

Now What? How Our Experiences at the Winter

Camilla Greene - Connecticut, Jennifer Fischer-Mueller -

At the Winter Meeting in January, Victor Cary, our keynote speaker, challenged us to think differently about the way we approach our work. He spoke to us about the need for a theory of action. He talked about building alliances across our differences in order to deepen and sustain our efforts to lead in the fight for equitable schools and a just society.

Victor spoke, shared some powerful quotes and strategies, and called on some of our participants to join him in a “Kiva,” in this case, a structured, public conversation by a handful of people from diverse backgrounds who play widely different roles in schools, but who come together around the need for equity to support the students whose best interests we hold in common.

When we began to plan this piece for *Connections* we thought of doing an interview with the Kiva participants so we could share their Winter Meeting conversation about how they approach “leading for equity” with those of you who were unable to join us in Philadelphia. Now some time has passed, and it seems clear that what we really need to know is how their public conversation about leading for equity, as well as all the rest of our reflection and collaboration at the meeting led to changes in our practice with colleagues, with kids and with their families.

Here are our own reflections on some of the changes and questions that grew out of our thinking and learning together last January.

Camilla Greene writes about her changed practice at last month’s National Facilitator’s Meeting:

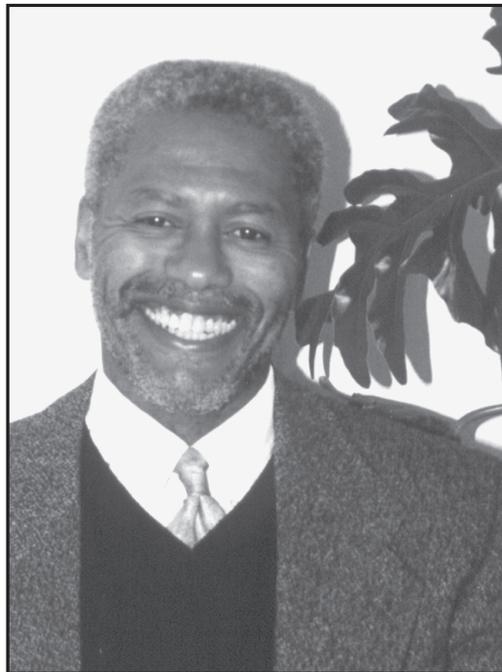
“For the first time in a National NSRF Facilitator’s Meeting, when asked to give feedback on a particular document on equity, I expressed my concerns about the purpose of the document and the intended audience for the document. It is my contention that we tend to play it safe and choose a text that is not too provocative. Too many times I have experienced in my CFG training the accommodations that are made by people of color to protect the safety and comfort zones of mainstream folks who feel threatened by equity conversations or are consumed with guilt and are not able to move forward.

“As a National NSRF Facilitator I am sensitive to the ‘Dynamic Zones’ and I wish to accommodate those who are not used to having open, honest conversation about race, class and gender. Therefore, I choose a less threatening, “safe” reading for the text-based discussion on equity. Most recently in CFG trainings, I have

been using more provocative texts and I have been experiencing a variety of responses. The responses I received from people of color are gratifying. Some people of color cannot believe that we are reading and discussing such a critical and provocative text on race in the context of our CFG training. The sense of urgency is most pressing among aware people of color for having the necessary deep conversations about race, class, and gender. We know how those issues play out in our urban high schools and urban classrooms across the country. In order to achieve more equitable academic outcomes for poor students and students of color, all adults in urban education must clearly be able to take action and level the academic playing field by making sure there are equitable learning environments for all students.

“Now I am thinking that we/I should offer a variety of readings on equity that range across the continuum from ‘soft to hard core’ to our participants and ask them to choose which level of intensity they would like to explore in their journey with equity. That way we can honor that we are all on a journey with equity. Some may be just beginning the journey. However, I contend that if you are a National NSRF Facilitator, and if you choose to work in urban areas, you should not have a choice about starting and moving quickly on the journey with equity towards creating learning environments for students and adults that

result in equitable outcomes for all students. As NSRF National Facilitators we must be ready to act on our own issues with equity, and help others act on theirs. To ‘act’ means to move past ‘awareness’ and ‘understanding.’ We must be able to have the open, honest and emotionally charged conversation with all educators about equitable outcomes for all students. We must be allies in equity, which means that it is not okay to pair someone who has had a lot of experience with dealing with equity with someone who needs experience. It is difficult enough to be in the equity work. We need each other as equity allies able to take appropriate actions when necessary.”



Victor Cary

Jennifer Fischer-Mueller, a participant in the Kiva, writes:

“Later tonight, at the very first minute of May 17, 2004, my partner Cathy and I will be at the City Hall of Cambridge, Massachusetts to apply for our marriage license. We are going tonight in order to participate in an historic event. For the

Meeting Continue to Change Our Practice

Massachusetts & Debbie Bambino - Pennsylvania

first time in the history of Massachusetts and the United States gay/lesbian couples are being allowed to marry. We want to be there.

“Our NSRF colleague Debbie Bambino ends all of her emails with the quote “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress, Education as the Practice of Freedom*).

“I have too many scary memories of growing up a gay kid. I can not imagine how my life would have been different if someone had ever said to me, ‘When you grow up, you can marry the person you are in love with - the person of your choice.’ If only a teacher had said to me ‘Jennifer, it’s going to be OK.’ If a teacher had ever taught me in a manner that respected and cared for my soul, my learning would have been different. Times are changing.

“During the Kiva at the Winter Meeting, I introduced myself and briefly described my work in Brookline, MA. The Public Schools of Brookline are committed to eliminating the achievement gap. We are engaged in the tough and brutally honest conversations about the relationship between race and

academic achievement. We hold ourselves to high standards of engagement and dialogue. We have very consciously created a process for pursuing high academic achievement for all students, with a focus on the gap between white and black and Latino/a students. We need to exert that same level of consciousness and attention to children who sit in those categories that represent inequity – second language learners, disabled students, gay/lesbian students, homeless students, students living in poverty – I need not go on.

“In my work, while sometimes still scared, I must provide for all students what was absent for me – an adult who shows respect and care by being authentic, to show them that it’s going to be OK.”

And finally, Debbie Bambino, a member of the Planning Team, writes:

“While the lessons of the Winter Meeting have been

playing out in many ways in both my work and my studies since January, I will turn my focus here on our recent facilitator listserv conversation and upcoming book chat.

“What started as an online call for the need for the addition of a facilitator of color at an upcoming seminar quickly became a conversation about many other forms of equity.

This ongoing conversation was then refocused on race and the particular difficulties we appear to have staying the course when questions of race and our potential racism are implied.

“The listserv conversation has died down for now, but some twenty list members have made a commitment to read and write/chat about a book on the first weekend in June. The book is called *The Trouble with Friendship, Why Americans Can’t Think Straight About Race* by Benjamin DeMott. In the book DeMott challenges us to look beyond our good intentions to be nice and become friends. He questions the political impact of an approach that raises interracial friendship as a goal in a society where the achievement gap continues to widen and survival itself is a huge issue for large numbers of people of color.

“I don’t know where the upcoming chat will take us, but I do know that I feel we are approaching the conversation about race, friendship and collegiality in a different way. I know that if we are serious about the strategic alliance-building that Victor

Cary spoke about at the Winter Meeting, our alliances need to be principled ones that don’t skirt our differences or the weaknesses in our understanding.

“Reading this book is a bit uncomfortable. I’ve recognized pieces of myself in a few of the unfavorable characterizations that DeMott has provided. My discomfort reminds me of the Zones that Camilla mentioned earlier, and I know that it’s in that less than comfortable zone where I stand to learn the most.

“I hope that this book chat will be the first of many deeper conversations about the inequities that weaken our unity as a force committed to leading for equity in support of all children.”

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