

different perspectives – with a concluding section: Jumping In; and two Appendices: Suggested Uses for Protocols, and Additional Resources; a section on References; and a quick-guide Index.

The authors, all steeped in professional development and CFG facilitating, emphasize that “at its heart, facilitating is about promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust.” They go on to note that “...protocols are deliberately designed with these tasks in mind, while most other meeting formats are rife with opportunities for ignoring them.” We are all too familiar with the faculty “meeting” where the Principal delivers a monologue while staff grade papers and check their e-mail, or the “discussion” in which two or three staff typically dominate and others tune-out. Protocols are designed to meaningfully engage all members of a faculty, to hear all voices, and to address real issues in collaborative, productive processes.

Lastly, in the back of the book, on a page which might be easily overlooked (although there is mention of this in the Preface), is a valuable reference to “FREE Abbreviated Protocols” on-line. These are “...designed to be used after you have read the full descriptions in the book. They are not designed to be used as stand-alone guides, nor do they contain all the information necessary to successfully conduct a session.” Readers are encouraged to “customize” these to suit their own professional staff development needs, adding notes, varying the times, adding or deleting steps, and posing provocative questions, making them useful to each facilitator’s own context. You can find them at www.tcpres.com where there is a list of Teachers College Press books. Scroll down to The Power of Protocols, and simply click there on the word “Protocols.”

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Interview with Participants from the “Building Collaborative Learning Communities” Leadership Seminar in Bloomington, Indiana, Nov. 2009 and March 2010



By Michele Mattoon

The National School Reform Faculty’s National Center, just completed a Leadership Seminar in Bloomington, Indiana. This training focused on

teaching participants how to increase student achievement through collaborative learning communities. By the end of the training, participants learned to improve student learning, create equity in the classroom, increase efficient, effective communication and enhance personal performance through the use of protocols and reflective practice. The seminar was led by Dave Lehman, the Interim Director of NSRF and Michele Mattoon, the Training Coordinator for NSRF. This was an open training, so educators came from such places as California, Texas, Florida and Alabama to attend, as well as some teachers from Harmony School in Bloomington.

This particular seminar was unique. One of our themes was “Democracy in Schools” and we were privileged to have Debbie Meier, a well-known educational reformer, writer and activist, as an integral part of the seminar. She gave an inspiring keynote speech the first day, and, using NSRF protocols that are used for in-depth text-based discussions, we discussed several of her writings, particularly related democracy in the school setting, with Debbie present and participating in the conversation, entering at various points throughout each protocol as the Participants discussed each writing. The following are responses from two of the participants, reflecting particularly on this unique involvement of an author in having text-based discussions.

NSRF - Please tell us your name, where you're from and what you do.



Phu Tranchi - Principal of General Studies at Shalhevet School in Los Angeles; I also teach science.



Kaethe Perez – University of Florida, Lastinger Center for Learning Facilitator, working mainly in the Pinellas County School District, in Largo Florida; I also work with a UF Professor in Residence to support the school district as they develop and deepen an understanding of active, engaged instruction, teacher inquiry, effective professional learning communities, and how those elements foster improved teacher learning and teacher practice.

NSRF - Was this seminar a worthwhile experience? In what ways?

Phu - The NSRF Seminar was a tremendous experience for several reasons. First of all, having Debbie Meier present was incredible. She is such a massive figure in education and to have her join us in a small group

setting was a true privilege. I am very excited about what I learned and look forward to implementing Critical Friends in my school. I have no doubt that it will have a profound impact on our education. The faculty who I have started to train are very positive about the nature of the collaboration and eager anticipate learning more. I really enjoyed the practical approach of the seminar, where we were forming a CFG among the participants without even realizing it. The way that we went through the protocols effectively modeled how relationships can be developed among educators in a school, while giving the participants the confidence to facilitate at our own schools. Finally, I thought that we had a very special group of educators in attendance and I felt honored to spend the time together, learning from and inspiring each other.

Kaethe - I appreciated the seminar format of three days, followed by a few months break, followed by a two day follow-up. This stretched-out format gave me time to 'settle in' to the philosophy, try out various protocols, and integrate the work into my current program. Fortunately, I have the support of UF Lastinger faculty and facilitators who have had this NSRF experience, either first hand in a five day seminar, or in co-facilitating with NSRF facilitators and coaches in the UF network.

Coming to the seminar helped me understand the underlying philosophy of NSRF, that a quest for equity and democracy drives this work. Giving voice to and empowering teachers and leaders to study their practice systematically and within conversational structures provides leverage, which assists development of collegial relationships. This in turn strengthens the professional practice of teaching and learning in classrooms, team meetings, school staffs and districts. In a prior educational role, I became certified as a trainer in another program that uses strategies to build resiliency, long term relationships, and community. While the protocol aspect of the NSRF seminar has some similarities, I can now better appreciate that the mission and message of NSRF is one of equity and democracy.

NSRF - How was it having Deborah Meier in the seminar as a keynote speaker, an author of texts that were discussed, and a participant?

Phu - As mentioned above, it was an absolute thrill to just have her present, never mind participating with us throughout the sessions. She is so prolific and still providing us with novel insights to democratic education. The fact that we could discuss her texts with her present to clarify and expand upon her work was such a unique opportunity. Her sense of humor around what she was thinking when she wrote some the pieces was relieving because we tend to be so serious about what we are doing all the time. She reminded us that it is just as important to enjoy leisure and to have fun with what we do. Again, it was such a great privilege.

Kaethe - Deb's experiences and passion for her life's work in education was the exclamation point on the seminar!! Having the author of many of the texts used in the text-based protocols gave additional depth to our conversations. She is not the least bit shy in challenging the status quo in small group discussions which pushed me to deepen my thinking about equity within and outside the educational system.

Deb's life wisdom is inspirational, as is her zealous return time and time

again to equity and democracy, the underpinning philosophy of NSRF. In one of our small group conversations, I had an 'AHA' moment when Deb emphasized that NSRF is not about protocols, that the protocols are a vehicle that can empower equity and democracy of voice, whether administrator, teacher or student.

NSRF - Were you able to use what you learned back at your school? Would you like to share any successes or roadblocks?

Phu - I have started to implement some of the CFG protocols successfully with two specific groups so far. My primary focus is on training our Educational Leadership Team, composed of department chairs and other administrators involved in our educational program. We have established an environment of safety within critique and learned a lot more about each other in the process. We recently completed our first consultancy protocol, which spawned one of the most profound conversations I've ever had about education in the ten years I've been at this school. I'm trying to be patient about getting this out to the faculty as a whole, though I've used some of the meeting protocols with them. I also trained some student leaders to facilitate sessions with students and teachers using some of the protocols, which was amazing to watch. I envision different CFGs being used throughout the school and at all levels eventually.

Kaethe - Successes: In Pinellas County Schools, we provided job-embedded professional development with 19 elementary schools, facilitated school leadership institutes, coaching academies, principal institutes, and are now partnering with the district to redesign professional development. Since the NSRF seminars I stepped up to the plate, offering to build the original agenda for a follow-up combined regional principal meeting, thinking both about the content objectives as well as the most appropriate protocols to bring an equity of voice to the work. The original agenda then became a 'weather-vane', so to speak, when emailed locally to our colleagues in Gainesville and Miami for their well-respected input. After a few iterations, the facilitator group met face-to-face to finalize and strategically think through the agenda, keeping in mind the original objectives, the participants, and the flow of the day.

Challenges: In this principal meeting, I had included a well-received protocol demonstrated at the NSRF two day follow-up (Penny for your Thoughts), as well as a protocol from the NSRF website newsletter. Dave Lehman has written a Two-minute Consultancy which we used to gather feedback about the district PD redesign from this group of 80+ principals. I realized halfway through the protocol that table groups of five or six could sustain the silence and give good written feedback. The larger table groups of 8-10 were losing energy fast – so I gave a moment of 'energy release', and encouraged groups to keep passing their question page around. Implication for future work? The size of the group and the purpose of the task need careful consideration!

NSRF - What is one thing that has stuck with you about this seminar?

Phu - Wow, it's hard to delineate the one thing that stuck with me because there were so many great things. I guess what continues to resonate with me is how dramatically you can improve school culture through the CFG

approach. It makes so much sense, but unfortunately remains very counter-intuitive in schools. Education must continue to evolve and I hope that CFGs will be a part our development.

Kaethe - Dave and Michele were excellent models of facilitation. Most important was the transparency of facilitation moves that both of them drew to our attention. I appreciate so much more the power of co-facilitation – the dance – which strengthens the work to be accomplished. Lots of pre-planning, time to review and revise the original agenda, debriefing at the end of each day to prepare the best agenda for tomorrow – all these things were modeled with patience and poise. This seminar helped me realize my role as an NSRF coach is to be the frame/support for the participants to actualize their empowerment towards improved professional practice. When I can provide the most well-thought out agenda and protocol(s) for a particular group, the group itself grows and deepens in their practice.

NSRF - Any other comments?

Phu - As we look to continue to reform education to benefit our students, it is important to develop strategies for benefiting teachers. It is very clear that there is no better way to improve schools than to ensure that teachers have the opportunity to learn and develop ourselves. From my brief experience with CFG strategies, I can vouch for the efficacy of this approach to developing professional learning communities. I've not seen educators so genuinely excited about the prospect of professional development. The intent of the approach comes across and disarms teachers when they can see that it is so clearly directed at their benefit and consequently their students. I've enjoyed a very memorable experience that will remain with me. I hope to always promote and be involved in a Critical Friends Group for the rest of my career.



Kaethe - I am so fortunate to have a local support system which includes Don Pemberton, director of the UF Lastinger Center and Sylvia Boynton, my colleague in Pinellas County. It was Sylvia who recommended I attend this seminar, which she had attended a few years ago in Tampa. I am grateful to be working with two Florida NSRF Facilitators, Pete Bermudez and Magdi Castaneda, who are UF Lastinger faculty members. Bottom line: you can read the website, you can attend meetings and workshops where these protocols are used, but to experience the full seminar with the focus on equity and democracy – this has helped me refine my own practice. Thank you.

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