The members of learning groups include adults as well as children. Documenting children's learning processes helps to make learning visible and shapes the learning that takes place. Members of learning groups are engaged in the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual dimensions of learning. The focus of learning in groups extends beyond the learning of individuals to create a collective body of knowledge.

Were you one of them? I was one of them. My mom taught, up until two years before this, at the same black school that I attended. She had been one of the black teachers that had been forcibly required to go teach at black schools, two years earlier, because that had been kind of the easing-in of this whole thing.

You take a few black teachers and sprinkle them into white schools and a few white teachers and they fight and they create a common body of knowledge. It was supposed to be a voluntary integration program. What it actually meant was, for the first time, children and families who were in black schools now could have the "Freedom of Choice" to attend white schools, that almost invariably, had better facilities. Everything was better and everything was up to date.

It also meant that white students also had the "Freedom of Choice" to attend the schools that had traditionally been all black. As you can imagine, the black schools, that had traditionally been all black, remained so. A really small handful of black students went to do the voluntary integration at white schools.

For more information about the National School Reform Faculty and the MLV, visit pzweb.harvard.edu

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

Were you one of them? I was one of them. My mom taught, up until two years before this, at the same black school that I attended. She had been one of the black teachers that had been forcibly required to go teach at the white school two years earlier, because that had been kind of the easing-in of this whole thing.

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For more information about this project, visit Project Zero at gseb.harvard.edu

For more information about Reggio Emilia Schools, visit zerosei.comune.re.it
D: I think the thing that surprised me was how connected it was to things I was thinking about doing at my previous school, that I didn’t know had been connected to NSRF.

K: I was a teacher at Foshay Learning Center, and at that school, we were using lots and lots of protocols, examining student work. We had a State of California Grant called SB 1274. That grant used, “the California Protocol” as a tool to examine our work. It was the way that our school, as a whole school and in small groups, looked at the impact of the changes we were making. I had been doing that for years, working with hundreds of teachers, on our government structure, leadership and at every decision that we made. I was just so shocked to see where this came from.

K: I have never heard of the California Protocol.

D: It’s the Tuning Protocol! I was amazed. I was blown away. I thought, “I had no idea that this is what we were doing.” I didn’t know the genesis of what we were doing.

K: When did you first hear about NSRF?

D: I was a faculty member with the UCLA School Management Program. It was working on improving LA Unified and the surrounding metropolitan area that were just finishing up their fifth year with Annenberg and the LA Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), and both had been doing CFG work. These projects were going to be closing and LAAMP began looking around for organizations that they felt confident would carry-forth the work of CFGs.

D: Yes, and asked if we would take that on. Patricia Avertte took eight of us at the School Management Program under her wing and put us through a week-long seminar. She gave us an intense version of a facilitator’s training over period of weeks. With that and with her ongoing support, we began to roll out our first CFG coaches institutes. She supported us through that, coached us, gave us feedback, and we began to make adjustments and began to work with the NSRF. It struck me as a way to really create true community. I was selected as the person to spearhead the effort for UCLA SMP on this.

K: Last year you moved from working full-time at the UCLA SMP into the LA School District. What are you doing with the school district, now?

D: This year, I am acting coordinator for secondary literacy. Our local district has about 65,000 students. In the secondary we currently serve seven comprehensive middle and high schools and we have five more that are either starting up right now, this year, or will be in the next three years.

K: What do you do?

D: We’re a professional development arm around literacy. We support teachers and literacy in a few ways. The central district has what is called, a secondary literacy plan. It is a very clear and focused plan that looks at content literacy. It takes the fact that so many students at the secondary level are really struggling readers and focuses on those specific strategies that we can use, and coach one another to use effectively, to help readers do what they need to do in order to become strong readers. We have a group of coaches and we have literacy cadres. Our work is to coach those coaches and to work directly with those cadres and directly with the school-site teachers.

K: You use the word, “coaches.” How does the coaching you are talking about relate to CFG coaching?

D: It relates really well for me. I think it’s just lucky that it does, because CFG coaching is not part of the LAUSD. The coaches in our area have, prior to my joining the team, received training in cognitive coaching, there is of course a link there, and have received training in specific literacy strategies. The place where they are now, the CFG-type coaching is really beneficial to them because it provides them with a really systematic way to coach one another. Many of them have just been together now long enough, this is starting their third year of working together, that they’re really ready to start looking really directly at one another’s work, so we have some protocols ready for them on how to do that well.

The other portion of how CFG work connects is that our local district is really focusing district-wide on the use of protocols when looking at student work. We’ve been training and supporting that.

K: Have any of those coaches had a chance to go through coaches seminars?

D: It’s really fortunate that when I returned to the district that I had so many existing relationships in so many small structures. One has coaches have been able to help structure meetings in a way that they focus on improved student learning and professional dialogue.

Houston A+ also uses Critical Friends tools and strategies as the operating foundation for the organization. Continued learning, examination of practice and cycle of inquiry are integral pieces of all meetings. Houston A+ staff members examine each other’s work, ask probing questions and read and discuss the latest research to determine its application to the work around supporting student learning.

Grants from the Annenberg Foundation, Bank of America, the Brown Foundation, the Joe B. Foster Family Foundation, the Clayton Fund, Ocean Energy, and the Simmons Foundation support the work of CFG in the Houston area.

Some Highlights of Houston A+ Initiatives

Houston Schools for a New Society Houston Schools for a New Society (HSNS), a partnership between Houston ISD and Houston A+ Challenge, is redesigning high schools to ensure that all Houston ISD graduates have the knowledge and skills they need for college or the workforce. Participating high schools are moving away from the traditional, large comprehensive high school model into small, theme-based academies designed around teaching and learning big ideas and maximum personalization of the learning environment for all students. Many of these schools’ staff members have received CFG new coach training.

In addition, a recent informal survey indicates that many of the schools also are using CFG tools in their regular academy meetings as they develop a professional learning community on campus. As adults begin to collaborate in new ways in these smaller structures, one CFG coach has been able to help structure meetings in a way so that they focus on improved student learning and professional dialogue.

Partnership for Quality Education In 2000, Houston A+ Challenge joined a consortium of universities, school districts and a community college that was forming Partnership for Quality Education, a redesign teacher preparation programs at their respective institutions. PQE formed six design teams to reshape teacher education courses along with core and majors courses. The PQE teams attended CFG trainings and then used the protocols to facilitate their design work. In addition, “Making the Case for Quality Teacher Education,” a new report by Adolfo and Betsin Santos of the Consortium for Assessment, Research and Evaluation of Policy (CAREP) and several PQE design team members as saying CFG changed the way they teach. For example, participants said they have implemented more discovery learning in their classes and become more of a coach than a lecturer.

Fondren Reforming Schools Summer Institute More than 250 Houston area educators, parents, and community members convened in July for the eighth annual Fondren Reforming Schools Summer Institute (FRSSI) to explore the theme “Keeping Kids Connected.” Institute highlighted included keynote addresses by Jim Burke and Grace.
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School Three - The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School Beth Graham, Massachusetts

four years ago, when I became principal of a small school in a large, urban, conversion high school, I had the rare opportunity to grow a new community. I resolved to create a school that sharply contrasted from the non-institutional institutions of which I had been a product. In order to begin this task, I feared and promoted myself as head learner. For teachers, students, and parents, I modeled “not knowing.” I was curious, asked a lot of questions, and resisted easy solutions. As a result, I helped us begin to manage the ambiguity that comes from doing school differently.

We began to understand, for example, that teaching and learning are complex issues, and must remain at a complex level if we are to do deep, meaningful work in schools. Because I made my own learning public, the kids learned to buy in, and a few began to share in the decisions that affected our school.

I recovered a professional learning community among all adults in our school when it emerged from a deeply evident context of privatized teacher practice. What would it take to shift the culture of adults in order to best serve the needs of all students? We had to learn to work differently.

First, we had to create new structures to support our new learning. A schedule was created, therefore, that provided common planning time for teachers. Having time available was not enough; however, teachers required my support as facilitator of those meetings in order to transfer their experience to their students. Curriculum into unexplored realms of essential questions and integrated, interdisciplinary, and thematic units of study. To make connections among disciplines explicit to our students, we learned that we needed first to uncover and make explicit our understandings as we learned and practiced thoughtful, reflective, and civil discourse, however, our curriculum began to emerge.

While structures such as common planning time were critical to support our new learning, how we used the structures was pivotal in our becoming a professional learning community. For example, in addition to our core curriculum meetings, a weekly meeting was convened for all advisors. While developing personal relationships with some adults in our school, we learned that we needed space and time to reflect together as a community of adult learners, and as individuals. Using the Collaborative Assessment Conference, we examined student work from multiple perspectives, and surfaced our assumptions (often contradictory) about teaching and learning. Finally, the Tuning Protocol allowed us to ask for help in improving our assignments, and to design authentic assessments that helped students to demonstrate deep understanding.

These structured conversations were so much more than nimble exercises and clever activities – this became the way we worked in our school. It was our culture.

As a result, the adults in our school became collaborators, and, ultimately, modeled thinking and learning for our kids. It was not unusual to observe teachers in their practice in front of kids: “Where do you think we should go next?” “What do you think we need to do to support your learning?” As teachers became more comfortable in their new roles as coaches, or facilitators of learning, most were able to slip the bonds of having to be the expert in the room.

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one that is entering its third year. The thing I remember most is how excited we were about the fact that there were really smart people in the room. And together, we were going to have the luxury of being to learn and learn together. At the same time there was that feeling of tentative-ness. “Am I really going to be safe?” “What do we have to do to make sure that we’re safe?” We all worked in the same building, at that time, and we knew that each of us had alliances with people in the building who were not a member of our group. There were concerns about confidentiality. There were concerns about just how honest we can be, really. There were concerns about making sure that we were clear about what we wanted to get out of this, that the time was not a waste of time.

K: Had you been part of a CFG before you coached that one?

D: No. I had learned from my experience of having used protocols extensively at my school and having gone through transition work later on from Annenberg to the UCLA SMP.

K: What did you learn from this experience?

D: The thing I learned the most is the importance of being honest with new coaches in coach’s institute and about how much we’re learning that we don’t already know. Even now, as with many institutes as we do at UCLA, and even with having been a CFG member for going on three years with a really stable CFG, coaching two or three times a year and to a second one, there are still so many things I don’t know, that I am finding out, and I am amazed at all of this work. I feel that I am just as green as I was when I coached my first CFG!

K: Can you talk a little more about learning how much you don’t know?

D: I think it really has put us in good steady that we’ve really had to be hum-ble, because we truly couldn’t even possibly think that we knew anything, going in. We just continue to feel that same way, that we have had more experiences, and still know that there is a lot we don’t know, and that same sense of humility and wonder and questioning, and then hopefulness that we could think of that first insti-tute. I think we still have that and I think that is what makes our institutes good at UCLA.

K: You talk about a sense of hope-fullness. What hope do you have for schools now?

D: The hope that I see comes from a heightened sense of awareness of subtle discriminations and not just a willingness, but a sense of responsibil-ity, to not let that be OK. The example that comes to mind is watching the students on TV from schools in east Los Angeles, which are the schools I serve. They were protesting in front of the school about the number of army and other military recruiters that more or less stay at our schools. They wanted to know why these people are practically camped-out on our school site, when they’re not visible at the schools in the San Fernando Valley and the affluent areas. I think a few years ago, students I was working with may have not been willing to say that or to take action around it or may not have even noticed that. The other thing that gives me hope is seeing teachers and certain administrators feel the impact that a true CFG or truly using CFG pro-cesses can have on our school. The story that comes to mind is about high school kids who noticed something going on with their teachers who had been to Critical Friends Institutes. The teachers had started coming into one another’s rooms and watching each other. The kids noticed that the teach-ers were starting to use similar practic-es. One of these teachers told me a kid came up to her and said, “Miss…, are you guys learning something?” (laughing) and that gave me hope.

K: (laughing) That’s wonderful Debby, looking back over your grow-ing involvement in NSRF – which began with the “California Protocol” at the Foshy Learning Center and grew rapidly as your positions within LA Unified and UCLA SMP evolved, and even included co-hosting the NSRF Winter Meeting in 2003, your recent acceptance of the role of co-director-ship in NSRF?

D: What are you going to do as a director of NSRF?

K: (laughing) I don’t know, yet. What do you hope you might do?

D: You know, this is probably going to sound funny because it’s not going to sound very…specific. Again, it goes back to that thing about community for me. As I listen to our group on the listserve, in groups of three, in groups of twelve, any group that I’m part of in NSRF, the thing that I notice is a need to really play attention to communication. So that’s where my focus lies right now, in really listening and watching to see what are the dynam-ics of communication. I think it’s not a coincidence that, “communicating” and, “community” are practically the same word. That’s my focus. I don’t want no other that gives me hope is seeing teachers and certain administrators feel the impact that a true CFG or truly using CFG pro-cesses can have on our school. The story that comes to mind is about high school kids who noticed something going on with their teachers who had been to Critical Friends Institutes. The teachers had started coming into one another’s rooms and watching each other. The kids noticed that the teachers were starting to use similar practices. One of these teachers told me a kid came up to her and said, “Miss…, are you guys learning something?” (laughing) and that gave me hope.

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