the peer support among the faculty and encourages growth. Dave recently participated in a workshop with Steve Barkley, specialist in instructional coaching, who helped him to realize that when teachers are not being evaluated by a superior, they are less concerned with exactly what they’re doing, but rather how they can do it better.

In 2015 Google concluded a two-year study of over 180 Google teams to identify



Penny Kynigou is an NSRF International Facilitator from the American

Community Schools of Athens. Penny teaches fifth grade and is the Coordinator of Professional Collaboration and Learning at ACS Athens. Penny runs her own professional teaching blog and can be found at [bloggingthelearningcurve.wordpress.com](http://bloggingthelearningcurve.wordpress.com) She may be reached at [kynigoup@acs.gr](mailto:kynigoup@acs.gr)



David Nelson is an NSRF International Facilitator based in

Athens, Greece, facilitating trainings in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. David teaches high school Social Studies at the American Community Schools of Athens, where he is also Faculty Development and Growth Program Coordinator. He may be reached at [nelsond@acs.gr](mailto:nelsond@acs.gr)

David and Penny together co-founded and coordinate the ACS Athens Collaborative Learning Communities.

the key dynamics of successful groups in their company. Psychological safety topped the list as the most important of the five that they identified in the study — “it’s the underpinning of the other four,” the researchers noted. The Google analysts discovered, as we have similarly found, that “the safer team members feel with one another, the more likely they are to admit mistakes, to partner, and to take on new roles... more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates.” The correlations with Google’s study and the success of CFG and CLC communities extend further — Google concluded that their teams were also successful due to the structure and clarity of the processes, the meaning of the work, and the empowerment employees feel for creating change.

For example, Christina, first grade teacher and CLC Coach, found CLC meetings both inspirational and productive. She felt that the spirit of trust and acceptance found at these meetings was the key to their effectiveness :

“Even though a CLC group is filled with grown-ups who are all there for similar reasons, it is important to develop a foundation of trust ... so that people can feel safe ... to have their dilemmas or work looked at so deeply. One thing I have walked away with since [my] beginning with the CLC is: ‘Always assume positive intent.’ It’s amazing how it has changed my perspective inside and outside of the school/work environment. When one feels accepted as part of a team, the empathy and security is there because we have all been in the same boat at one point or another - so there is no judgment. CLC groups, by their nature and design, are geared to make the experience a very forward-moving process... and we all like to progress, don’t we? We all like to feel productive and meaningful. We get this support in our groups...which then inspires us to tread further, freer and with more confidence in the things we do...”

Growth and learning are optimal in the tension of that creative space where one is neither too comfortable nor feeling actually in danger, known in CFG communities as “the risk zone.” CFG work provides both security and challenge, inviting participants to venture into the risk zone together, as Christina’s reference to the ‘Always assume positive intent’ strategy shows. Our ACS Athens participants found this shared adventure in professional growth not only bonding, but also valuable and stimulating.



“I value the many disciplines and opinions brought in help solve the most complex issues.”

-Jenny G, Middle School ESL Teacher

## 2. The diverse makeup of the groups generates a high level of creativity

The second consensus that emerged from the data was that the diversity of the participants in the CLC groups generated a high level of creativity. ACS Athens is an unusual school in that we have elementary, middle, and high school all located on one single site. This means that we are one of the few JK-12 schools able to create highly diverse CFG groups including participants from across the JK-12 range. When composing the groups at the beginning of each school year, we consciously aimed at the richest possible mix, considering length of teaching experience, grade level, and subject specialty. Although the participants initially found the mix counterintuitive, they soon discovered that they highly valued interactions and found the discussions most stimulating when elementary and early childhood practitioners shared insights on middle school and high school dilemmas, and vice versa.

Many participants identified the importance of approaching the presenter’s topic with a “beginner’s mind.” They noted that this enabled them to rethink issues and challenge each others’ assumptions. For example, a fresh perspective on a handbook for parents could uncover basic elements, which might have been overlooked by the author because they were too close to the issue. Initially participants were concerned that their lack of knowledge of a particular domain might prove a barrier to making useful contributions during the protocol, yet most participants came to realize that their insights could turn out to be the most stimulating and helpful of all. One participant also observed that a CLC meeting is the only forum in our school where we gain the opportunity to look at issues from the perspective of the whole child, something we educators too

“Working with a diverse group of teachers helps to eliminate the ostrich head-in-the-sand effect we tend to get when bouncing ideas around with people of our own grade level.

-Christina, 1st grade



"...Who am I to discredit the experience and knowledge of so many highly qualified teachers just because they do not teach science?"

-Justin, Academy Science



often forget while working in the “silos” of our departments or grade levels.

In another example, one of our participants, Justin, HS Science teacher, tells the story of how he brought to his CLC group his dilemma on motivating reluctant science students. He was not expecting to get much valuable insight, as no other science teacher was in the room:

“I’m in the tenth year of my teaching career, and I am finally to the point where I would call myself an excelling teacher. Not that I’ve never thought I’m terrible, but after 10 years of experience I feel that I have a solid grasp on all aspects of my teaching: lesson planning, classroom management, integrating technology, teaching to differentiated learning styles, connecting with students, etc.

I should’ve been more optimistic. I should’ve been thinking, “I will certainly get some fresh ideas,” as that is exactly what happened. I tried two of the ideas from my diverse group of advice-givers the next week with positive feedback from my students. The diversity of the group opened me up to all new perspectives way outside of my comfort zone that I (or any teacher) would never experience typically. Even though those ideas come from different disciplines, with some minor tweaking, I can apply them to my classroom. Who am I to discredit the experience and knowledge of so many highly qualified teachers just because they do not teach science?”

Diversity of groups is the key to getting the most creative ideas. We are always at our most creative and open state when exploring potential solutions to problems outside of our own sphere. As Justin himself pointed out, the [Dilemma Analysis Protocol](#) used in the CLC meeting helped him as presenter to solicit and hear the feedback of his peers in a context which encouraged “out of the box thinking.” This shift in intent and listening circumvents any potential knee-jerk response of defensiveness and self justification which interferes with hearing and benefiting from the advice of others. ACS Athens participants find the diversity of the groups an essential component. In fact, when asked at the end of the year whether we should

restructure the groups school by school, they were adamant that we should retain the diversity claiming, “This was the best part!”

### 3. The focus on inquiry was the key component in successful problem solving.

The third core belief that emerged from our data was that the focus on inquiry was identified as a key component in the successful problem-solving that happens in these meetings. As Senge points out, in inquiry, “people begin to explore the thinking behind their views, the deeper assumptions they may hold, and the evidence they have that leads them to have these views... They begin to ask each other questions.” Inquiry is at the heart of the NSRF protocols in which questioning techniques guide participants to explore an issue where the outcome is always unknown. (NSRF differentiates between “protocols,” used to explore many possible outcomes, with NSRF “activities,” which lead to a specific outcome.) In a protocol, the focus question provides the direction, clarifying questions map out the known territory, and probing questions unfold new horizons both for the presenter and the participants alike. The focus of inquiry in these meetings is on the craft of teaching rather than the content areas. Teachers explore the complexity of their craft through dialogue rather than suggesting simple, temporary fix, solutions. Protocols give the opportunity for reflection on teaching practice not only for the presenter but also for the participants, resulting in many “Aha! moments” for everyone involved as they challenge their own assumptions. Through reflection and dialogue, an understanding of systematic causes of problems emerges. Teachers themselves become thinkers and learners experiencing a range of collaborative learning activities in the same kind of vigorous learning community that they hope to create in their classrooms. Furthermore, many of our teachers report being able to transfer activities used in CFG meetings successfully to their classrooms, using them to challenge students to think more deeply.

Once again, the NSRF coaches’ training transparently teaches that tight structures provided in the protocols



“Developing the skill of writing probing questions has been crucial to my classroom instruction. They help identify root causes or encourage different perspectives, which serves my students well.”

-Hrisi, MS English

ensure that inquiry is not haphazard but focused. Most protocols are preceded by a pre-conference with the presenter, typically complete the week prior to the CLC meeting. During the pre-conference the trained coach helps the presenter to identify and refine a focus question, to check that the issue is within the presenter's locus of control (thus ensuring that meetings are productive), and to confirm selection of the most effective protocol for the presenter's desired outcome. The focusing question then drives the protocol in order that the dialogue during the protocol helps to meet the presenter's needs.

At ACS Athens, we've conducted multiple trainings to reach a critical volume of trained coaches in each CLC group. The coaches all have a deeper understanding of the value of probing and clarifying questions, so conversations within the meetings have become more meaningful and focused and our participants report "coming away with a plethora of ideas." Several reported how they found the probing questions even more valuable than the suggestions offered to them, as these questions helped to unlock their thinking and opened them up to new possibilities. Because it is a tenet of CFG practice that presenters may only bring dilemmas that are within their locus of control, the effect is to empower teachers to discover solutions

and expand their toolkit of choices.

Amberdawn, High School Social Studies teacher, in this example, reflects both on the supportive aspect of working within a CFG community and the way in which collaborative inquiry challenged and stimulated her thinking, leading to even more creative teaching ideas.

"Teaching can be a very isolating experience. Sometimes, when faced with an instructional challenge, you just need "a safe place to fall." Not a space to whine or complain, but an opportunity to share what is troubling you about your practice without fear of judgement. Knowing that others have had or are currently facing similar problems is reassuring. Moreover, being able to benefit from the experience of others and knowing that there is a team that wants to help you to solve the problem in an empowering and energizing way is a priceless resource.

"You're not alone. You are part of a group with professional purpose. Even when the ideas might not be a perfect fit for your classroom, having someone with a totally different approach can help you make your own thinking more visible. And the suggestions can reinvigorate your thought process and lead to more inspired and creative learning activities. Even if I don't implement the exact sugges-

tions of the group, I always walk away with something that I can develop further to meet my goals."

Learning through an open-ended collaborative process of inquiry is not necessarily a familiar approach to all teachers, who have been taught that they must be the authority on their subject. Through participation in Collaborative Learning Communities, ACS Athens teachers experienced both the value of this style of collaborative learning for their own professional growth and how to set up and adapt the processes for their own classrooms.

### Reflective comments

In every school there is an untapped wealth of experience, research, and training held within the faculty themselves. In ACS Athens, a portion of our faculty are hired state-side on short contracts, and others are Greek locals whose relationship with the school lasts much longer. In schools like ours, it can be difficult to integrate these diverse groups both socially and professionally, yet the school has much to gain from the cross-fertilization of knowledge bases.

CFG groups provide the time and space for their integration and as Peter Senge says, allow us to "tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn." The challenge for organizations, he says, is "how to initiate change and deal creatively with the challenges of sustaining momentum." At ACS Athens these meetings provide a vehicle for new Stateside hires to gain insights into the cultural context of Greek parenting, learn from the experience of long-term colleagues while also sharing ideas from their own teaching experience and recent Stateside training. Furthermore, the CFG communities have been significant in mediating the school's shift in practice toward a constructivist approach to learning in which children negotiate meaning through collaboration and discussion. Teachers experi-

"Sometimes, when faced with an instructional challenge, you just need a 'safe place to fall.' Not a space to whine or complain, but an opportunity to share what is troubling..."

The CLC is a priceless resource."

-Amberdawn, High School Social Studies



ence collaborative learning with their peers, facilitation rather than training, and the powerful conversations which happen in the reflective debrief during CFG meetings. They become familiar with protocols and are then often able to experiment with this new skill set in their classrooms and make them their own.

In this study we have tried to capture the diversity and range of influence these communities have had by gathering anecdotal evidence on the participants' perceptions of the experience of working within CFG communities over the past two years. Yet this was just a initial attempt at framing research, and we are well aware, was quite limited in scope. One of the problems in researching this kind of community is to find a way to assess the extent of its value. Senge quotes W.E. Deming, pioneer of the quality management revolution, as asserting, "You can only measure 3% of what matters."

One *Connections* reader, fellow NSRF National Facilitator, Terry Daugherty from Indiana, wrote to us in response to our previous article, telling of his own experience in beginning a CFG in a middle school consisting of 55 teachers. "We began with a few and ended up with 80% of our staff in a CFG at the end of the fourth year. We have no evidence to really prove it, but many of us felt that the CFG work helped sustain us, innovate our work, and actually improve test scores."

This sentiment echoes, we think, what many people who work in CFG communities are sensing. So we would like to pose a focusing question to the *Connections* readership to help us tune this research project: "In what way could we most effectively gather data and analyze the effect of CFG communities on our schools?" We would be delighted to receive your warm and cool feedback! Please [email us with your comments!](#)

*Part one of this two-part series appeared in the June 2016 issue of Connections.*

## LINKS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Part one of this article series in June 2016 Connections

Add NSRF/Harmony School Corporation as your beneficiary at <http://smile.Amazon.com>

Purchase The Fifth Discipline: Via Amazon Smile

Barkley, Steve, Education Consultant. "Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud."

Rozovsky, Julia, , Google Operations. "The Five Keys to a Successful Google Team."

 Compass Points Activity

 Dilemma Analysis Protocol

 Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger Activity

## NSRF STAFF NEWS



**Ivan Harris** is the new Operations Manager for the National School Reform Faculty and a CFG Coach in Indiana. In previous years he worked for Indiana University Libraries and the United States Department of Navy as a Human Resources Specialist. Ivan earned a B.A. in Industrial Organizational Psychology from DePaul University and a M.A. in Organizational Management from George Washington University.

Serendipity led Ivan to NSRF and our mission of improving student achievement and adult learning: with his older daughter enrolled in Harmony School and his wife in a doctoral program at Indiana University, Ivan had been a full-time stay-at-home dad with his youngest daughter. Now he's happy to be working within the Harmony School building, with Evelyn upstairs and Olivia just down the hallway in "the baby room" on a part-time basis.

With responsibilities for new client contact, managing the website, and improving customer satisfaction, you may contact him with your questions or comments at [ivan@nsrf-harmony.org](mailto:ivan@nsrf-harmony.org).

**Dotty Sharp** continues her work in the office, now as our part-time Office Manager. She answers the phone and the general office email at [nsrf@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org), handles billing, fulfillment of web orders, and membership documentation.

**Luci Englert McKean** continues her role as Managing Editor of *Connections*, and has been promoted to Assistant Director of the NSRF.

**Michele Mattoon** continues as Director of the NSRF.



"In the course of history there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

~Wangari Maathai,  
the first  
African woman  
to win the  
Nobel Peace Prize