

# Inquiry Circles

## An Appreciative Approach to Professional Inquiry

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*"In the long run, a people is known, not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells."*

- Flannery O'Connor

**I**nquiry can poke air holes in your life!" These were the words of a group member at a recent NSRF Inquiry Institute. The group consisted of experienced CFG coaches who worked together to explore the viability of inquiry in our work using the Inquiry Circles Protocol. By shaping inquiry questions as laid out in the protocol, the group succeeded in moving beyond their current work world- one characterized by recent, huge budget cuts, school closures and job losses- to a place that required better understandings of what was good and strong in their work.

The Inquiry Circles Protocol is intended as a way to refresh our professional lives through an asset-based approach to inquiry. In constructing this protocol, I was inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry model for organizational change generated by Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003). They proposed that "organizations move toward what they study" (p. 29). This protocol recognizes the power of our questions to influence our actions. In essence, how we inquire influences the culture of our schools.

It is my hope that the Inquiry Circles Protocol will help us remember to be curious, to share and develop our stories of professional strength, and to rebuild a narrative culture around us that contributes to a healthy and enriched professional life.

The protocol intentionally asks us to focus on what is healthy about our life's work, but also helps us unwrap such gifts through specific acts of critical friendship. It is clear that "goodness" is fraught with contradictions and complications but by choosing to grab hold of and build on the positive - what is

good and working for us - we can make a difference in the quality of our work experiences and in the public conversation about education. This information should be at least as prominent in our discourse on schooling as the problems that are more often highlighted.

It is interesting to consider, as a professional community, what our stories will tell us about the actions we should support in order to make a positive difference for professional educators as learners and for students as learners. The protocol supports time for participants to think for themselves and to think in collaboration with others. It is a reflexive and expansive process. This is the dance of professional inquiry - space to reflect alone - space to reconsider in the company of respected others - space to act and grow.

The title of the protocol, Inquiry Circles, was chosen for several reasons:

1. to highlight the cyclical nature of inquiry - questions lead to more questions
2. to denote the continuous connections of understanding that inquiry can support
3. to present a method for supporting inquiry that asks people to circle-up and share their stories of hope and promise

### Overall Purpose:

To generate robust inquiry questions that can lead our work in support of teachers and students as power-based learners.

### Supporting Goals:

- to place inquiry at the heart of our work
- to support reflective practice
- to encourage the development of an evidence-based, positive narrative culture
- to build on the good
- to develop a vision-based professional voice

This protocol may be used as an agenda for a day in the design of a CFG Institute. ■

*A summary of the protocol is reprinted on the opposite page, and the full version is available on our website, at [www.nsrffharmony.org/connections.html](http://www.nsrffharmony.org/connections.html). You can reach Betty Bisplinghoff at [bettybs@arcges.uga.edu](mailto:bettybs@arcges.uga.edu)*

