

Protocols in Practice: The Triple Chalk Talk- An Alternative Way to “Set It Off”

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I explicitly recall having a conversation with Nancy Mohr when she, Katy Kelly and I participated in the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools' (BayCES) Leading for Equity seminar in the summer of 2004. I remember thinking, it seems like a perfect marriage... if we could integrate BayCES's equity pedagogy with the processes and protocols of NSRF. Lo and behold, it wasn't long afterward that the work began with a few of our National Facilitators and BayCES colleagues, work that launched the Coaching for Educational Equity (CFEE) Seminar in the summer of 2005.

This particular article is intended to put to paper some thinking around an NSRF process, Chalk Talk; content that emerged from CFEE as a result of the partnership with BayCES; and the Gates Foundation's attributes of high-achieving schools -rigor, relevance and relationships- for those involved in the national Small Schools movement.

As we sought to create agendas for those who were interested in professional learning communities that were a radical departure from business as usual, we knew that we had to research, adopt, and implement critical pedagogy and practices that were engaging and potentially transformative. As a group comprised of some of the National Facilitators from our CFEE cohort, we continued to grapple with processes and content that would deepen our practice and intensify the experiences of those who passionately wanted to explore what it might look like to interrogate, interrupt, transition and transform our cognitive and emotional selves as part of our quest to create small, personalized, equitable learning communities for students. In order to change the predictable outcomes for unsuccessful/traditionally low-performing students, we asked ourselves “How could we begin our seminars by setting the conditions for participants to be reflective and interrogate their own values, beliefs and assumptions about schools in order to recognize what they actually believe to be true about the purpose of schools?” We wanted to bring to the surface what participants actually believe and challenge them to think differently about how to redesign learning envi-

ronments so that they would yield a different set of results for students who had been neither compliant nor appropriately involved in school.

As most educators do, we went with what we knew, but allowed ourselves to be challenged to be far more rigorous and recreate the experiences that would stretch us and the participants. We shared with each other our individual and collective experiences from working around the country, where we witnessed various attempts at starting new small schools. Unfortunately, we saw that most new small schools, after a year or two,

began to look very much like many others. From our collective observations and data compiled from national and local reports on school achievement, most new high schools were turning out to

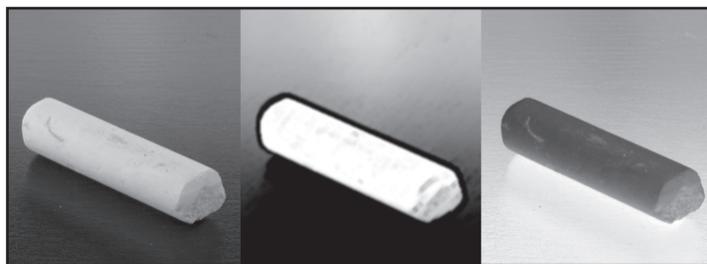
be miniature replicas of large comprehensive high schools with minimal changes in performance results or adult/student relationships. Having the experiences of serving as a director of creating new small schools, advocating for them and coaching in them, I took the liberty of putting my own spin on what we conventionally know as the Chalk Talk.

Chalk Talk: its purpose was clear and familiar in most contexts, but for the onset of a seminar, it was not sufficiently provocative in getting participants to think differently about how to create school cultures and establish relationships and instructional practices that would get a different set of outcomes for students who historically had been least served and were yet the most needy.

Triple Chalk Talk

How could we preserve and protect the integrity of Chalk Talk while increasing its rigor, relationship and relevance to the content which was to follow? The responses to that question led to the “Triple Chalk Talk.” The thought was to ask not just one question, but three that would cause people to enter a space of dissonance- dissonance that was intended to direct us inward and call to the fore that which was both personal and professional, cognitive and emotional.

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Getting to the questions

My input for changing our choice of questions was informed by a meeting I had with Lisa Delpit, where she recommended that I read her article *Educators as "Seed People" Growing a New Future*. This article was coupled with our CFE reading of *The Nature of Discourse(s) in Education* (aka *Changing the Discourse in Schools*) by Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish and Dianne Smith. After multiple readings and discussions, I questioned what, then, the difference is between Delpit's definitions of "education" vs. "schooling," and Eubanks, Parrish and Smith's discourses of traditional talk and schooling that perpetuates and propagates "social reproduction" vs. transformation- what *is* vs. what *could be*? Juxtaposed between these two constructs, the critical question we had to then ask was- "what is equity?" (After we've interrogated our assumptions and beliefs and interrupted inequities, how do we begin to transition and ultimately transform ourselves, in order to transform others?) Posing these three questions:

- What is schooling?
- What is education?
- What is equity?

just might get us to a point of challenging not just etymologies, but also educators' understanding and manifestation of these beliefs in schools, benefiting students and their families and, consequently, society.

Testing out Triple Chalk Talk

How can we get to transformation and not simply reproduce unsuccessful high schools on a smaller scale? As some of us began to wrestle with the questions ourselves, we were amazed at the dissonance that it caused within each of us and among the participants, and at the revelation that what they were doing in their schools that would eventually only get them to the same results as the schools they sought to change.

The mere suggestion of changing the structure and content of the Chalk Talk was met with some trepidation. Because we were an "out of the box" and mixed group of facilitators across difference, we agreed to take the risk and support each other in the facilitation and debrief of the process.

The Triple Chalk Talk afforded us the opportunity to get participants' thoughts on the landscape, inviting them to grapple with common terms in uncommon ways in order to assess where they were as we began the journey of identification, inter-

ruption, transition and transformation. Rigorous, yes. Relationships- we asked ourselves and our participants what the relationships were between the three terms, and also what the relevance was of posing the three questions within the context of our seminar and their schools. These questions were asked in the debrief and we've always been surprised at the outcome. We oftentimes stood in angst, confusion, enlightenment and clarification with more questions- a deeper reflection on practice in schools- and a yearning for ways to truly create something radically different, not only for the students and parents, but also for the educators who yearned for greater satisfaction in what they were doing for their students and school communities.

On facilitation...

I also learned that the facilitators' rationale for using this protocol with these questions should be made clear before it is implemented. Depending upon the purpose for using Chalk Talk, it can be counterproductive, or an escape route for addressing equity superficially, if it is only intended to be used as a "silenced" dialogue. If the equity dialogue isn't unpacked and connected to other curricular components to deepen understandings throughout the seminar, it is insufficient- and dare I say irresponsible- to open and shut the dialogue at the Chalk Talk. For those who want to hide behind their discomfort in pressing for public conversations about the issues that beset the poor, the marginalized, children of color and other victims of bias and discrimination, it can be a way to "bring it up" without "taking it up." While there's safety and anonymity in the Chalk Talk, it does a disservice to simply create silent spaces to name inequities without the proper curricular connections and skilled facilitation to allow participants to verbalize their thoughts and feelings that surface as a result of "doing the protocol"; without then creating and holding the space to un-silence the dialogue.

Another point that may seem minor to some was incredibly important and telling to me. As I watched the Triple Chalk Talks play out, I began to notice that while they happened in differing locales, the questions repeatedly ended up being placed in a similar order. First and/or second were the questions "What is education?" and "What is schooling?" usually placed in close proximity to one another. Then, in another distant space, (continued on page 19)