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Foreward to the book A Facilitators Book of Questions by Tina Blythe and David Allen

I love to facilitate — be it a protocol-guided conversation or some other kind of meeting or session — and I appreciate the work of really skilled facilitators when I am a participant in a group. However, I admit to being a bit skeptical of the value of books on facilitation, since most seem to focus on new sets of techniques, tricks, and recipes. This book is a much-needed departure from that approach to facilitation — and should be useful to experienced and beginning facilitators alike.

What makes it so different, and so useful? First, it avoids a generic discussion of facilitation and instead places facilitation in a particular context, that of facilitating protocol guided conversations. In so doing, the authors are able to ask facilitators to consider their own assumptions and beliefs — about their role as facilitators, about the purpose of the work they are facilitating, and about the group with whom they are working. Secondly, it avoids giving a generic discussion of facilitation and instead places facilitation in a particular context, that of facilitating protocol guided conversations. In so doing, the authors are able to ask facilitators to consider their own assumptions and beliefs — about their role as facilitators, about the purpose of the work they are facilitating, and about the group with whom they are working. Secondly, it avoids giving pat answers for potentially complex situations, and instead invites readers to consider the consequences — intentional or not — of the various "moves" they make as facilitators. Finally, it addresses the important question of facilitator stance, or disposition.

The book challenges those of us who facilitate to ask ourselves: How am I reading this group, and how do I know I am right? What should I do, and how do I decide this is the best course of action? Do I really believe these people have the capacity to do the learning they say they want to do — and if I do, how do I best serve them and their learning? Certainly, in reading this book, facilitators will expand their repertoire, and will walk away with ideas and tips for responding to the wide range of facilitation issues that inevitably come up in protocols. More importantly, however, the reader will be pushed to think about her stance as a facilitator, as all of the ideas about "how" to respond are linked to discussions of "why" one might want to respond in that way.

Facilitating protocols can be a tricky proposition. The task requires the facilitator not only to "show up," but to be fully present and completely attentive to the group and its learning. The protocols can help, acting, as the authors say, as a kind of co-facilitator. Protocols help build equity into the conversation; they help group members build new skills and habits; they help make efficient use of time; and they help build a useful agenda for almost any kind of meeting. However, they don’t stand on their own, and they require a firm, yet gentle hand on the part of the facilitator. A skillfully facilitated protocol not only creates the possibility of a group doing new, significant learning together — learning that will ultimately benefit students. It also can help a group build the kind of trust that allows it to tackle the really important (continued on page 14)
Success Analysis

Daniel Baron, Indiana

Can you imagine how different a school would be if we built a teachers’ and students’ strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses?

I was thinking that as a teacher I naturally thought that marking the incorrect answers on my students’ math assignments was the natural thing to do. It made sense to me that the opportunities for learning were most obvious when I brought my students’ attention (though I didn’t use red ink) to their errors. I routinely ignored correct answers without comment and kept my focus on what my students didn’t know or understand.

The disposition to look first for errors in my students’ work soon became a habit. The number of mistakes that were marked by me on their assignment often discouraged my students. I brought the same deficit-centric disposition to my own work. After every class I would naturally think of those students I didn’t reach, and even if the number were small, I would be hard on myself for the lack of success of my lesson. As a reflective practitioner, I would often analyze the reasons for the mistakes my students were making and then adapt my instruction to address the misunderstandings of my students.

Over time, I came to realize that many educators spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy focusing on their mistakes and those of their students.

was her practice to ask parents to tell stories about those times that they felt most comfortable and significant in their child’s school. Those stories were shared with teachers and the lessons learned from parents’ successful experiences in school became the data from which parent engagement schools designed programs. Parents became the experts/consultants for their children’s school.

The notion of reflecting and analyzing successes as a vehicle for improved practice struck me like a bolt of lightning. After 20 years of reflecting on my failures as a teacher, a whole new realm of possibilities that was based on the analysis of successful practice opened up for me. It was standard practice in professional development to provide successful (best) practices for the purpose of adding those strategies to teachers’ repertoires. Although this form of professional development often provided the immediate gratification of what to do on Monday, it did little to nudge the habit of reflective practice on what makes some teaching strategies successful.

The Success Analysis Protocol (SAP) was created to support educators to focus on those practices that actually met their desired outcome and to learn from each other through peer dialogue on what they analyzed what made that particular strategy successful. The intent was not to have colleagues add a particular strategy to their bag of tricks, but rather to reflect together on the analysis of what made the strategy effective and what new insights they might glean from the analysis of different dilemmas they were struggling with in their own pedagogy. The inquiry is on what made the practice successful and how to adapt future practice to reflect the new insights on what makes pedagogy effective. Invariably, the analysis by peers also enhances the understanding of the presenting teacher of their own work.

The SAP is easily tailored to be relevant to the goals of virtually any meeting. The prompts to guide the presentation of successes can be adapted to the topic at hand. I have used it to explore the success of CPG (continued on page 15)

"Many educators spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy focusing on their mistakes and those of their students.

Success Analysis

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Small Schools Northwest can be contacted at feicke@ksu.edu

Success Analysis (continued from page 3)

...for participating in the CPG Coaches’ Training, but also for the work they do in their CFG in their school. We are also integrating CFG and NSRF work into our Integrating Teachers’ License Program and other programs and are deeply examining other ways to model and support collaborative and reflective practice throughout the college.

In the words of BAYCES director Steve Jubb, “We are so much more effective at meeting human needs as interdependent communities than we are as independent individuals.” Our goal of equitable opportunities and outcomes for each of our children is impacted by our ability to work together and to create genuine collaborative community. As a school coach and director of Small Schools Northwest, I see it as my responsibility to model, support and create collaborative community in the environments I work in, and deeply value the support and reflective thinking that comes from NSRF and motivates me to continue this work.

Kim Feicke, Director of Small Schools Northwest, can be contacted at feicke@ksu.edu

Success Analysis (continued from page 3)

coaches, mathematical communication, issues of equity and social justice, service learning, powerful teaching and learning, distributed leadership, etc.

Teachers, by our very nature, tend to be hyper critical of our work. We are reluctant to talk about our practice, and are particularly reticent to share our successes with our colleagues out of deeply ingrained sense of humility. We are much more likely to share our limitations than our strengths. The Success Analysis protocol provides an opportunity for all participants to learn from each other’s practice and to apply what we have learned from each other for the benefit of all of our students.

I am now much more inclined to mark the correct answers (even with red ink) on student and teacher work.

Kim Feicke, Director of Small Schools Northwest, can be contacted at feicke@ksu.edu

Success Analysis (continued on page 15)
questions about teaching and learning. Addressing such questions requires individuals’ willingness to share and, often, reconsider their own privately held beliefs.

I want to talk 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 end of the session as if the protocol has somehow used us. I know the protocol will demand a certain rhythm by its very structure, yet I want to tap into the natural rhythm of the group. I want to be an active facilitator — one that group members can count on to keep the process safe so they can have potentially risky conversations with each other. Yet I know that sometimes the best thing I can do or say as the facilitator is nothing, because sometimes it has to be uncomfortable for group members to learn and grow. I want to be a fully contributing member of the group, yet I know that good facilitation sometimes demands that I give my full attention to that aspect of the work.

I remember the day I turned the corner in my thinking about myself as a facilitator. The conversation 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. An example of the kind of cross-country collegial sharing of practice comes from an on-line discussion about "Quinn’s 6 Questions."

The CFG coach who wrote that she uses Quinn’s 6 Questions regularly to check her own teaching, as well as having her interns use them during their internships, but doesn’t know their source (she’s had “…multiple copies floating around for years and I found them in our CFG toolkit uncited”) elicited a response from the list that reveals the broad scope of the work of NSRF.

Juli Quinn is a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Cal State University, L.A. She has been a CFG Coach since the first summer of training in 1995, she is a “Center of Activity” for NSRF in California, and works with lots of school folks in building Professional Learning Communities. Juli developed "Quinn’s 6 Questions" from a set of personal reflections, but the questions, as we know them, were developed in 1991-1992 when her sister was a new teacher, teaching first grade. Juli would meet with her every Sunday to help her plan for the following week, and since Juli had no idea about the curriculum for first grade, she had to conduct an inquiry to help her her sister think ahead. From there the rest is history. These deceptively simple questions — Quinn’s 6 — have been passed around the NSRF network, adapted and revised in ways that have made them relevant for different settings:

Quinn’s Original 6 Questions
1. What am I teaching?
2. Why am I teaching it?
3. How am I teaching it?
4. Why am I teaching it that way?
5. How do I know the kids are getting it?
6. How do the kids know they are getting it?

John Newlin of the Southern Maine Partnership wrote about a spin off of the Questions that reflect a broader school application:
1. What are we doing?
2. Why are we doing it?
3. How are we doing it?
4. Why are we doing it that way?
5. How do we know how well we’re doing it?
6. How do others know how well we’re doing it?

Coaching Lessons...
(continued from page 4)
Coaching Lessons from Co-Rec Softball

David Christman, Indiana

Bouncing Balls
I have always loved games that involve lots of people and bouncing balls. They seem so social, friendly and filled with quickly and unexpectedly. 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!). I had to “close fields” if there weren’t enough players, expand and contract teams around mealtimes, and often the younger participants were the mentors for the adults. I loved the inclusiveness and ornate strategies that evolved from so many variables. I also learned a lot about how different personalities respond to different situations.

Though I played in more formal leagues, it was never as much fun.

It seemed way too competitive and not so many variables. I also 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 CFG 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 scars from previous group interactions and need to make sure their ideas will be listened to.

The Rules of Engagement
The “extra” rules of Co-Recreation softball:

- There is no such thing as too many or too few participants. We have to balance issues of perceived power: having the same number of men and women on a team (two each in the outfield, infield and pitcher/catcher combination); men must bat opposite handed (than their “natural” or “traditional” hand) and use a bigger bat (that will not carry as far) when batting.
- Walking a man is two bases, to discourage pitching around women in the order. Batting orders must alternate genders.
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from the other person. This work has made me continue to hone my listening skills. As president, listening to other people’s problems and working to co-construct possible solutions is a big part of my job.

In general, I think I’d say that reflective practice has become a more ingrained part of who I am now. Each time I’m in a situation, I never leave it without thinking about the impact of my participation. I wonder what I worked, what didn’t work and how I could have handled it differently or better.

The key is that by reflecting, I grow, and this has made the idea of my being a lifelong learner more explicit.

Staying in this work and expanding my role as a facilitator has helped me understand the value of teacher inquiry and research. The more we do this work, the more we uncover the big questions we face. You know the ones I mean, the kind of questions that keep you up at night. Now when I have one of those problems, or a question, I find myself tapping into our collective experience by emailing colleagues in the broader network of coaches, asking for their resource or an experience they’ve had that can help push my thinking. I understand the need to systematically tackle those big questions over the long haul and I use collaborative, reflective tools to help find answers.

Have your hopes for the Lucent Project been realized? Are collaboration and reflection a part of the way things get done in SDOL schools now?

I believe the seeds of collaboration and reflection have been planted and there are many signs that they are taking root. In the first five schools that were involved in the project, collaboration continues to be part of the ways those schools do business. In the Schoolwide Improvement Plans, the LCCs are listed as a strategy to improve student achievement and the groups continue to meet regularly during the school day. Since our expansion of the project district wide, LCCs have started to take hold in the other schools as well.

Earlier you talked about the sustainability of LCCs if there were changes in leadership. I know you’ve experienced some changes and I wonder if you might comment on the impact.

We have had leadership changes since the start of this work, changes at both the school level and at the District level, but the work continues to grow. Our New Superintendent supports the project and teachers continue to take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and improve their craft.

What next steps do you envision? How will SDOL sustain the use of collaborative, reflective practices during the school day without the Lucent funding?

There are several ideas that the SDOL should consider as we enter the funded phase of this project. Namely, we must bring the coaches (teacher and administrator) together to examine the current structures that support the LCCs and determine what we must have in place to deepen the roots of collaboration.

We should continue to support and grow the SDOL Apprentice Facilitator process to build capacity at the district level to support new and experienced coaches. And the most ambitious goal is to begin to create opportunities for students, parents and community members to participate in LCCs.

The power of collaboration is only truly realized when all members of the school community are reflective about teaching and learning in meaningful ways to accelerate student achievement and to close the achievement gap.

Sharon Allen-Hamilton can be contacted at sharon@lancaster.k12.pa.us

Introducing CFGs…

(continued from page 7)

at all levels of school organization. In some places, we have been successful in convincing people that tapping the expertise of a group of educators and encouraging them to value and share this expertise is an extraordinarily efficient form of professional development.

We remain optimistic that critical friends processes and, in time, Critical Friends Groups will continue to enrich the cultures of the schools and districts in our network. When we were trained as CFG coaches, Debbie Bambino and Carol Nejman taught us a mantra: “Trust the process. The work sells itself.” They were right.

Pam Ayres, Director of Minority Achievement & Intervention Programs at Carroll County Public Schools in Maryland, can be reached at payyes@ccusd.org, and Mary Helen Spirit, Co-Director of the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential School, can be reached at mhs@richtmx.com

Creating Effective Small Schools

Kim Felike, Oregon

I t could have been an ugly situation.

After two years of planning and climbing, the four small schools’ staff had created to replace its large high school had just been reduced to three. Different in the planning process and student choice, amongst a myriad of other variables, led the leadership team to dissolve one of the schools before it even opened.

There was a collective sadness in the school the next day, but an atmosphere of support for each other and moving forward prevailed. There is nothing we can plan to change a large high school into small autonomous schools and there are daily examples of the frustrations schools face in their efforts. But what many at this particular school have agreed on is that their attention to process from the inception of this work has got them through the tight spots. Their Foundation in Coalition for Essential Schools (CES) Principles and Critical Friends groups have supported them in creating a collaborative and supportive process that has resulted in the successful implementation of three small schools this year.

I am their school coach.

Ultimately, for me, my goal as a school coach is no different than the Mission Statement of NSRF: to foster educational and social equity by empowering all students with skills to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences—everyone.

Creating effective small schools is how we do that. Coaching schools through processes of creating small schools is what I do, and NSRF tools and protocols are my toolbox for doing it.

How do I use NSRF in my work? Let me count the ways…. The easiest way I can describe it is you show what a typical week looks like for me.

On Monday, I’m meeting with the planning team of a large comprehensive high school for the first time.

They’ve just received a planning grant for creating smaller learning communities and this is their first meeting together as well. Throughout the day I spend with them we will do some ice breaking and team-building activities I pulled off of the NSRF website, we will do a text rendering on an article related to their reform effort, we will do the Continuum Dialogue Protocol so they can get a sense of where they are in their attitudes about this work, and we will do a chalk talk about their school culture.

After spending the day with them, I will drive to another district I’m working with to meet with their Student Leadership Team, a group of students from each of the high schools in the district that are working together to build student voice in the district. I will teach them the Consultancy Protocol and they will spend the evening supporting each other in dilemmas they’re facing at their individual schools as they implement their action plans.

On Tuesday, I meet with a group of teachers from schools across Portland who are working on their Continuing Teacher’s License, a requirement to teach in Oregon. We will use the Success Analysis Protocol to examine culturally relevant lesson plans that each teacher is bringing with them to discuss attributes of successful culturally relevant learning experiences. As a part of the program, the teachers are required to write a reflective journal entry about their classroom environment. They will start with the Metaphor Activity to give them a jumping off point into their writing.

On Wednesday, it’s off to another school where my task will be to facilitate a joint meeting of the school leadership team and the site council about where their redesign work is right now and what the next steps are. I don’t know what we’re doing there yet, but last time we met as a large group we did a Tuning Protocol around the design process.

On Thursday I get to go to my coaches CFG group, my place of refuge in this work. The place where I get help with my dilemmas, challenge my own practice, and grow professionally.

Beyond coaching in schools, Small Schools Northwest at Lewis & Clark College is a site of professional development opportunities to support the long-term sustainability of small schools. If we consider CFGs to be valuable professional development for educators, what are we doing to support that concept and build it into our preparation of new teachers and support of veteran teachers? How does it inform our work in preparing administrators to work in an environment of school change? How does it support the changing role of counselors in schools? These are some of the questions we’re looking at Lewis & Clark College works towards its goal to create a “truly diverse school of education committed to bridging the achievement and social class gaps”.

Thus along with our typical Center of Activity work—CFG Coaches’ Trainings, ongoing learning opportunities and support for CFG coaches and introducing CFGs to new audiences—we are also working to integrate CFGs into our teacher education program. Currently, teachers can receive graduate credit not only for participating in the CFG Coaches’ (continued on page 15)
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 allowed risk-taking and for deep, honest conversations.

We have always been a substantial and heartfelt group, aware at the end of last year that we needed to take our work to a different level. And what was that next step? Where were we, for instance, in applying in our classrooms what we have learned from our own collaborative work? This was the question first item on the agenda. It was apparent within minutes, though, that with the long summer in upper school, the question was too removed 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, “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. 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? weren’t our students’ lives often as pressured and fragmented as ours? How could we bring more reflection into the class? Could we launch a faculty-wide initiative to look at student work, a day that signaled a tidal change in our development as a learning community.

As our CFG began our first meeting we were reflecting on a moment for how much she meant to us. We felt a renewed sense of commitment to continuing our work with the same dedication and enthusiasm that she had inspired in us.

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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DURING the 2000 ‘01 school year the School District of Philadelphia (SDOP) joined three other districts in the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. NSRF, at the time the Lucent Philanthropic Initiative (LPI), has been involved with the project and its rollout of district-wide Lucent Learning Communities (LLCs) since its inception. One outstanding feature of this project has been the intentional collaboration of administrative and union forces on the project in each district. This issue’s Living History segment features my conversation with Sharon Allen-Hamilton, President of the Lancaster Education Association and CFG coach-facilitator.

As President of the Teacher’s Association in Lancaster, I was part of the team that was inter-viewed by Hallie Tames of TPI and Daniel Blank of NSRF. During those first conversations I was struck by Daniel’s mention of teacher empowerment and the ways that learning communities allowed teachers to take responsibility for their own professional growth.

As Association President I had become increasingly aware of the teaching concerns about the value of their professional development sessions for their day-to-day practice. In light of their concerns, the idea of a grass-roots project where teachers would be responsible for their own learning really appealed to me. I was particularly interested in the plan to provide teachers with a structure, framework and tools, along with the time to collabor-ate and reflect on their work. I thought that this combination of time and tools would allow teachers to sustain their growth even after the Lucent funding was exhausted, or there was a change in leadership.

As a public school parent and a teacher, how did you think the creation of LLCs would help students?

I was a classroom teacher for 17 years and I know that teachers collaborate in small ways all the time. I thought that the LLCs would help teachers add more focus to their collab-oration and sharing.

During my training as a coach I learned new ways to structure conversa-tions so that we could zero in on improving our practice. When we look at stu-dent or adult work and really focus on a question or dilemma, we always end up with concrete ideas to improve our practice and that helps our students.

Can you share an example of the kind of teacher learning or change that you’re describing?

One LLC explored a district pro cess, which was developed to support students who were not meeting stan-dards. While the process was familiar to some teachers, it was not widely used in schools. The LLCs helped to unpck some reasons why the process was not used widely and enabled the presenter and the col laborating teachers in the use of the sup- port process.

As President, what potential ben efits did you see for your Association members?

I really welcomed the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice. I appreciated the Superintendent’s commit-ment to shared leadership of the day-to-day way you do your work?

Since I started coaching, I find myself thinking a lot more about the assumptions I make about what I see, or things I hear people say.

Can you give me an example?

Well, by acknowledging my own assumptions I now ask more ques-tions and make sure to get clarification (continued on page 12)

Eric Baylin
New York
Over the past two years there have been CFGs’ trainings in Philadelphia, State College, and Upper Darby. These trainings were conducted by local NSRF coaches in partnership with local Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) centers. CFG coaches’ seminars have also been organized in the Chesapeake area. As a result of these activities there are working CFGs in a number of local elementary, middle and high schools throughout the region.

In addition to their CFGs, some of these schools have started to embed reflective, collaborative practices into their ongoing staff and leadership meetings as well as their classrooms. At C.W. Henry Elementary School, for example, text-based discussions that support the development of common understanding have included habitus, for example, text-based discussions that support the development of common understandings, as members of grade-level teams or academic departments, and the like. We attempt to empower people to engage in structured conversations in forums that already exist in their schools and districts. The initial training is comprised of three strands: (1) building trusting relationships and fostering development of a learning community through collaborative processes, (2) developing shared understandings through text-based discussions, and (3) rethinking teaching and learning through looking at authentic student and teacher work. The initial training introduces a common language and provides shared experiences that we then work to support at the school, district, and network levels. It is not unusual, for example, for teachers in our network to ask for assistance in selecting a protocol to use in a grade-level meeting. Parent meetings have included text renderings, tuning protocols, and charettes. Collaborative groups have worked to establish ground rules and norms. Common understandings have helped us to elevate the level of discourse at network gatherings and to build enthusiasm for the introduction of new practices.

Despite our successes among those who have engaged in our initial training, we know that some Critical Friends Groups are slow to evolve. Among the 25 schools in our network, we have identified three groups functioning as CFGs. Others are beginning to form, but the challenges described previously are real deterrents. Those who have an opportunity to explore the work readily acknowledge its value, but the schools and districts in which these individuals work remain unconvinced that structured professional dialogue is potent professional development.

We acknowledge two essential next steps in fostering the work of CFGs. First, we must find ways to support the efforts of those who believe in and promote the work in their schools and districts. We have begun to sponsor regional dinner meetings in different locations in our network that bring faculty and administrators of the introductory training and others interested in the work.

Second, we must work to introduce CFGs to new networks. It is our hope that participants across school and district roles. Secretaries, instructional assistants, central office staff, administrators, and classroom teachers – to date 262 people from across our network – have engaged in this work. The central focus of the introductory course is comfort with the processes of collaboration. Our hope is that participants will begin to use these processes in authentic settings – in their classrooms, in faculty meet-
Meaningful Learning at Jules E. Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School Pennsylvania

Last spring, Nicole Gaughan, a first-year Philadelphia high school teacher, participated in a CFG Coaches’ training. Here’s an excerpt from her reflections about her experience along with her students’ responses to a prompt she shared with them about a time when their learning was meaningful at Mastbaum...

As a first-year teacher I came into the school year with high hopes and huge plans. I was quickly snapped into the reality of a living breathing high school in the Philadelphia School District. High hopes and huge plans became small wishes and day-to-day plans. I was overwhelmed and ready to run for the hills...From September to March the viewpoints I learned in college were lost to just trying to survive; that is, until I was introduced to Critical Friends. Just four Saturdays were able to remind me of my original beliefs, and helped me make them a reality in my classroom...Through CFG I have grown to realize that it takes a community to create a good teacher. The training gave me the opportunity to say, “I need help.” I also learned that the first take or draft is not the last and final product. Using a Tuning Protocol I was able to change an assignment that I originally thought was great, but made it meaningful at Mastbaum.

I was watching the class and preparing to do my work. Some of my classmates were talking and some were already doing work. The teacher was beginning to speak. When the teacher said to me, “you passed my class.” I felt special, because I never thought I was.

That day I learned something new but every day I walk out of my class with something new when we talk together as a class.

I learned a lot about myself. I did it I got $30. My teacher was helping us and doing work on the board so we could understand what we were doing a little better. Me and my classmates were understanding how the measurements and angles were formed. I learned a lot of new things that day.

A time when I learned something new was when I was in geometry. My teacher was helping us and doing work on the board so we could understand what we were doing a little better. Me and my classmates were understanding how the measurements and angles were formed. I learned a lot of new things that day.

The time when I learned a lot was last year in ninth grade. In algebra, I say I learned a lot then because now in geometry I’m taking all my skills from last year and using them in geometry.

The time when I learned was when I was in ninth grade in world history when we were learning about swords and watching movies. The other time was in English class when we were writing poems and talking about the Blues.

The time when I learned something meaningful was when I was in geometry class when all of the students and teachers got together and talked about a subject. I don’t remember what the topic was about but I do know that everyone was getting along and it was a great topic, and everyone was asking questions and learning. What made it so meaningful was that everyone was learning and not talking or playing around.

When my learning meant something was when I was in English class when we were talking about my shop when I helped fix a fence for a man that came to the school. He said that he couldn’t find anyone that knew how to fix his fence. When I did it I got $50. My teacher said that I can make way more money than that, when I get older. My classmates must not enjoy my shop as much because they didn’t help me. But when they see me get paid they wanted to work harder. My teacher was just checking up on me to make sure I was OK. This particular experience was so meaningful when I heard you can make up to $40 an hour. Now that’s a lot of money.

It was in ninth grade when I was in geometry class with people I knew. The teacher and students made it comfortable for me. The teacher was hard but helped us get our work done. I was motivated to get a good grade.

As I look back on this school year I think the most valuable thing I have learned was in my shop. I learned how to sharpen properly and handle a knife in the proper way. I learned how to make sautéed chicken, muffins, cookies and a lot more. I’m glad I chose the shop I am in. It is easy to get a scholarship if you really want it and work hard at it. My shop teacher also showed me that I need to control my temper. That is another thing I have learned about myself.

A time when I learned something meaningful to me was when we went on a class trip to the Franklin Institute. We had a lot of fun when we were in the Omnimax Theater because it made me feel like we were moving when we weren’t. When we left we had a snowball fight and it was really fun. My teacher was enjoying herself while she was with us. My classmates were helping the teacher and having fun themselves. The reason this day was meaningful is because it was the first time I had fun while learning.

These excerpts and others were used as text by the staff at a retreat in June.

Nicole Gaughan is a teacher at Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School in Philadelphia. You can email her at nigaughan@comcast.net

Winter 2004
Meaningful Learning at Jules E. Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School Pennsylvania

Last spring, Nicole Gaughan, a first-year Philadelphia high school teacher, participated in a CFG Coaches’ training. Here’s an excerpt from her reflections about her experience along with her students’ responses to a prompt she shared with them about a time when their learning was meaningful at Mastbaum:

“As a first-year teacher I came into the school year with high hopes and huge plans. I was quickly snapped into the reality of a living breathing high school in the Philadelphia School District. High hopes and huge plans became small wishes and day-to-day plans. I was overwhelmed and ready to run for the hills…From September to March the viewpoints I learned in college were lost to just trying to survive; that is, until I was introduced to Critical Friends. Just four Saturdays were able to remind me of my original beliefs, and helped me make them a reality in my classroom…Through CFG I have grown to realize that it takes a community to create a good teacher. The training gave me the opportunity to say, “I need help.” I also learned that the first take or draft is not the last and final product. Using a Tuning Protocol I was able to change an assignment that I originally thought was great, but had received disastrous results from my students. Listening to other teachers critique my work…I was able to change my project enough that the original goals and objectives are met, to other teachers critique my work…I was able to change my assignment that I originally thought was great, but needed help.” I also learned that the first take or draft is not the last and final product. Using a Tuning Protocol I was able to change an assignment that I originally thought was great, but had received disastrous results from my students. Listening to other teachers critique my work…I was able to change my project enough that the original goals and objectives are met, until I was introduced to Critical Friends. Just four Saturdays were able to remind me of my original beliefs, and helped me make them a reality in my classroom…Through CFG I have grown to realize that it takes a community to create a good teacher. The training gave me the opportunity to say, “I need help.” I also learned that the first take or draft is not the last and final product. Using a Tuning Protocol I was able to change an assignment that I originally thought was great, but had received disastrous results from my students. Listening to other teachers critique my work…I was able to change my project enough that the original goals and objectives are met, to other teachers critique my work…I was able to change an assignment that I originally thought was great, but needed help.”

The best time I liked was when we were in English class and we were reading The Piano Lesson. Everyone in the class participated and after we were done reading the book we watched a movie on it. The teacher was reading the book with us and watched the movie with us. It was meaningful because we all paid attention and did all of our work. The teacher gave us a test and we all passed except like three people.

The whole class was in shop and the shop teacher was showing us how to use the knife in a proper way. He was also showing us how to slice, mince and dice celery, carrots and onions. The whole class was participating, the teacher demonstrated cutting the celery, carrots etc. and showed us a couple of ways that you can get cut with a knife while not paying attention. When my mom’s making dinner I can help her cut the carrots, celery etc. in the proper way.

I was walking in the classroom and preparing to do my work. Some of my classmates were talking and some were already doing work. The teacher was beginning to speak. When the teacher said to me, “you passed my class.” I felt special, because I never thought I was.

There really wasn’t a special day where I felt I learned something new but every day I walk out of my class with something new when we talk together as a class.

The time when I learned a lot was last year in ninth grade. In algebra, I say I learned a lot then because now in geometry I’m taking all my skills from last year and using them in geometry.

I remember a time in English class when we were in the Omniverse Theater because it was a special day where I felt I learned something new. The whole class was participating, the shop teacher was showing us how to slice, mince and dice celery, carrots etc. and showed us a couple of ways that you can get cut with a knife while not paying attention. When the teacher said to me, “you passed my class.” I felt special, because I never thought I was.

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The best time I liked was when we were in shop class and the teacher was showing us how to cut and cook and a guest speaker came and taught us how to make pasta salad. Another time I learned something at Mastbaum was in ninth grade in world history when we were learning about swords and watching movies. The other time was in English class when we were writing poems and talking about the Blues.

The time when I learned something new, that really meant a lot to me, was in my Spanish class. From my experience in this class, I have learned a different language and now I am able to explain some things in Spanish to other people.

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Over the past two years there have been CFG coaches’ trainings in Philadelphia, State College, and Upper Darby. These trainings were conducted by local NSF coaches in partnership with local Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) centers. CFG coaches’ seminars have also been organized in the Chesapeake area. As a result of these activities there are working CFGs in a number of local elementary, middle and high schools throughout the region.

In addition to their CFGs, some of these schools have started to embed reflective, collaborative practices into their ongoing staff and leadership meetings as well as their classrooms. At C.W. Henry Elementary School in Mt. Airy, in addition to their CFG, weekly classroom meetings are held schoolwide. All team meetings are based on collectively developed agendas that are facilitated by team members in a shared leadership structure. At Mastbaum High School, there are now two CFGs, a veteran group that began last year and a new group that is being coached by teachers who participated in last spring’s coaches’ training. Collaborative, reflective practices are being introduced into the school’s cabinet and academy structures as the school works to become a schoolwide learning community for all students and staff members. Veteran Critical Friends Groups are continuing to work and grow at Taylor Elemen
tary and Central East Middle School. Our Center’s most recent development is the creation of a Leadership CFG. In the fall I received an e-mail from Deb-

The assignment for our next meeting was to bring a dilemma and to share it with the consultancy protocol. The assignment for our next meeting is to bring a dilemma and to share it with the consultancy protocol. The consultancy has always been one of my favorite protocols. Whether presenting or participating I always gain new ideas and perspectives. I first learned about consultations, as well as many other practices, from Nancy Mohr.

I am rejuvenated, excited and look forward to what we can accomplish as individuals and as a group during the coming year. Nancy Mohr’s legacy will force us to imagine and ask the hard questions. Our meeting will enable us to grow, to examine our practice and to facilitate change in our schools.

Julo Feldman is the Principal of the Nether Providence Elementary School. Email him at feldmanu@ae.com

Introducing CFGs to a New Network: Fighting the Good Fight

Pam Ayres and Mary Helen Spiri, Maryland

Introducing the heresy of authentic collaborative practice into such an educational culture has proven challenging on many fronts. Generous grant funding in 18 schools supported by our Center; the Coalition of Essential Schools has created ample opportunities for training. Simply stated, money is not a deterrent in the educational culture. The “best” teachers perform magic within the boundaries of their classrooms. The “best” learners test well on Maryland’s and Virginia’s standardized test.

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(continued on page 12)
thoughtfully we worked together, again
With this strong reminder of how
tuning protocol was comforting.
A number of people shared how
they were already using aspects of this pro-
tocol 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
with this.” One
member said in jest,
“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.

Finally a foreign
language teacher suggested that our
essential question might be: how do
we bring more reflection into the class-
room? With that question, the conver-
sation 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? Where’s 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 accept-
able to the whole group. We agreed to
focus, for this year, on developing
new ways to structure conversa-
tions so that we could zero in on improving
our practice.

Eric Baylin teaches art at Packer
Collegeiate 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 art, 1st, 3rd and 4th grades.
Teaching experience ranges from
six to over thirty years.
Eric may be contacted by email at
etaylor@packer.edu

While our meetings have always
been substantial and helpful, 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
classrooms what we have learned from our
own collaborative work?

This question was the first item on the
agenda. It was apparent within min-
utes, though, that with the long summer
interlude and the bustling first weeks of
summer, though, that with the long summer
seasoned group! Let’s take a look at
where we are going with this.”

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During the 2000 ‘01 school
year the School District of
Lancaster (SDOL) joined
three other districts in the
Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. NSRF, at
the invitation of The Lucent
Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), has been involved
with the project and its rollout of district-
wide Lucent Learning Communities (LLCs) since
its inception. One
outstanding feature of this
project has been the intentional collaboration
of administrative and union forces
on the project in each district. This
issue’s Living History segment features
my conversation with Sharon Allen-
Hamilton, president of the Lancaster
Education Association and CFG coach/ facilitator.

Can you tell us a little
bit about what
was that first
attracted you to
the Lucent Peer
Collaboration
Project in the
SDOL?
As President
of the Teacher’s Association
in Lancaster, I was part of the
team that was inter-
viewed by Hallie
Tames of TPI and
Daniel Blank of
NSRF. During
those first con-
versations I was
struck by Daniel’s
mention of teacher
empowerment and the ways that learn-
ing communities allowed teachers to
take responsibility for their own pro-
fessional growth.

As Association President I had
become increasingly aware of the
challenges and concerns about the value of
their professional development sessions
for their day-to-day practice. In light
of their concerns, the idea of a grass-
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time and tools would allow teachers
to sustain their growth even after the
Lucent funding was exhausted, or
there was a change in leadership.

As a public school parent
and a teacher, how did you think
the creation of LLCs would help
students?
I was a classroom teacher for 17
years and I know that teachers col-
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Can you share an example
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porting teachers in the use of the sup-
port process.

As President, what potential ben-
efits did you see for your Association
members?
I really welcomed the opportunity
for teachers to reflect on their practice.
I appreciated the Superintendent’s com-
mitment to shared leadership of the
day-to-day classroom accountability
process.

The benefit I saw for our members
was really about the shared leadership
or teacher empowerment. Traditionally,
as teachers, we always thought we
knew what was best for our students,
our classrooms, and that understand-
ing directed our classroom practice and
decision-making. But we didn’t always
examine the results of our practice to
see if it was indeed accelerating stu-
dent achievement.

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Eric Baylin, New York

N NSF’s Living History
A Conversation with Sharon Allen-Hamilton
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Winter 2014
from the other person. This work has made me continue to hone my listening skills. As president, listening to other people’s problems and working to co-construct possible solutions is a big part of my job.

In general, I think I’d say that reflective practice has become a more ingrained part of who I am now. Each time I’m in a situation, I never leave it without thinking about the impact of my participation. I wonder what worked, what didn’t work and how I could have handled it differently or better.

The key is that by reflecting, I grow, and this has made the idea of my being a lifelong learner more explicit.

Staying in this work and expanding my role as a facilitator has helped me understand the value of teacher inquiry and research. The more we do this work, the more we uncover the big questions we face. You know the ones I mean, the kind of questions that keep you up at night. Now when I have one of those problems, or a question, I find myself tapping into our collective experience by emailing colleagues in the broader network of coaches, asking for advice or resource or an example. I think they’ve had that can help push my thinking. I understand the need to systematically tackle those big questions over the long haul and I use collaborative, reflective tools to help find answers.

Have you hopes for the Lucent Project been realized? Are collaboration and reflection a part of the way things get done in SDOL schools now?

I believe the seeds of collaboration and reflection have been planted and there are many signs that they are taking root. In the first five schools that were involved in the project, collaboration continues to be part of the ways those schools do business. In the Schoolwide Improvement Plans, the LLCs are listed as a strategy to improve student achievement and the groups continue to meet regularly during the school day. Since our expansion of the project district wide, LLCs have started to take hold in the other schools as well.

Earlier you talked about the sustainability of LLCs if there were changes in leadership. I know you’ve experienced some changes and I wonder if you might comment on the impact.

We have had leadership changes since the start of this work, changes at both the school level and at the District level, but the work continues to grow. Our new Superintendent supports the project and teachers continue to take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and improve their craft.

What next steps do you envision? How will SDOL sustain the use of collaborative, reflexive practices during the school day without the Lucent funding?

There are several ideas that the SDOL should consider as we end this funded phase of this project. Namely, we must bring the coaches (teacher and as an administrator) together to examine the current structures that support the LLCs and determine what we must have in place to deepen the roots of collaboration. We should continue to support and grow the SDOL Apprentice Facilitator process to build capacity at the district level to support new and experienced coaches. And the most ambitious goal is to begin to create opportunities for students, parents and community members to participate in LLCs.

The power of collaboration is only truly realized when all members of the school community are reflective about teaching and learning in meaningful ways to accelerate student achievement and to close the achievement gap.

Sharon Allen-Hamilton can be contacted at sharon@lacustrer12.pas.us

Introducing CFGs...

(continued from page 7)

At all levels of school organization. In some places, we have been successful in convincing people that tapping the expertise of a group of educators and encouraging them to value and share this expertise is an extraordinarily efficient form of professional development.

We remain optimistic that critical friends processes and, in time, Critical Friends Groups will continue to enrich the cultures of the schools and districts in our network. When we were trained as CFG coaches, Debbie Bambino and Carol Nejman taught us a mantra: “Trust the process. The work sells itself.” They were right.

Pam Ayres, Director of Minority Achievement & Intervention Programs at Carroll County Public Schools in Maryland, can be reached at payres@doe12.cc.md.us. Mary Helen Spirit, Co-Director of the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential School, can be reached at mhs@prices.edu

Creating Effective Small Schools

Kim Felicke, Oregon

It could have been an ugly situation. After two years of dreaming and planning, the four small schools’ staff had created to replace its large high school had just been reduced to three. Difficulties in the planning process and student choice, amongst a myriad of other variables, led the leadership team to dissolve one of the schools before it even opened.

There was a collective sadness in the school the next day, but an atmosphere of supporting each other and moving forward prevailed. There is nothing easy about planning a large high school into small autonomous schools and there are daily examples of the frustrations schools face in their efforts. But what many at this particular school have agreed on is that their attention to process from the inception of this work has gotten them through the tight spots. Their Foundation in Coalition for Essential Schools (CES) Principles and Critical Friends Groups have supported them in creating a collaborative and supportive process that has resulted in the successful implementation of three small schools this year.

I am their school coach. Ultimately, for me, my goal as a school coach is no different than the Mission Statement of NSRF: to foster educational and social equity by empowering all involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. Creating effective small schools is how we do that. Coaching schools through the process of creating small schools is what I do, and NSF tools and protocols are my toolbox for doing so.

How do I use NSF in my work? Let me count the ways… The easiest way I can describe it is that you show what a typical week looks like for me. On Monday, I’m meeting with the planning team of a large comprehensive high school for the first time. They’ve just received a planning grant for creating smaller learning communities and this is their first meeting together as well. Throughout the day I spend with them we will do some ice breaking and team-building activities I pulled off of the NSF website, we will do a text rendering learning experiences. As a part of the program, the teachers are required to write a plan for a building environment. They will start with the Metaphor Activity to give them a jumping off point into their planning.

On Wednesday, it’s off to another school where my task will be to facilitate a joint meeting of the school leadership team and the site council about where their redesign work is right now and what the next steps are. I don’t know what we’re doing there yet, but last time we met as a large group we did a Tuning Protocol around the design plan. On Thursday I get to go to my coaches CFG group, my place of refuge in this work. The place I go to get help with my dilemmas, challenge my own practice, and grow professionally.

Beyond coaching in schools, Small Schools Northwest at Lewis & Clark College is working on professional development opportunities to support the long-term sustainability of small schools. If we consider CFGs to be valuable professional development for educators, what are we doing to support that concept and build a home into our preparation of new teachers and support of veteran teachers? How does it inform our work in preparing administrators to work in an environment of school change? How does it support the changing role of counselors in schools? These are some of the questions we’re looking at as Lewis & Clark College works towards its goal to create a truly diverse school of educators committed to bridging the achievement and social class gaps.

Thus along with our typical Center of Activity work—CFG Coaches’ Trainings, ongoing learning opportunities and support for CFG coaches and introducing CFGs to new audiences—we’re also working to integrate CFGs into our teacher education program. Currently, teachers can receive graduate credit not only for participating in the CFG Coaches’...
Coaching Lessons from Co-Rec Softball
David Christman, Indiana

Bo uncimg Balls
I have always loved games that involve lots of people and bouncing balls. They seem so social, friendly and filled with quickly and unexpectedly. 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 younger kids were left out of the fun. I loved the inclusiveness and intricate strategies that evolved from so many variables. I also 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 can’t really find the right words to describe the many adult softball leagues here in the Midwest. It seemed way too competitive and not much fun.

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 groups and it is hard not to notice some overlap in skills required to be effective in both roles.

Field Notes for CFG: Coaching
Ideas are a lot like buncing balls and tossing them around in a group of collegues can yield unexpected insights. People come to the table from different backgrounds, some have scars 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 involve having to balance issues of perceived power: having the same number of men and women on a team (two each in the outfield, infield and pitcher/catcher combination); men must but opposite handed (than their “natural” glove hand) and use a heavier ball (that will not carry as far) when batting. Walking a man is two bases, to discourage pitching around women in the order. Batting orders must alternate genders. The rules, especially at first, feel like a thin treading on thin ice (groom section) 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 CFCG: Coaching
Protocols can be avoided at times and may take explaining and practice. Attempting to “level the playing field” can yield some false assumptions, but sharing the power is an important goal. 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, and encouraging people as a fellow teammate. I enjoy teaching a specific skill, with permission, and explaining rules and strategies – but mostly players learn from their teammates. I really enjoy helping people figure out who is going to be the coach and the team runs smoothly during the game.

Field Notes for CFCG: Coaching
The team has most of the skills it needs already in the group. 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 time! 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 needing that heightens the effort and enjoyment of the game.

Field Notes for CFCG: 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 work can bring out the best in members. Switching roles, finding new perspectives, viewing the discussion encourages the addition of new strategies.

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 on page 14)

Who is Quinn?
(continued from page 3)

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, explicitly and the question about how I am teaching and why...but there seems to be an additional power in bringing the students into the questions in a more personal, real way...up front.”

Another way I am using the Q’s 6/7’s is as an organizing framework for integrating the variety of ‘professional development’ one of my schools is undertaking. We are deconstructing the theory and ‘directions’ for classroom implementation into Curriculum, Assessments, and Instruction and Pedagogy by fitting the attributes and strategies into the frames of the 6 Questions...it has helped us SEE that what we are doing is building our repertoire of connected ideas and strategies VS inventing a number of ‘stand-alone’ PROGRAMS that are unrelated.

If you look at the Quinn’s Six Questions are helping us feel wealth and abundance in starting our new year rather than overwhelmed with the age-old question of ‘how will I get it all done!’

“Hope this helps, and please feel free to adapt and share any way these questions are being used!”

I’d like to add as an addendum the full text of one posting by Teri Schrader, Principal of Francis W. Parker School in Denver, MA. I think it underscores how tools like “Quinn’s 6 Questions” can influence the culture of a school – especially when practitioners take the opportunity to reflect on these tools apply to their own work and are pushed in their thinking by colleagues using different approaches.

“Are we in our third and final week of faculty summer planning here at Parker School—and tomorrow we will spend our mornings in domain (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 stuck by re-looking at Juli’s questions on this particular day, given what we’re up to here.

‘The questions posed in Quinn’s 6 make me think about framing our sessions 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 about the academic program in a multi-dimensional way and revise our thinking on any aspect of the work. Terrific curricula is only as terrific as the means by which we assess it, and great ideas that aren’t thoughtfully framed or translated into developmentally appropriate class activities or comprehensive projects don’t help kids learn. So... it strikes me that using the questions here allow presenting teachers of teachers to talk about the curriculum, yes, but also we can think alongside the factors that must prevail upon our curriculum building—the questions about intention, “audience”, anticipated reaction and potential bonuses or pitfalls we face in instruction/assessment.

‘I will be interested to see how the deliberate posing and thinking about these questions helps me think about change or affirm what we’re thinking. Sometimes we wait till a unit or a project is full and then reflect back to deeper instruction or assessment questions, but it seems like we can consider the full array at the design stage.”

It’s also a nice, concise format to frame the discussion.

“Hope the beginning of the year is a time of real energized renewal and creativity, and optimism for everyone in all our schools.”

Katy Kelly is the Director of the NSRF National Center. She can be reached by email at kelly@harmonyschool.org

NSRF Research Project Carrie Brennan, Arizona

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 or critiques of students changing their practice? Have you documented the growth of the teachers involved or their impact on 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 NSRF as part of your graduate studies, perhaps even writing a dissertation on Critical Friends Groups? Or if you have any questions or comments about any aspect of the work, we would be happy to include them.

Carrie Brennan can be reached at carrie@cityhighschool.org. The National School Reform Faculty enters its tenth year next fall, and it is essential that we are able to demonstrate the power of our collective work.

Winter 2014
Connections: A Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Connection 4
Connections: A Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

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

We address questions 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 group members will talk together. I want to be an active facilitator — one that group members can count on to keep the process safe so they can have potentially risky conversations with each other. Yet I know that sometimes it is uncomfortable for group members to learn and grow. I want to be a fully contributing member of the group, yet I know that good facilitation sometimes demands that I give my full attention to that aspect of the work.

I remember the day I turned the corner in my thinking about myself as a facilitator. The conversation 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 role I had played as facilitator. That is when I understand what is for me now the most important maxim about facilitating protocol conversations: “This is not about me.” Facilitators with a broad repertoire of responses and sophisticated ways of thinking about their craft are critical to the collaborative work of teachers. But, in the end, the work is not about the facilitator, or the facilitation, or the protocol. It is, first and foremost, about learning the presenter and the group do together on behalf of students.

Gene Thompson-Groove is one of the three Co-Directors of NSRF. You can contact her at gthompsongroove@earthlink.net.

Coaching Lessons...

(continued from page 4)

game when you make the perfect play. So many skills are critical that there is always a way to tvk off and develop new skills.

Field Notes for CFG coaching: There are so many skills that support clear communication. We all make mistakes along the way. Over a whole year (or more) as we practice protocols together we have many opportunities to improve and support our own toolkits of skills.

Who’s Coach?

Our last game was a make-up for a rained-out game early in the season. The other team didn’t show up. We were all there and ready to go. With little prompting, we split up into small teams and had our own game — filled with close friends, pinch hitters and guest runners from the bleachers. We were relaxed and enjoying ourselves — not only comfortable with the rules and tools of the game, but also creating new rules (our scoring system was especially unique that game). We were all coaches.

Field Notes for CFG coaching: Ultimately a team becomes a self-propelling, synergistic group of potential coaches. The final meeting is the one you remember most during the summer vacation.

The Off Season

Working well together carries over into enjoying and valuing each other’s learning and other’s skills. Shared moments of success help clear the way for all kinds of day-to-day interactions. The pattern of positive feedback and gentle kidding helps to keep communication channels open for the important and sometimes difficult work of teaching.

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.

David Christian teaches high school science at Harmony High School in Bloomington, Indiana. He loves softball, Shakespeare, and the ukelele (among things). You can e-mail him at dchristin@harmonyschool.org.

I Must Know: Who is Quinn?

Katy Kelly, Indiana

People in the NSRF network who have developed the habit of reflection in their practice often use the NSRF Coaches listerv to push their thinking or to share ideas with colleagues. An example of the kind of cross-country collegial sharing of practice comes from an on-line discussion about “Quinn’s 6 Questions.”

The CFG coach who wrote that she uses Quinn’s 6 Questions regularly to check her own teaching, as well as having her interns use them during their internships, but doesn’t know her source (she’s had “...multiple copies floating about and found them in our CFG tools notebook unclued”) elicited a response from the list that reveals the broad scope of the work of NSRF.

Juli Quinn is a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Cal State University, LA. She has been a CFG Coach since the first summer of training in 1995, she is a “Center of Activity” for NSRF in California, and works with lots of school folks in building Professional Learning Communities. Juli developed “Quinn’s 6 Questions” from a set of personal life questions, but the questions, as we know them, were developed in 1991-1992 when her sister was a new teacher, teaching first grade. Juli would meet with her every Sunday to help her plan for the following week, and since Juli had no idea about the curriculum for first grade, she had to conduct an inquiry to help her sister think about. From there the rest is history.

These deceptively simple questions—Quinn’s 6—has been passed around the NSRF network, adapted and revised in ways that have made them relevant for different settings:

Quinn’s Original 6 Questions


John Newlin of the Southern Maine Partnership wrote about a spin off of the Questions that reflect a broader school application:

1. What are we doing? 2. Why are we doing it? 3. How are we doing it? 4. Why are we doing it that way? 5. How do we know how well we’re doing it? 6. How do others know how well we’re doing it?

Here is a version of the Questions that was adapted for meetings:

1. What are we meeting about? 2. Why are we meeting about it? 3. How are we running/conducting our meeting?


This revision of unknown origin caused the writer to reflect upon the need for personalization in our work. She shared her revision with the list “because I think that while lots of us might be reflexively adding that already, making it explicit will help surface assumptions, both ours and others, and different perspectives.”


(continued on page 13)

NSRF Mission Statement

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities.

NSRF’s 6 Questions

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(continued on page 13)
Can you imagine how different a school would be if we built ‘teachers and students’ strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses?

Over time, I came to realize that the opportunities for learning were most obvious when I brought my students’ attention (though I didn’t use red ink) to their errors. I routinely ignored correct answers without comment and kept my focus on what my students didn’t know or understand.

I came with the same deficit-centric disposition to my own work. After every class I would naturally think of those students I didn’t reach, and even if the number were small, I would be hard on myself for the lack of success of my lesson. As a reflective practitioner, I would often analyze the reasons for the mistakes my students were making and then adapt my instruction to address the misunderstanding of my students.

Over time, I realized that many educators spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy focusing on their students’ mistakes and those of their students. As a CCG coach, I found that most teachers were presenting work of their own or their students that failed to reflect the quality that they were expecting for them—selves or their students.

NSRF practices and protocols typically focused on dilemmas in our practice or deficiencies in our work and that of our students. In January of 1996, while serving as a site developer for ATLAS Learning Communities, I attended a workshop on parent engagement presented by Dr. Vivian Johnson from Boston University. Vivian had committed much of her professional life to empowering parents in west Africa, west Portugal, and the inner city of Boston to take an active and important role in the life of their children’s school. It was her practice to ask parents to tell me what they might have done differently next time? We are also integrating CCG and NSRF work into our Continuing Teachers License Program and other programs and are deeply examining other ways to model and support collaborative and reflective practice throughout the college.

In the words of BAYCES director Steve Jubb, “We are so much more effective at meeting human needs as interdependent communities than we are as independent individuals." Our goal of equitable opportunities and outcomes for each of our children is impacted by our ability to work together and function as a community. As a school coach and director of Small Schools Northwest, I see it as my responsibility to model, support and create collaborative community in the environments I work in, and I deeply value the support and reflective thinking that comes from NSRF and motivates me to continue this work.

Small Schools Northwest, Kim Feick,
Director of Small Schools Northwest, can be contacted at feick@harmonyschool.org for participating in the CCG Coaches’ Training, but also for the work they do in their CCG in their school. We are also integrating CCG and NSRF work into our Continuing Teachers License Program and other programs and are deeply examining other ways to model and support collaborative and reflective practice throughout the college.

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