

What's Your Question?

Reflections on the Second Annual NSRF Research Forum

Donna Reid, Texas

“I’m grateful for this opportunity to get folks together who are interested in studying systematically CFG work. It’s affirming and energizing!”—Research Forum participant

That quote sums up the positive response to the second annual NSRF Research Forum held on January 24, 2007. Around 30 practitioners associated with NSRF gathered in Seattle to examine and advance research related to CFG practices. The thirteen sessions covered a wide range of topics that prompted another participant to reflect: “A revelation to learn the scope, variety, and quality of research.”

What sets the NSRF Research Forum apart from other similar gatherings is a collaborative atmosphere that fosters questioning and transparency and encourages presenters and participants to connect with each other as well as to connect with new knowledge. The stodgy rectangular set up of tables and chairs that the hotel provided quickly gave way to presenters and participants forming circles to better interact with each other. As both presenters and participants, we took responsibility for each other’s learning, and, to that end, many session leaders chose to use protocols to examine their research. For example, I attended Pat Norman and Angela Breidenstein’s session titled “Learning to analyze student work: The use of protocols to develop teacher candidates’ assessment skills and dispositions.” As professors and CFG Coaches at Trinity University in San Antonio, Angela and Pat asked “whether and how protocols support teacher candidates’ ability to assess student work as well as whether and how the engagement in protocols influences teacher candidates’ stance toward assessing children’s work.” They collected data by videotaping university class sessions where teacher candidates used the ATLAS protocol to describe poetry written by elementary students. They transcribed the videotaped discourse and analyzed it along with the teacher candidates’ reflections.

Unlike the norm at other research gatherings, where presenters rehash dry descriptions of their research design and findings, Pat and Angela plunged us into their data by asking us to engage in



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the ATLAS protocol using one of their class transcripts as a text. Yes, we were doing an ATLAS protocol of a transcript of an ATLAS protocol—with powerful results. Together the participants described and interpreted the transcript and then reflected on the implications for our practice. The process democratically validated the presenters’ research and reminded every participant that conversation is at the center of CFG work.

This format encouraged us not only to share knowledge, but to influence each other’s practice. At the end of Angela and Pat’s session, I wasn’t just thinking “Hmm, that’s a good idea,” but “Wow! I’m going to try that out myself.” With the permission of our own critical friends back home, another colleague and I plan on making transcripts of protocols in action to possibly use as texts in our New Coach training seminars.

Other participants echoed this appreciation of interactive sharing in their reflections at the end of the day. One shared, “I very much enjoyed being here, felt heard and felt like the setting(s) allowed me to give good feedback to others.” Another wrote, “Please know that, for emerging and continuing scholars, this is an important community to foster. Connections are being forged and collaboration is taking place.” Finally, a participant new to NSRF wrote, “I very much appreciated the openness and active connection-making.”

Although the second annual NSRF Research Forum displayed the NSRF community’s strengths as open-minded, reflective collaborators who actively create new knowledge, there is more work to be done to get the organization closer to fully realizing our shared values and beliefs. The NSRF mission statement includes language about “empowering all people” involved with schools to do the work of building reflective communities. Yet of the many researchers who presented at the 2007 forum, only one is currently a classroom teacher. All the others listed universities and other educational organizations as their primary contact. Perhaps this is to be expected, since classroom teachers have a harder time leaving work to attend conferences, but NSRF’s research agenda could be strengthened by encouraging more teacher

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including scholarship support when necessary.

We are the protocol people – we're also the CFG people, the CFEF people, and the facilitative leadership people – no one else, and no other organization may lay claim to those things (one exception is our partner organization in the CFEF work, BayCES, with whom we are codeveloping that work). Choosing to support NSRF is a choice toward supporting the things we do coupled with our theory of action, which supports our mission statement of educational and social equity.

The choice to support NSRF is made with the understanding that the organization stay committed to its core values and principles. We have had many conversations and thought openly and honestly about the business of NSRF. NSRF is worthy of your support because we are, have always been, and will continue to be an organization committed to mission first. What we have realized and what we are asking you to support as a dues-paying member is that we must operate as a business in order to have the resources to further our mission.

And our time is now. I believe we are entering a perfect storm for teacher voice and teacher empowerment. In the face of the punishing effects of an unsustainable accountability system based on standardized test scores, school systems across the country are asking out loud what service they are providing their schools. Systems from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles are considering and reconsidering their carrot-and-stick approach to school management and governance and are seeking ways to reward school success with increasing levels of school-based decision making and management autonomy.

New York City alone is in the process of dismantling a failed bureaucratic school management structure in favor of locating as much power, decision making, and resources as possible at the schoolhouse level. With that type of administrative discretion, teachers and principals will get to choose the type of professional development and external support they buy and receive. Imagine, no longer will a central office staffer demand this or that type of professional development in over 1,000 schools representing tens of thousands of teachers. This is not a dream but a reality that will take effect July 1. Our time is indeed now.

As you consider your memberships, professional affiliations, and obligations this year, I am confident you will not only choose to become a dues-paying member of our organization but that

you will encourage others to do so as well. I have had great counsel from trusted colleagues and critical friends in this time of transition for NSRF; our work is stronger, more important, and more critical than ever – it is up to each of us to choose to make our organization equally strong as a voice for adult learning in the service of student achievement. We can choose to make NSRF strong and I believe deeply that if we stay committed, we can and will choose a more socially just and equitable society. ■

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researchers to attend the forum and share their work.

Other participants pointed out that “work is needed. . . to document the research agenda, some essential history, etc.” and one suggested “incorporat[ing] the research into each local center's work plan.” These comments reinforce the idea that in order to further influence others to transform schooling, CFG practitioners must be more deliberate about collecting data and presenting evidence that demonstrates how we make a difference for our students.

Because NSRF's history is rooted in a tradition of “building reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone,” NSRF is in a unique position to bridge the gap between theory and practice and use our strengths to transform student learning by transforming ourselves.

So what is YOUR research question? How does your practice influence others, and how can you share that? Hope to see you at the third annual NSRF Research Forum in Florida on December 12th, 2007. ■

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