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What processes best support collegial dialogue and enhance collaborative learning? What characterizes an effective protocol? How can we tell when we have a process that we’re ready to try with other educators? These were some of the questions that members of my CFG and I started wrestling with, even though we didn’t know at the outset that we’d be going in this direction.

I’ve been a member of the same CFG for nearly three years now. Our membership has changed slightly; we’ve lost some of our original members when major career moves made getting together really tough, we’ve gained some new members who’ve added new facets to the group’s work, and we’ve struggled to overcome challenges in scheduling. In other words, we’re a very typical group of critical friends.

When we convened at the beginning of the school year, we began – as usual – by brainstorming goals for our work. As we tossed out several questions that we might want to pursue, one area for study kept coming up over and over, worded in different ways: What do we know about looking at hard data about student performance? Schools we’re working with are generating so much data, and people keep saying the data is supposed to inform instruction, but how can the data inform instruction if we’re not really analyzing the data? We have lots of protocols for looking at student work – written products and other artifacts – but how do we look at the hard data, the numbers and graphs, in ways that are productive?

We agreed that we wanted to put forth a concerted effort to develop a protocol that would encourage teachers to see data as nonthreatening, non-evaluative, informative, and worthwhile. Since the members of our group were all in some way connected to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), either as teachers or administrators or as consultants from the UCLA School Management Program, we decided to focus our development efforts on the LAUSD Periodic Assessment Program for English/Language Arts.

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Director’s Report

Debbi Laidley, Co-Director

10th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting

Announcing the

Denver, Colorado January 12th-14th, 2006

watch your mailbox or check the website for more information: www.nsrfharmony.org/wintermeeting.html
the sheer magnitude of the data. Even more daunting, because most teachers had had previous experiences that had taught them that “data are not our friends,” there was widespread distrust of how the data would be used.

As we continued to plow through mountains of data reports, we became clear about a few principles that guided our protocol development. We wanted to be sure to:

• think about ways to help teachers, individually and collaboratively, reflect on these data reports so that they are not viewed as threatening or as a basis for evaluation;
• keep the focus on evidence of what students are learning, not on how teachers are teaching;
• set up conditions so that teachers approach the data analysis in a spirit of inquiry, bringing to the process their own questions. We connected to our own experiences in using protocols to learn from student work. We knew that there were road maps to guide us in both the ATLAS Protocol and the Collaborative Assessment Conference. Our first attempt to use a protocol-like approach to analyzing the data went something like this:

1. We were clear that the data analysis should not be a “fishing expedition.” There were just too many reports for us to go in without questions to guide our inquiry. So, before we looked at the data, we did a two-minute quick write in response to the question, “What information do I hope to find out by looking at these data? Or, what do I hope to learn by looking at these data?” We shared our thoughts and generated some guiding questions for our group.
2. We agreed on one type of report, and made sure we all had copies of the same report type for one grade level. Then we asked the following questions, in rounds:
   • What do you see/notice/observe?
   • What surprises you? What makes it surprising?
   • What questions do the data raise for you? Or What else do you want to know?
   • Where might you go to get that information?

This got us started, and helped us to see where we were stuck in the process. Some of the new questions that came up were:

• should I identify standards that will recur from one component to the next?
• Should we provide this information to group members up front, or is it important for participants to seek out this information and make sense of it for themselves?
• Once we’ve identified an area where students aren’t doing well on the assessment, what is the bridge between what they know and how they perform in the classroom to how they perform on the test? How do we make the connection between evidence of understanding in the classroom and performance on the assessment?

When you consider the power of networks and their impact on school reform in New York City, you realize that New York is really, in many ways, a small town. Just a handful of us at NSF have worked with more than four-hundred superintendents, principals, assistant principals and other teacher leaders in NYC over the last few years, embedding NSF-like protocols into the daily professional development that we do. If you add our NSF NY Endorsed Facilitators and other facilitators, the number of people we have worked with expands geometrically.

We have found that responsive facilitation and the use of NSF’s principles of reflective practice, collaboration, and shared leadership can be effective means of working with people in districts to create respectful, thoughtful, and safe conditions that will encourage them to look critically at their practices.

So, while the NSF community is very much alike and alive in New York City, it is a community of ideas and practice far more than an organization. We are fairly certain that only a small number of the questions we had asked to identify the work they are doing as NSF work. What they understand it to be is an approach to working with colleagues and students which values inclusion and multiple perspectives and sees leadership as being responsible for creating an environment where learning is enhanced by collaboration. Indeed, the use of protocols and the recognition that skilled peer facilitation is important are becoming mainstream rhetoric in NYC. Practice, of course, lags. What many of us have done, in our different roles within the NYC Department of Education and partner organizations, is to take advantage of professional development opportunities that exist to introduce some new ways of working and then to be absolutely transparent about it. We aggressively encourage bold action by participants to “go home and try it” and come back and talk about it.

A principal of a very large high school, after participating in a text-based discussion using an NSF Protocol, changed the school’s planned professional development for the following week and engaged the entire faculty, for the first time, in reading and discussing a common text. The principal shared that while he had been wanting to do something like that, he simply had had no image of a way he could pull it off until he experienced it himself. A teacher who participated in an NSF training session where participants silently responded to a prompt in writing on a common large sheet of paper, reported that the next day she used this as a strategy to introduce a new book to her class, saving the paper for a reflective activity at the end. She was thrilled at how well it was received.

We have also offered more formal “facilitation training” in various configurations in order to build vibrant professional communities that support student achievement for all students, even those who have traditionally been marginalized and thought of as terminally at risk.

One recent example: Alan works in twelve high schools in New York City. After he had had new leaders in a process of inquiry and reflection over the course of months, it became clear to three of these school leaders that while they were working in various teacher team configurations, they weren’t realizing sufficient pay-off. Meetings were going off on unproductive tangents.

Decisions seemed to take forever and often became bargaining sessions instead of creative problem-solving experiences. They wanted the groups to be able to set agendas, follow through, seek solutions, assess progress, critique plans and be creative. A tall order. Through a series of consultancies and other problem-solving protocols, it became clear to all that teacher-leaders needed to strengthen their facilitation skills and broaden their repertoire in order to be effective leaders in these collaborative communities.

An institute was hatched by Vivian, Alan and two principals for teams of administrators and teachers from these three schools. The institute was led by NSF-trained facilitators and was rooted entirely in this group of these schools. After three intensive days, participants went back to their schools to apply what they learned, having committed to return a month later to talk about their efforts. Teachers looked at how their work (continued on page 18)
Dr. Maloy invited these impassioned teachers to attend the Administration Round Table (or RAT) on August 15th. That respectful invitation led to the new coaches planning and facilitating the afternoon session of Critical Friends Group to the Lesson Study Group. It was a great match, and working together with NSRF facilitator Ross Peterson- Veatch, the group made the transition from study group to CFG. This early success led to HSRF facilitating two full-day retreats of the I.U. SOE faculty in two consecutive years. Indiana University has also sponsored coaches seminars for I.U. faculty and Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCSC) teachers and administrators for the last two summers, with another seminar scheduled for this August. Betty Bushinghoff from the Athens, Georgia Center and Ross have been invaluable members of the facilitation team.

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Over twenty-five teachers enthralled them both. They wanted their central office administrators to know about the power of the work. Perhaps equally important, they wanted to communicate the power of cultural transformation that had to occur in order for the work to take root in their schools. They insisted that their principals had to understand this work so that it could become the core of professional development for their buildings.

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