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 designs and new logos. After months of what felt like years of learning basic design, Mrs. Salchow very much-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 how, the why, the rules. In my mind, 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 deep discussions, to create a sharing atmosphere and to create an agenda. 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 didn’t go the prescribed way at first. I could see the deeper value of learning the process beyond just finishing the agenda. One minute I would be ready to run out and start the next 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 calling 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.

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Breaking the Rules
Michaelann Kelley, Texas

I want to give them my strength, not my fears. A quote from James Baldwin: “To act is to be committed. To be committed is to be in danger.” How do you bring yourself fully to your work and not lose yourself in that work? Ultimately every minute of Winter Meeting contributed to the epiphany of realizing that...
Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election... to place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment.” The 2004 NSRF Winter Meeting was “a journey through mud to magic” (to paraphrase my storytelling partner) which placed me back in the middle of the stream of my life, impelling me toward truth and right, if not perfect contentment.

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Our World Café
(continued from page 12)
I am still thinking about the question, “What does equity look like?” Without open conversation, how will we get there? We won’t. We will continue to hold institutions to tell us we are reaching all students when in fact the data shows something very different. When every student is empowered to take control of their learning and all students see themselves as a vital connection to the world, then we will have begun the road toward real reform. Until then, the best we can do is pretend and congratulate ourselves for thinking we are doing the right thing, instead of actually doing the right thing. It is not easy, but it is critical to have that conversation. CFGs give voice to progress and provide a check on what does and does not work. They bring the voice to the table where no voice existed. World Café is not a panacea, but it is a bridge to the table where conversations about where to begin.

Gregory Foote is a teacher and CFG Coach at El Sereno Middle School in Los Angeles. He can be reached by email at gfoote@mc2.com

This year, the National Facilitators’ Meeting took place in Chicago in May. Conversations among the National Facilitators at this meeting, as well as among members of Center of Activity contacts at the annual Winter Meeting in January, are just two ways that leaders in the organization learn with and from each other, thus supporting the growth and development of NSRF work nationally. Hawaii was one of the first states that – up until this spring – did not have a formal way to participate in the decision making of NSRF, or to learn with people in NSRF from other parts of the country. There were people interested in pursuing CFG work, but since Hawaii didn’t have any NSRF National Facilitators, there was not a Center of Activity to support the work or to facilitate CFG Coaches Seminars. Educators in Hawaii had to either go to the mainland for their CFG Coaches’ seminars, or had to fly NSRF National Facilitators to Hawaii.

So, in February, two NSRF National Facilitators from the mainland and three CFG Coaches from Hawaii co-ordinated and co-facilitated a two-day Introduction to CPFs for 24 participants from Hawaii schools. Following the two-day introduction, these CFG coaches from Hawaii were sponsored by an NSRF National Facilitator in Los Angeles, and went to California to co-facilitate a full five-day CFG coaches seminar with her.

Hawaii now has two NSRF National Facilitators, hopes to offer CFG coaches seminars with follow-up, and is our newest NSRF Center of Activity. One of the interesting things about Hawaii’s Center of Activity is that it has involved public and charter schools, as well as independent schools, from its inception. Intentionally bringing together these diverse strands of educators is consistent with Hawaii’s cultural value of interdependence, and other Centers of Activity will hopefully be able to learn from their experience and work together.

NSRF’s National Center provides some direct support to individual CFG coaches, but the bulk of the National Center’s work is focused on supporting local Centers of Activity and their National Facilitators. The NSRF National Facilitators in the Hawaii Center of Activity are not bringing national projects to their local community, but are instead using ideas, insights and tools gleaned from their work with the work of others in NSRF’s national network to inform their local work and context. That is what building capacity is all about.

From Hawaii to Maine, to Washington and Florida, NSRF Centers of Activity are providing the necessary support to help educators move away from their previous isolated practice toward the development of collaborative learning communities. The ultimate goal? To support every child in developing his or her full capacity as a person, as a learner, and as a responsible citizen.

Steve Botcheke, Gene Thompson-Grove and Daniel Baron are the three Co-Directors of NSRF. They may be contacted at the following email addresses:

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Daniel Baron – dbaron@bloomington.in.us

I t’s the first Saturday of the month and here in Philadelphia that means our leadership CFG is meeting. We had just finished our “opening moves” and one of the principals was puzzling over how to offer space and time for the diverse professional learning needs of her staff. After hearing her concerns, I slipped out of the meeting and ran upstairs, to get Marjorie Larner’s new book, Pathways: Charting a Course for Professional Learning. I had had an “aha” earlier in the week when I was reading the book and thought our CFG would benefit from it.

I know we all talk about customizing agendas and processes to fit the needs of our groups and schools, but there’s something about Marjorie’s book that makes this customization tangible. She shares a “Continuum of Participation” template and a “Ways to Participate in Professional Development” menu that empower teachers and groups to chart their courses in very specific ways. It was this notion of differentiation that struck a chord for me. Have we been guilty of too narrow a focus on the ways and times adults learn?

As a coach, I am continually doing the dance between mandated and voluntary professional learning, worrying about buy-in and whether mandated teacher “learning” has any impact or value for our kids. We know “one size fits all” doesn’t work for our students, but we often still try to use this model for adults. I have a really strong hunch that using the tools in Pathways will help us develop differentiated learning plans that empower teachers and administrators to move forward using many paths toward their shared destination of greater student success.

Members of my CFG are ordering copies of Pathways as they begin work on their plans for summer trainings and school improvement. I look forward to hearing about the ways they use this new resource at their schools and I urge others to use this tool too.

Pathways: Charting a Course for Professional Learning
Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Marjorie Larner is a former teacher and administrator. She is currently a staff developer at the Denver-based Public Education and Business Coalition (PERC). Marjorie is a member of NSRF and Colorado Critical Friends Group. You can contact her at larnerm@earthlink.net, and order Pathways at www.heinemann.com

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CONNECTIONS is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty. Published three times per year by the Harmony Education Center, it provides a forum for CFG coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

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Production Coordinator — Sarah Childers

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