

What Happens When We Intentionally Reflect on Our CFG's Work?

Ellen Key Ballock, Pennsylvania

What really struck me at the last Winter Meeting was the number of individuals who shared with me some degree of discontent with their CFG experience. They spoke of a mismatch between their group's actual collaborative work and their vision of the possible, of wondering how to push their CFG to the next level, or of the challenges of doing CFG work in their specific contexts. This was particularly interesting to me since it was the incongruity between my hopes and my actual CFG experience that first motivated me to explore critical friends groups as a researcher.



Ellen Key Ballock

Several years ago I had gone through coaches training with quite a number of colleagues from our local school district and university, and as a group we had initiated several new CFGs. I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from a long, deep, collaborative discussion of just one piece of student or teacher work, and excited to learn about how many different types of protocols would work. However, once the novelty began to wear off and I grew weary of the monthly question "Does anyone have work they would like to bring to the group next time?", dissatisfaction grew.

Uncertain of whether my discontent related to my own unrealistic expectations or to our CFG's need to push forward in a new direction, I began pursuing answers to questions such as the following: What is the ultimate potential for a CFG? What factors help or hinder a group in meeting this potential? How do CFGs develop into strong learning communities? How can this development be facilitated?

My research began in the library as I searched for research reports specifically related to CFGs and more generally related to professional learning communities and group development. My interest in pursuing these questions was heightened as I realized that in addition to making claims about the effectiveness of CFGs in enhancing collegial relationships and teacher professionalism, and in impacting teaching and learning, the existing body of research also documents many of the struggles that have held CFGs back from meeting their full potential. These struggles have related to relation-

ships, processes, and content. For example, group members may have difficulty developing the trusting relationships that allow them to honestly share deep questions from practice or to honestly challenge one another during discussions (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Armstrong, 2003). A particular context may try to establish too many CFGs too quickly or the participants may focus so much on the process of learning to use protocols and function as a CFG that they do not get to meaningful content (Murphy, 2001). Finally, coaches and CFG members may have difficulty learning to ask meaningful questions, identifying important goals for growth, or accessing resources to help them push forward in

their learning, and thus never address content that is rigorous enough to have a significant impact on teaching and learning (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Armstrong, 2003; Murphy, 2001).

I began to wonder if some type of intentional reflective process might help groups to push through these struggles and attain more meaningful and productive collaboration. So, using my own vision for the possible and what I learned from other researchers, I began drafting a reflective tool, or framework, highlighting the attributes of CFGs that seemed most essential and how they might develop over time: Relationships, Roles and Responsibilities, Commitment, Meeting Focus, Group Learning Agenda, Level of Reflection, and Impact on Teaching and Learning. Then I began to pursue a more formal research process involving two parts. First, I asked a number of individuals across the country to serve as "critical friends" for me and to provide feedback through a questionnaire on the content of the descriptions I had included within the framework. Then, having made some revisions based on this feedback, I observed three groups as they used this reflective tool to analyze their CFG's work and engage in a goal-setting process. The full process involves three parts: (1) reflective analysis of the group's functioning or collaborative work leads to the development of specific goals; (2) discussion of the steps needed to accomplish those goals leads to a concrete action plan; and (3) checking back in at a later date allows the group to monitor progress towards those goals. I followed up observations of this process by first asking

(continued on page 21)

What Happens When We Intentionally Reflect on Our CFG's Work?

(continued from page 8)

each participant to complete a questionnaire and then through a more detailed interview with each group's coach.

The data collected during the two phases of this research process has both challenged my thinking and provided provisional answers to my research questions. First, the data shows that CFG members found that the process of analysis and goal-setting had several important benefits. The process deepened participants' sense of purpose and helped them to develop more of a common understanding of their work together as a CFG. It was a reflective process that allowed them to celebrate their group's strengths, but also to identify areas for growth or to clarify their direction and focus. It was a process that disrupted each group's routine, providing them with a new vision for the possible or a clearer direction for their work. One participant wrote, "We became more aware of where we, as a group, may be off track, the direction we want to go, and how we need to reset our group's path in order to reach our goals and deepen the effectiveness of the work we do and the support we provide to one another." Though this research study has not examined the long-term benefits of this process, the data suggests that periodically stopping to reflect on our collaborative work and vision can be really helpful for pushing our work forward, given a commitment to following through on the goals and plans the CFG makes. It does indeed appear possible for CFG members to intentionally plan for the growth and development of their group, pushing through struggles in order to collaborate more meaningfully.

Second, my reflections on both the amazing strengths and the persistent struggles of the three CFGs in this study have led me to stronger convictions and new burning questions. Although I do believe this study has confirmed the importance of each of the seven attributes I listed above, I have also been reminded that neither a foundation of strong community nor tools of effective processes are sufficient for impacting teaching and learning. As a mentor of mine recently quipped, we can be doing things right, but if we are not doing the right things, what does it matter? Our interactions and processes are important, but if we are not asking important questions, questions that are rigorous or challenging, questions that we pursue over time, then will there be powerful sustained learning? Since CFG work is based largely on the questions we as practitioners bring to the group, then how do we learn to ask the "right" questions, the ques-

tions that are most important to our learning and the learning of our students? How do we sustain these important inquiries over time? And how do we ensure that we are continually gaining outside perspectives as well, so that we do not become isolated and insulated in our own experiences and perspectives?

I suggest that we need to hear more about the questions that CFGs around the country are pursuing, particularly those that result in powerful learning experiences for group members. We need practitioners to write about the specific questions they have asked that have led to powerful learning opportunities, how those questions have been addressed within the group, and what actions have resulted over time. This will serve two important purposes. First, it may provide a stimulus for others to ask similar questions about the work in their context. Second, it will begin to build a more concrete collection of evidence for the organization about ways this work really does make a difference in teaching and learning.

I would also suggest that we continue work to develop tools to help us ground our inquiries in NSRF's mission of "educational and social equity." These words are so laden with meaning that unpacking what this means in terms of a group's next steps can seem overwhelming. Developing tools to help new groups identify appropriate and concrete beginning questions and to help experienced groups reflect on their growth in this area and make plans for specific next inquiries would be challenging, but so useful.

Though there is not ample space within this article to share all the specifics of the reflective tool and process that I have been working to develop, I conclude here with several questions based on this work, with the hope that they will facilitate purposeful reflection for taking stock of a CFG's work:

- What is our purpose as a group? What concrete goals or inquiries are we working towards individually and/or as a group? Why are these pursuits important?
- To what extent does our work depend on actual data, whether student achievement data, work samples, or reading research from the field?
- To what extent have we committed ourselves to NSRF's mission of pursuing educational and social equity?
- What kinds of

(continued on page 22)



inequities have we identified within our own context? How are we responding?

- What biases and stereotypes have we identified within our practice or within ourselves? How are we responding?
- What are we learning about the relationship between culture and student learning? How are we working towards more culturally responsive practices?
- How do we hold one another accountable to taking action based on what we learn and discuss as a group, whether within our own individual practice or within our organization as a whole?
- How do we know whether we are making progress as a group? How do we measure success? What evidence or documentation do we have of our own learning and impact? What differences can we identify in student achievement across all subgroups? ■

Armstrong, K. (2003). Advancing reflective practice and building constructive collegiality: A program's influence on teachers' experiences in urban schools. Ed.D. dissertation, Harvard University, United States - Massachusetts. Retrieved September 7, 2005, from ProQuest Digital Dissertations database. (Publication No. AAT 3086978).

Dunne, F. & Honts, F. (1998). "That group really makes me think!" Critical friends groups and the development of reflective practitioners." Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA. ED 412188.

Murphy, M. (2001). Critical friends groups: An urban high school's five-year journey toward the creation of professional learning communities. Ed. D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States - Illinois. Retrieved September 7, 2005, from ProQuest Digital Dissertations database. (Publication No. AAT 3017169).

This research has been funded in part by a grant from the Lastinger Center for Learning.

Ellen Key Ballock can be reached at ellenkey@hotmail.com

there were 32 new CFG Coaches seminars. CFG Coaches seminars are our most typical introduction to the work of NSRF and our mission. These 32 sessions reached educators in 19 states through 20 Centers of Activity in every region from Massachusetts to Hawai'i.

NSRF dues-paying membership added a new dimension to sessions this summer. Offering membership to seminar participants provides a new opportunity for them to be engaged in the national NSRF community and support the mission of NSRF. The summer sessions in Hawai'i were the first to build in a one-year NSRF membership for participants.

This summer has been another learning opportunity for all of us. Our continued work has come a long way in spreading our mission and vision for democratic and equitable schools. The door has been opened to hundreds of new NSRF colleagues and scores of old ones have been renewed in their practice and purpose. We look forward to reflecting on the important work of this summer in search of its impact on the lives of our students this fall. ■

The NSRF events database was the source for the information in this article. This database is only as good as the data provided, so if you are an NSRF National Facilitator, please let the National Center know about any upcoming NSRF seminar experiences, so we may promote them on our website and use the collected information to enrich our network.

Chris Jones can be contacted at cjones@nsrfharmony.org

