

Introduction

How can we use peer observation to help us grow in our roles as coaches and facilitators? This was the question that emerged for us this fall as we began using peer observation in our specific context here in Vermont. We hope that our descriptions and our questions can help all of us in NSRF think more clearly and deeply about our coaching and facilitator roles. (Note: In what follows we are using the term “NSRF facilitator” in a very specific way to refer to

Introducing and Practicing Peer Observation With New Coaches

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In our continuous effort to improve our practice, the NSRF facilitators in the Vermont Center of Activity have begun a process of peer observation as we facilitate New Coaches Seminars. David Leo-Nyquist and I have been coaching a CFG for three years in the context of a graduate seminar in educational leadership that we teach together. It is our intention that over the course of our three-year seminar, we will have introduced all of the elements of a five-day New Coaches Seminar and practiced them in many ways. In this, the third year, David and I decided to introduce peer observation to the group, and it was during this peer observation “lesson” that David and I also engaged in peer observation between us for the first time. Our intentions were both to model good peer observation practices and to improve our teaching. In my own practice as a teacher, I have found peer observation to be the most transformative part of Critical Friends work. I was eager to share the power of peer observation with our students and with David, who had never engaged in it before.

In our first session on peer observation, David observed my facilitation using the Observer as Coach protocol. My focus question was,

“Am I giving the group members the skills they need to try the Observer as Coach protocol with a peer observation partner in their schools?” My approach to teaching this material was to begin by asking everyone to read the protocol, “Peer Coaching: Observer as Coach.” (protocol available online at www.nsrffharmony.org/connections.html) Then I explained that I would be taking the role of a classroom teacher whose class they would observe on videotape, using this protocol. I asked the participants to form small groups and to plan the questions they would ask me during the pre-conference. Then, in character, I fielded questions from each group in a mock pre-conference. I paused and stepped out of character to debrief the pre-conference, then we watched a video of “my” class engaged in an inquiry science lesson. I chose a 20-minute video clip of an ambitious science lesson that presented some complex teaching challenges. Following the video, the small groups reconvened to plan the debriefing and again I fielded their questions in character and stepped out of character at the end to debrief the debriefing.

David observed and took notes throughout all of this without participating or interrupting. In debriefing with me later, he first restated my focus question: “Am I giving the group members the skills they need to try the Observer as Coach protocol with a peer observation partner in their schools?” He then offered his impression that the participants were very ready to engage in the protocol back in their schools, citing data from

his observations. He noted that they had skillfully engaged in both the pre-conference and the debriefing. He also mentioned that in the final debriefing of the process, the participants had asked many insightful questions.

During our debriefing, David asked me the following probing questions:

- What did you intend for them to be planning in the pre-conference triad? Do you have some stock pre-conference questions that you want them to know/arrive at?
- Why did you choose to show this particular video? What are its strengths and liabilities for this purpose? How might this video be made more useful?
- You role-played an essentially confident teacher who was very open to challenging feedback. How will you help these participants deal with embarrassment and defensiveness if they should encounter these in future peer observation partners?
- Does it serve your purposes to combine your roles of role-player and facilitator, or would it be more effective to have your co-facilitator take one of those roles?

I found these questions to be very provocative and useful. Over the course of a 45-minute debriefing, I struggled with them and concluded that when I introduce a group to peer observation in the future, I will: (1) provide some stock pre-conference questions upon which the group can build; (2) seek other classroom videos and/or edit the one I used to better suit this purpose; (3) ask my co-facilitator either to role-play the teacher or to facilitate the

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Learning to See with a Third Eye

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for active listening and regular reality checks with “insider participants,” those teachers, students of color and their families with whom I’m working. I need to “check-in” about my observations and conclusions in order to examine and assess my assumptions for the inevitable bias I bring to the action-research and change processes. Basically, I hear Dr. Irvine’s words as a caution that I need “to know what I don’t know” before I can learn to co-construct valid meaning and propose positive interventions in support of “other people’s children.”

While Dr. Irvine’s analysis has given me much to chew on as a doctoral student in training, it has also moved my thinking about facilitation in the here and now. So I’m thinking about what I want to do differently this week in my meetings with new coaches of learning communities, and that has led me to revisit the reflective questions that Nancy Mohr penned a few years ago. Nancy wrote:

Reflections: Whatever activity you do, the reflection can be explicitly about equity.

How does this promote equity?
What does this have to do with equity?
What does this mean in terms of equity?

And I have added:

Who’s at the table? Who’s missing? Why aren’t those voices included? How can we include those whose perspectives have been silenced historically?

How does the work we’ve just done serve all of our students? How does it serve those students who have been marginalized in the past?

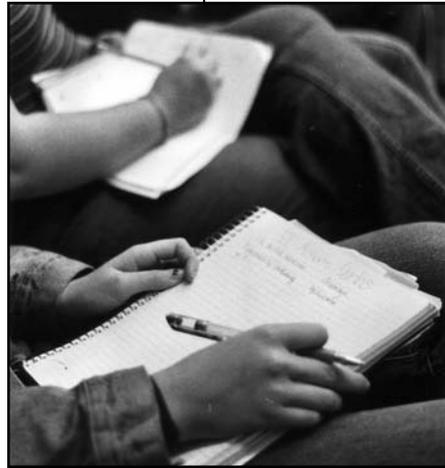
I don’t think these questions are the legendary “silver bullet,” but I do think that regular reflection and debriefing that considers them as possible prompts for every activity is a step that will help me move beyond an equity focus that is only addressed sporadically, as an “add-on”.

Yesterday, I facilitated a series of “Lunchtime Learning” sessions about

content literacy at a Philadelphia high school. As I thought about the reflection questions, looking for the ways these sessions were related to equity, I realized that I needed to go beyond the generic use of metacognitive strategies of reading instruction in order to bring the role of literacy in the struggle for equity to the surface. To that end, I added the introduction of *Reading, Writing and Rising Up* by Linda Christensen to the resources I was using with participants. In her introduction, Christensen quotes Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, Paulo Freire and a number of prisoners to situate the role of literacy and the impact of illiteracy in our current power structure. Christensen makes a strong statement about the purposeful use of reading and writing skills as tools needed to challenge the inequities our students face daily, in our schools and in our society. My addition of Christensen’s perspective helped me translate what I learned from Dr. Irvine’s analysis and Nancy Mohr’s questions into practice that can help kids. I hope that being given a context for the analysis of how and why these literacy strategies are keys to student success will enable more students to actively buy into their own learning process.

For my part, I will continue to read the contributions of Dr. Irvine and other educator researchers of color as I work to develop the lens of my “third eye” whose vision depends on regular collaboration, reflection and changes in my practice. ■

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learning of the protocol; and (4) if I take the role of the teacher, make her less confident and perhaps somewhat defensive during the debriefing.

When David and I had debriefed both of our observations, we reflected on the process as a whole. We both found it very valuable and plan to engage in it regularly. David also

noted that the strength of the protocol as we experienced it was in our asking probing questions of one another during the debriefings, yet the protocol itself makes no mention of probing questions as a debriefing

tool. We found that to be a weakness in the protocol and will make that revision when we use it in the future.

We see a number of implications for our peer observation work with a group of new CFG coaches. First, when the 18 students in our seminar begin to engage in peer observations in their schools, we hope that classroom doors will begin to open wider throughout their schools. Second, in our roles as CFG coaches, as NSRF Coaches Seminar facilitators and as instructors in higher education, our own coaching, facilitation and teaching will improve as a result of our peer observation practice. We look forward to our future learning together. ■

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