Coaching Lessons from Co-Rec Softball

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Bouncing Balls

I have always loved games that involve lots of people and bouncing balls. They seem so social, friendly and filled with quirky and unexpected events. In my neighborhood, as a child, to get a game started involved going door to door to find enough people to play at any given time, and usually involved kids of many ages, some adults, and even a dog or two (great fielders!). We had to “close fields” if there weren’t enough players, expand and contract teams around mealtimes, and often the youngers were upkeepers (not to mention insurers for the adults). I loved the inclusiveness and ornate strategies that evolved from so many variables. I always learned a lot about how different personalities respond to different situations.

Though I played in more formal leagues, it was never as much fun. As an adult, I couldn’t really find the same camaraderie or the same style adult softball leagues here in the Midwest. It seemed way too competitive and not enough players, expand and contract often, and ornate strategies that evolved from many variables. I learned a lot about how different personalities respond to different situations.

That changed five years ago when I was asked to be on a Co-Recreational softball team, right around the time I became part of my first Critical Friends Group. As time has progressed, I’ve become a coach for both teams and it is hard not to notice some overlap in skills required to be effective in both roles.

Field Notes for CFC coaching:

Ideas are a lot like bouncing balls and tossing them around in a group of colleagues can yield unexpected insights. People come to the table from different backgrounds, some have scarfs from previous group interactions and need to make sure their ideas will be listened to.

The Rules of Engagement

The “extra” rules of Co-Recreational softball games are so many ways to

Coaching involves helping to set and honor ground rules. It’s challenging to coach a group and be an active member at the same time. If you’re going to participate completely, make sure the group is skilled enough to not let you dominate the game! A sign of a strong group dynamic is when the group can share the facilitation.

Diverse Skills and Comfort Zones

I like to ask what positions players want to play, what goals and fears they might have and then work from that space. Some members really only feel comfortable playing one position for a while; others like to switch around. Some of our best games have been when people are needed to fill in for absent team members – there is something about feeling needed that heightens the effort and enjoyment of the game.

Field Notes for CFC coaching:

People have to feel comfortable before sharing and taking risks. The urgency of being asked to help the group work on difficult and important goals. Having a diverse group increases the knowledge base and pool of insights available.

The Player-Couch

I love the side-by-side quality to being a player-coach. I can understand and explain, and when the game is over, I can talk together about the decisions we made. Some of our best games have been when we are able to talk together about the decisions we made.

Second Chances

There are so many ways to contribute to a successful softball game – a nice catch, hit, throw, backing up a fellow fielder, or hustling down to first. Mistakes have a way of becoming “before picture” of the next inning or (continued from page 14)

6. How will my students know they are getting it?

Here is what Juli wrote about these revisions and uses: “I do like the notion of making the question of TO WHOM, explicit” and use a thrower ball (that will not carry as far) when batting. Walking a man is two balls, to discourage pitching around women in the order. Batting orders must alternate genders. The rules, especially at first, feel less formal (gender oriented sax) and awkward to say the least.

Still, in the two years we’ve played as a teacher/parent/spouse/ alumni team, we’ve had a huge amount of enjoyment playing this hybrid game, and enough success (even a few come-from-behind victories). It has also definitely contributed to a feeling of closeness and shared insights within the group, as well as improving our skill level dramatically.

Field Notes for CFC coaching:

Protocols can be awkward at times and shared insights within the group, and the team runs smoothly during the game.

Field Notes for CFC coaching:

Making the question of TO WHOM explicit underscores how tools like “Quinn’s 6 Questions” can influence the culture of a school – especially when practitioners take the opportunity to reflect on how these tools apply to their own work and are pushed in their thinking by colleagues using different approaches.

We are in our third and final week of faculty summer planning here at Parker School and tomorrow we will spend our mornings in domain (interdisciplinary) meetings to share our curriculum across divisions (integrated grade levels middle, intermediate and upper high school) and plans for what we’re about to ask the kids to do this year... So, I’m thinking about how timing really is everything. I’m struck by re-looking at Juli’s questions on this particular day, given what we’ve up to here.

“The questions posed in Quinn’s 6 make me think about framing our lessons tomorrow differently... rather than convening separate conversations about curriculum and instruction and assessment, these questions frame a comprehensive discussion that may allow us to talk together about the academic program in a multi-dimensional way and revise our thinking on any aspect of the work. Terrific curricul-

The National School Reform Faculty is taking stock of the various research efforts that have been conducted and articles that have been written about Critical Friends Group over the past decade, and we need your help. Is your school or district implementing CFGs as a critical component of a larger restructuring effort that requires careful documentation, such as the Small Learning Communities or Comprehensive School Reform federal grants? Is your Center of Activity recording the impact of your work, using either quantitative or qualitative measures - e.g. the number of coaches trained each year, the number of schools using CFGs as part of their professional development program, or case studies of teachers of teachers changing their practice? Have you documented the growth of the teachers involved or the impact of their collaboration on their students’ work in the classroom? Have you come across an article about Critical Friends Groups that you think others might not be aware of? Are you conducting research related to the work of CFGs in particular, your graduate studies, perhaps even writing a dissertation on Critical Friends Groups? If you are interested in one of the questions above, please contact Carrie Brennan and share your “leads.” Call her at (520) 884-1548 or email her at carrie@cityhighschool.org. The National School Reform Faculty enters its tenth year next fall, and it is essential that we be able to demonstrate the power of our collective work.

Who is Quinn?

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questioning about teaching and learning. Addressing such questions requires individuals’ willingness to share and, often, reconsider their own privately held beliefs.

I want to think about this kind of facilitation as being full of tensions — tensions that as a facilitator I want to, in the spirit of this book, manage, rather than resolve. I want to be an advocate for the presenter’s success, yet also be in service to the whole group and its learning. I want to facilitate with a light hand, yet be firm in helping the group stick to the agreements it has made about how group members will talk together. I want to honor the steps and intention of the protocol, yet not feel by the indulgence of the group that day had been challenging, and the group confronted some deeply held beliefs about expectations for students. I knew that individuals in the group had moved to a new, more productive place in their thinking. As I read the reflections about the session written by group members, I was struck by how all of them talked about their learning, about their students, about their practice, about how other group members had challenged them to see the student work and their assumptions differently. There was not one mention about the protocol itself, about its facilitation, or the protocol. It is, first and foremost, about learning the presenter and the group do together on behalf of students.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

I think about this kind of coaching as a kind of reflection on practice. It is to foster educational and powerful learning experiences that create and support professional learning communities. A colleague, working with new teachers, had developed the habit of reflection in their practice. People in the group confronted some deeply held beliefs about expectations for students. As I read the reflections about the session written by group members, I was struck by how all of them talked about their learning, about their students, about their practice, about how other group members had challenged them to see the student work and their assumptions differently. There was not one mention about the protocol itself, about its facilitation, or the protocol. It is, first and foremost, about learning the presenter and the group do together on behalf of students.

Field Notes for CFG coaching — It’s clear to me that my CFG group has helped me look more insightfully than I could by myself at my own teaching practice — in that sense it is much more than a game. Still, I find that most of my effort as a CFG coach is in helping to create and keep an environment where people are relaxed and ready for the unexpected — requirements for thinking out of their comfort zone.

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