I was the first meeting of our third year together as a CFG. We knew we had come a long way when one member immediately stepped forward with student work, and even requested a tuning protocol to refine her assignment. In the beginning most of us had to be convinced to bring even our students’ best work. It was a sign that we were doing something right. We had stuck together and established the kind of support and trust that allows risk-taking and for deep, honest conversations.

While our meetings have always been substantial and heartfelt, we agreed at the end of last year that we needed to take our work to a different level. And what was that next step? Were there ways, for instance, of applying in our own way together.

Finally a foreign language teacher suggested that our essential question might be: how do we bring more reflection into the classroom? With that question, the conversation turned a corner.

Wasn’t this exactly the point of our own meetings: a time to step back from the busyness of our days to reflect on our practice? We’re not our students’ lives often as pressured and fragmented as ours? How could we create for them the same opportunity for more reflection? We were starting to forge a direction that was acceptable to the whole group. We agreed to focus, for this year, on developing ways to encourage our students to become more reflective about their own work.

The next morning there was an excited e-mail from one member about a successful class discussion with his sixth graders regarding group norms. He ended the message: I love our group and how we work together. I want my classes to have the same feel.

There is something tremendously satisfying in seeing our talk bear fruit and in knowing that one small thing happening on one side of the protocol anyway! Wasn’t it about giving and receiving thoughtful feedback? A number of people shared how they were already using aspects of this protocol with their students from lower through upper school.

The conversation continued, though a bit ragged. I said at one point, “We aren’t sure where we are going with this.” One member said in jest, “Well, why don’t you know?” I laughed. “Because I’m the teacher, right?”

To my mind, though, this was precisely what we needed as a group at that moment: to be ragged and to find our way together.

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Eric Baylin teaches art at Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn NY, a pre-K-12 independent school with 935 students and 130 faculty members. The school has had CFGs since 1998. The group of teachers in both middle and upper school. Grades and disciplines represented include science, math, English, foreign language, dance, visual arts, 1st, 3rd and 4th grades.

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