

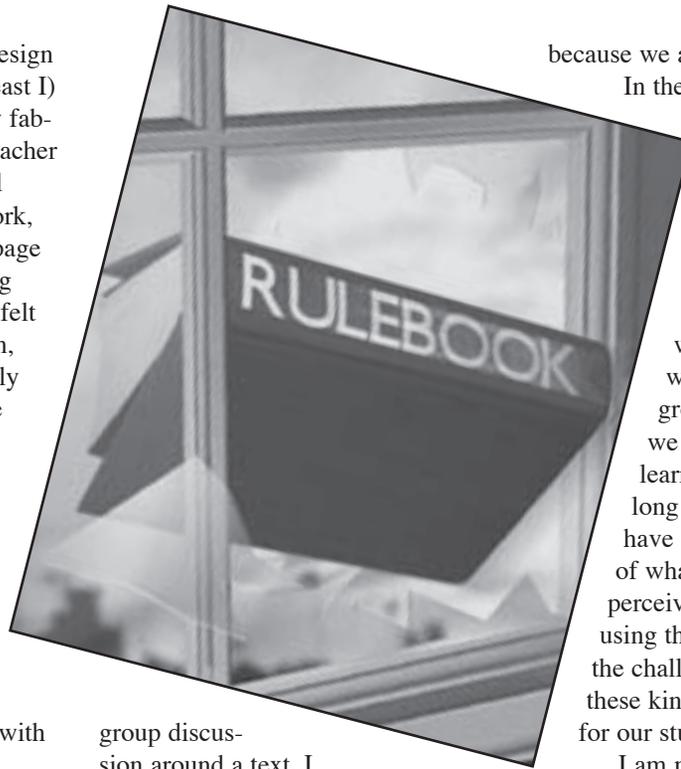
# Breaking the Rules

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I remember my first graphic design class in college. We (or at least I) thought we were enormously fabulous, creative and artistic. My teacher at the time was doing what we all thought was very basic design work, and I wanted to get into making page layouts for products and designing new logos. After months of what felt like years of learning basic design, Mrs. Salchow very matter-of-factly told us “Before you can break the rules, you have to know them.” After she spoke those words it clicked – I needed the basics: the theory, the research and the skills. When I obtained these needed facets to my education, then I could make an informed choice as a designer, to “break the rules.”

Mrs. Salchow’s words stuck with me even as I trained as a Critical Friends Coach in the summer of 1998. During the training, we learned how to facilitate a professional learning group on our campus. During this intensive weeklong training, I was on a roller coaster of emotions and learning. One minute I would be ready to run out and start the work right away and other times I was so drained with the demands of new pedagogical learning that I would go home with my head pounding. Already I saw my colleagues cutting corners or skipping debriefs in order to get finished early – already breaking the rules. I had learned the benefits of building a strong foundation, so I stuck with learning the protocols the prescribed way at first. I could see the deeper value of learning the process beyond just finishing the agenda.

Five years later and I am back in school as a student learning about educational theory, the research and skills. I was thrilled my first semester back when one of my professors passed out a chapter from *The Skilled Facilitator*, *Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*, and announced that each one of us would facilitate a



group discussion around a text. I must confess my first thought was – YEAH! I am in with an A; I can do this hands down. She told us to read the chapter for homework and be prepared for the next class.

I showed up excited and ready for the next class, prepared with 5 years as a CFG coach under my belt. Next came the biggest shock of my life: the class simply dove into the process. No norms were set, there was no discussion of the reading, the professor was just trying CFG protocols because she had seen them done before. Needless to say, the experience in the classroom spiraled out of control, and by the end of the semester, over half the class had completely shut down during text-based discussions. I was one of those students. This is a good example of not learning the rules before you break them.

Moving from a “could have been better” example to a “better” example, I have been working with the same CFG for over four years, and we meet every month. Why? Do we do the same protocols and connections that I learned in 1998? No, but we did for quite some time. Then why? I believe

because we all learned the rules first.

In the beginning the group set up norms and built the trust needed to do some very reflective and deep and meaningful work. Then after the first year, as the group became more comfortable with the protocol processes, we ventured into a whole-group inquiry based on what we believed to be powerful learning. Through this year-long journey, the group came to have a common understanding of what each of our members perceive powerful learning to be, using the protocols, to navigate the challenges we face in providing these kinds of learning experiences for our students.

I am not painting an unrealistic picture and portraying this CFG as the ultimate CFG group; rather I would like to portray a CFG that works and learns the processes together. As the coach that has been with the group the longest (my first co-coach retired and the second is still with the group but in a new position), I have found that as in families, not all times are good times but all times are a time to learn with and from each other. We are now very comfortable with each other and so, when we start a meeting without going over norms, it is OK. When the CFG modifies protocols to meet the presenter’s needs or question, it is OK. While each member of the group faces many challenges in our practice, we know that in CFG we will all work together, both inside and outside the protocols, to clarify the situation and expand our approach. It is our informed, collective decision making that makes breaking or rewriting the rules work. ■

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