Searching for Answers: A Center of Activity Emerges in Milwaukee

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Schools are social systems. In the work with inform and the redesign of schools we need to recognize that dimensions related to equity exist. Any way we look at it, there are, according to Peggy McIntosh, author of Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege, people who are “privileged” who do not see themselves as racist. They have been taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness, not necessarily in invisible systems. This makes change hard and virtually impossible, at the school reform level, unless we raise consciousness. Coaches and teachers, well-intentioned people, have to be aware that their assumptions guide their expectations and manifest success or failure for their students. To believe that a privileged status exists in our social system, and it is both visible and invisible. Racism and inequity do not just exist in individual acts of meanness, they are the consequences of our thinking thoughts and intentions, both conscious and unconscious. Our organization, the Technical Assistance and Leadership Center (TALC), in Milwaukee, is comprised of high school reformers engaging in systemic change.

Systemic change takes a long time, even for those of us who work as change agents. We constantly chip away at it. In doing so, believing in the Critical Friends process, we asked ourselves how CFGs could be used to promote reflective practice, raise consciousness and address issues of equity. Our internal question became, “Can CFGs related to learning and teaching move teachers toward believing that all children can learn and should have access to successful learning experiences?”

Lessons Learned

We couldn’t ask our schools to do what we weren’t willing to do. Step 1. First, we used the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) Critical Friends philosophy to move our organization, TALC, toward reflective practice. Using CFG protocols helped us in our organizational work around issues of equity and consciousness-raising. We set operating norms that defined our organizational relationships and practice. We designed CFGs that guide our work. We used North, South, East and West: An Exercise in Understanding Preferences in Group Work. Using some of the text-based protocols with articles about race, color and equity, we engaged our small school teams in the Diversity Exercise. When we asked participants to break up into small groups of four or five, we limited the categories to birth order, gender, and race/ethnicity. This became an ordeal, as the

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students could explore new knowledge through art. We changed our essential question so that students would study the decade of the 1920s in conjunction with The Great Gatsby as a period of light and dark images. For this exhibition, students would create a work of art that captured the light or dark aspects of the novel. We would encourage them to work through the process of creating a work of art, similar to the process used in writing a paper. Their final art piece would be the focus of a student art exhibition, open to school and community members. Students would write an abstract to accompany their artwork, describing the main idea they wanted to convey to the audience and explaining why they used various choices of color, form, content, and style. This work took months. I finally arrived at my question for inquiry: How does the development and implementation of a visual arts-integrated curriculum affect student learning? I next needed to establish what kinds of data would help me to explore this question.

Step 4: Establish indicators to demonstrate what will signify improved student learning. I would monitor student work, student feedback, homework completion and test scores. I would also ask members of my CFG to observe my work and offer feedback.

Step 5. Design instruction based on an essential question. For this unit of the curriculum was, “How is The Great Gatsby a novel of ‘light’ and ‘dark’ images?” We watched film clips of the time period, we learned the Charleston, we studied different sources of art, and we studied the techniques artists used to create a message. We used various text-based protocols to explore the theme and characters.

Step 6. Analyze the data. After I had made the changes to this unit, 68% of my students reported that this was their favorite unit of study. 95% of them completed all homework assignments, and 100% of students completed their final exhibition. Students had remained engaged throughout.

Step 7. Reflect on implications for changing practice. With the feedback for this unit was to create a visual art-integrated unit, I also wanted to appeal to as many of the multiple intelligences as possible, so my lessons and assignments were varied. As a result of this change I made to my practice, I learned that authentic curriculum promotes student engagement and investment in their learning; that students develop critical thinking skills; and that students achieve at a higher level.

Throughout my period of inquiry, my CFG played a significant role in my learning. They helped me to formulate my inquiry question, tuned my curriculum, and conducted a descriptive review of student work. They observed my teaching, they pushed my thinking, and they motivated me with their questions and their comments. They then helped me to formulate my next question. My next cycle of inquiry was to examine how authentic curriculum and instruction improved student learning. My questions build on my learning from my first question.

There is nothing easy about this work. I spent two years digging at the question and searching for answers in my students’ performance and achievement. I remember, however, the feeling of isolation I experienced when I lectured, piled on more and more punishing assignments, and watched my students fail. When I lean on my colleagues for help, I know that we are all in this together—all focused on improving student learning. When I know that my colleagues care about my work, it makes a difference.

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7 See Palmer, Courage to Teach, pp. 73-77, for elaboration on the six paradoxes of space.
8 For a detailed introduction to one underlying set of theories and assumptions about how our current behaviors, beliefs and assumptions are often linked to past memories and experiences that have been hurtful (e.g., racism, sexism, and classism), see Julian Wessgall, “Constructivist Listening: Empowerment and Change,” The Education Forum, Vol. 54, No. 4, Summer 1990.

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Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

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Using a Blog to Intensify Reflections
Donna Reid, Texas

I want to teach like Tiger Woods plays golf.” I heard this declaration at a textbook presentation several years ago and it has really stuck with me. The speaker explained that Tiger Woods is truly a reflective practitioner when it comes to golf. The public just sees him out on the fairways, but Tiger spends a lot of time behind the scenes studying the game, observing others, analyzing film, and reflecting on his own performance. The result is excellence.

Isn’t this what CFGs can help us achieve as teachers? My hope is that setting aside time for study and reflection about our teaching practice will help us achieve excellence in our classrooms.

[Donna’s Reflections, 12-20-2003]

Blogs, or web logs, are journals that are posted on the World Wide Web. Besides text, the entries may include photographs, document files, and links to other websites. Because they allow readers to add their own comments to an entry, blogs are more interactive than a paper and pencil. They are also far more public since blogs are accessible anytime, anywhere, from any computer connected to the web.

Of course, anybody can keep a journal with pen and paper, but the blog ramps journaling up a notch by making it public and making the reflections interactive. For example, after every meeting of my current CFG, I post a summary of our activities and everyone’s written reflections. Each member of the group may add comments that express their own thinking and learning, and these comments enliven the blog by turning the reflections into a conversation instead of a monologue.

This is my first time responding in this medium, and I’m amazed by the different modes of sharing technology provides us. I find great value in having a “voice,” but more value in being able to share it in this way and get feedback. HURRAH for CFG work! [Marcela, 3-24-2004]

I love the quick posting of everyone’s thoughts. It makes my own reflection of the meeting more insightful and deep. [Michaelann, 4-13-2003] Interestingly, the blog has strengthened our CFG in several ways. First, through regular postings and comments, it continues to sustain conversation in between meetings. Second, it produces an ongoing record of our work together, and importantly, that record is public. Most importantly, writing the blog has intensified my own reflections by helping me discover that reflecting is not just something to do during the final ten minutes of a meeting— it is truly at the core of my work. Earlier this year, I admitted: I’ve once again been struck by how central the act of reflecting is to my work and how my work unravels when I do not deliberately reflect.

I’m embarrassed that I have posted so few entries over the last few months. I slacked off when a colleague wondered out loud if anybody was really reading the blog. The implication was that the time I spent writing entries wasn’t “worth it.” As a result, I feel I’ve just been moving from deadline to deadline in my work without much inspiration. I’ve learned that my blog is as much a tool for motivating current planning and action (continued on page 16)

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ticipants resisted our structure. The resistance was directed mainly toward the limitations of our categories. It seemed difficult for the participants to talk about what it meant to be male, female, black, white, etc. We found that this protocol pushed participants outside of their comfort zones.

The discomfort was not limited to race. A faction of men broke off from the white group and became a men’s group. Some black men joined the men’s group and defined themselves as males. There was a black women’s and a white women’s group. There were no mixed-race women’s groups and only one birth order group (which was mixed race). Once the participants had moved beyond their discomfort, however, which usually was moved beyond by being honest and coming from their heart, they became immersed in the dialogue. They were so involved in their discussions, in fact, that they resisted again when we began to reconvene the whole group.

This experience forced the participants to deal with their good, bad, and ugly assumptions and stereotypes. Their learning was revealed as we debriefed the protocol. A connection had been made. The realization that we had just put them through was what many educators put our students through every day in our classrooms. We harbor assumptions, and we form relationships and create expectations based on those assumptions. Furthermore, our students rise to those expectations both positive and negative. This is how we make our first success or failure with students. It was an eye opener for just about everyone who participated.

We learned that using CFG practices can help facilitate transformation. In developing safe spaces that allow for discussing difficult issues, if we are grounded, we can make an honest and productive approach to relationship building resulting in reflective practice. Who we are, and what we bring to our work-matters. Sometimes in the process, we experience discomfort, sometimes resistance. The process of improving learning experiences for children and adults requires that we look at our motivation, the assumptions that shape our expectations, and finally at our practice.

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together soul, role, institution, and social transformation.

Endnotes
1 See Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, Chapter 1, 1998. In this chapter, Palmer addresses the issue of identity and integrity when it comes to teaching in the classroom. The ideas he puts forward are just as relevant and challenging when thinking about coaching for educational equity.
2 See Julian Wergin, ‘Bridges of Hope, Building Relationships for Educational Change’, 1998. My thinking and understanding of the many forms that oppression takes and what can be done to interrupt the cycle is drawn from his book and my association with the author.

See also Stephen D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 1995. This book gave me new insight into the connection of critical reflection and the recognition of hegemonic assumptions. Brookfield writes, “The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes completely imbedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify any particular group or groups of people actively competing to keep others silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony are part and parcel of everyday life—the common and commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that many of us take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here, it is the conspiracy of the normal.”

4 Myles Horton and Ruio Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 222.

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