From the Director

Mindful Facilitation Transforms Classes, Meetings and Trainings

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF® Director, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG® Coach in Indiana, michele@nsrfharmony.org

Like me, I’m sure that you have also experienced the dreaded “meeting (or workshop, planning session, etc…) gone wrong.” Perhaps the person who was leading the meeting didn’t seem in control. There was no obvious structure that supported dealing with the subject at hand. Only a third of the people present were heard and the meeting ended without concrete action steps. On the other hand, maybe the leader was so focused on set time limits and the original agenda, that decisions were made hastily and left the majority of the group feeling frustrated and powerless.

When I began my career as a facilitator, I had the good luck to work around many “master” facilitators. They made the process look so easy. I would marvel at their skills at structuring meetings, creating an atmosphere of safety and trust, giving the opportunity for all voices to be heard and honored and moving the group toward a conclusion that felt satisfying for all. I took copious notes and eagerly embarked on my own facilitation journey. Although I did not realize it then, I began to cultivate a habit of mindful facilitation.

So, what is mindful facilitation? Mindfulness has been defined as paying attention in a particular way. It is an intentional, moment-to-moment awareness that is nonjudgmental, curious, and open. Mindful facilitators develop active, engaged listening skills that allow them to be tuned into the group and its needs. Cultivating an attitude of “compassionate unattachment” is essential for the mindful facilitator. She realizes that her job is to meet the needs of the group, not to push her own agenda. If a facilitator’s heart, as well as her head, can hold everyone’s needs, opinions, ideas, thoughts, emotions, etc… and remain personally unattached to the outcome, then she is much more likely to be accepted as a neutral third party who is working for the good of the group.

When at her best, the mindful facilitator is passionate, dispassionate, and compassionate all at the same time. She is full of energy, unattached to outcomes, and genuinely wants the best for each individual, as well as the group as a whole. The mindful facilitator respectfully honors a variety of perspectives, and calmly and confidently role-plays appropriate risk taking behaviors that encourages others to do the same. This paves the way for members of the group to be more honest and open, without having to be defensive when others think and feel differently.

So what can you do to become more of a mindful facilitator? I respectfully offer these suggestions:

1. Know your role. Your job is to move a process forward, not to push your own
agenda, inject your opinions and ideas, or seek any one particular outcome. In other words, your role is not to solve the problem. It is to objectively (re)state opinions, suggestions, and feelings, to ask clarifying and probing questions that push people to reexamine their own beliefs, to help them focus so that they can clearly articulate their thoughts, or push their thinking into new directions. Participants allow you to do this because you are a neutral, yet caring, third party.

2. **Provide structure.** Although you believe that a group can collaboratively come up with its own solutions, mindful facilitators know that a structure is needed. Without one, there will be no guardrails to keep the process from meandering onto non-productive paths, speeding haphazardly though dangerous conditions or taking a nose dive off a cliff altogether when emotions and passions run too high. Mindful facilitators know that groups need to be taken through a process of defining a problem, targeting the specific area that needs work, understanding specifics through the asking of clarifying and probing questions, taking time to silently reflect on possible solutions and the creating of actionable solutions based on the collaborative group process. Good Critical Friends Group coaches and facilitators know that the best way to do this is by using protocols and activities like those provided by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF).

3. **Be flexible.** As every good facilitator does, you’ve come up with an agenda and tailored it to fit the needs of the group you are working with. Every mindful facilitator knows that is just the first step. Mindful facilitators think on their feet. They are constantly adjusting time, structures, and focus, depending on what thoughts, feelings, ideas, or needs surface during the process. This means that mindful facilitators are not attached to using their “brilliant” agenda, but instead rely on the brilliance of a group in a collaborative process. It also means you really need to know your stuff!

4. **Take, make and create time.** This actually goes along with being flexible, but is important enough to have as a stand-alone topic. If you want something done well, it will take time, time that almost no one ever wants to give up. Although most people will acknowledge that good decisions might take a good deal of time to make, what they really want is instant gratification. It is your job to put forth a reasonable time frame for what needs to be accomplished. Remember that although each session has a beginning and ending time, everything to be addressed within that time frame may be adjusted or adapted to accommodate the priorities of the group as it moves along. Mindful facilitators know that important, emotionally charged topics may well take more than one session to reach resolution, and they will have to articulate the importance of this to the group. The use of reflective silence is a powerful tool. Mindful facilitators know when to take the time to use it! A few minutes of silent reflection time can be an effective way to regroup, calm things down when the atmosphere gets tense, or to help participants articulate their responses effectively, thereby saving a lot of time!

5. **Be compassionate.** Believe me, people know if you are truly working with their best interests at heart or are acting compassionate to mask a hidden agenda. Mindful facilitators listen to, acknowledge, and value feelings as much as opinions and ideas. They know that unless strong feelings are brought to the surface and worked through, collaboration will break down and prevent long-term, workable solutions from being made.
6. Don’t take yourself too Seriously. Developing a light, humorous tone when appropriate can go a long way toward building relationships and creating buy-in to the process. A day-long event feels much, much longer if you never share a laugh. A mindful facilitator can laugh at herself and with others. Showing the group that you enjoy your job helps them to enjoy the process as well.

Obviously, experience is, perhaps, the best teacher of all. The mindful facilitator is always striving to improve. Seeking out constructive feedback on her performance not only gives her valuable information about how to hone her skills, but also models for the group how to skillfully accept well-intended feedback. Mindful facilitators each have their own style and should take time to develop it. Being authentic creates an atmosphere of trust. And remember, if a facilitator cultivates an attitude of mindfulness, she will plant the seeds in others to do the same.

Wishing you the the best possible start to the new semester and 2013,

Michele Mattoon
Director, NSRF

P.S. Please feel free to forward Connections to friends and colleagues, and suggest they sign up for our Connections e-list!

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Hurry! Only a few seats still open at our Critical Friends Group New Coaches Open Training beginning Feb. 18-20*

Bloomington, Indiana, $795 for five days’ training
Visit the NSRF website for more details and to enroll.

Look what CFGs can do for your school:
- Build diversity of thought
- Extend and share leadership
- Facilitate participation from all members
- Provide healthy challenges
- Foster equity
- Honor and prioritize time for deep reflection
- Support strategic planning
- Reveal solutions to complex dilemmas
- Develop critical problem-solving
- Encourage creative, new thinking (sometimes around old problems)
- Carefully analyze work, and support everyone in receiving and giving focused, actionable feedback

“I had huge misgivings about this training, one would even say resentment. It was based on past trainings that we encountered and took nothing from them. Most of these left me feeling powerless on staff.

“I must say this was entirely different. After a week of this training I feel we now have more tools to improve meetings, communication and the community at [my] school. Thank you so much. I now feel able to voice my concerns and dilemmas effectively. I also feel these protocols will make me a better member of [my] school. They will further my ability to teach my students as well.” -- A new CFG coach from Wisconsin

*First three days of a complete five-day training, final two days to be determined by participants
I found myself in a nightmare of a situation. Like one of those college dreams, where you find yourself late for a test, and no way to get to class.

I had traveled across the country to facilitate a Critical Friends Group Coaches Training. My communication with the organizers had been, at best, incomplete. I really did not know who I was training, nor did I know the organization’s nor any individual’s goals or hopes, why they’d selected CFG training, nothing. And when I got there, I found out the participants were just as uninformed as I was.

One of the great experiences of taking CFG training is the growth and connectedness that all participants feel by the end of the training. But that fantastic experiences requires a lot of preparation on the facilitator’s part. As I prepare for a training, I typically feel a mixture of panic and responsibility. The panic increases in direct correlation to the lack of connection with the organizers ahead of time.

A good meeting or training facilitator will do many hours of planning to match the correct set of experiences, texts, and activities with the group they will be training.

The first day is usually about bringing the individuals together and helping them to practice listening and collaborating with each other. As the days pass, protocols and activities will hopefully give them an understanding of how to improve their teaching or administrative practices. The goal — make their practice public to others by meeting in a CFG, and use protocols to give equal voice to each other in supporting each other’s professional growth and development.

So, here I am, far from home, in a training where I discovered on the first day these things:

1. The group didn’t know why we were doing this training.
2. They didn’t know much about each other’s work, even though they all worked out of the same office.
3. They didn’t know what they didn’t know.
4. They were experiencing the results of a lot of invisible hierarchy within their office.
5. Some group members were major, vocal skeptics during the whole first day.

Realization: I had no idea what to do with the rest of the week!

I went back to my room after the first day of training and looked at my five-day plan. I wanted to tear it up, throw it out, and start over. Then, I made a crucial decision for the week. I decided that this group, more than they could realize, NEEDED to experience basic CFG practice through experiencing the protocols in training, step by step.

Our second day together focused on learning how to give and receive feedback effectively, and doing some Tuning protocols. Through the process, the group learned so much about each other, they demanded to interrupt the agenda for the day and work on all of the newfound responsibilities they were learning...
about each other! I held them off.

An important detail about this group that I hadn’t mentioned yet: they do Professional Development with educators too. They know P.D. techniques and experiences thoroughly. They travel the country, like me, giving and receiving Professional Development. They looked at this NSRF CFG training like a CSI pathologist looks at a victim. Because of this perspective, they asked me to do the “unholy” to the “holy.” They wanted permission to interrupt each protocol as we were running it. When we were doing a protocol for the first time, they wanted to halt it at any time and ask why I was facilitating in a certain way. I understood that they had a different view about the process and so I met them in the middle. I asked them to write their questions on Post-it Notes and I would pause at the end of each section of a protocol and go through the questions that came up. (Editor’s note: Although Terry’s adaptation is not recommended for most groups, he was beautifully following his own internal Mindful Facilitator wisdom.)

The third day of training, we worked on dilemma protocols, which led to more frustration as members of the group discovered so much more content of their work lives that needed work. I was taken aside that day by a very wise person and asked what my plans were for the rest of the week. This wise participant suggested that it would be useless to continue the training along its typical agenda. I agreed.

That night, I rewrote the last two days’ agenda entirely. Instead of facilitating the rest of a typical training, I put on my coaching hat, and led this group as if it was a CFG that I belonged to. My thinking switched from, “What do I need to do to move them toward becoming facilitators?” to “What do I need to do to help my CFG?”

I want to thank the staff in the NSRF office for their help and guidance along this path of changing the training. I always find them invaluable as a resource for preparing and conducting a training. In this case they were essential.

The next day we did an ATLAS Looking at Data Protocol to honor the need to look at their own research and feedback data. Then we began to use that protocol to delve into their work. We did the following things:

- We went into a protocol to tease out the different issues the group needed to work on using an Affinity Protocol.
- Once issues were defined we prioritized which of the issues could and should be worked on.
- Next, we selected who should be working on the issues identified.
- Our next task was to begin to plan what work to do on these issues. Each group used a Futures Protocol to do this. These issues were so immediate to the group, they only went in the future 6 months in order to plan backwards.
- Their next step was to do a NSRF Creating Action Plan.
- When that was complete, we used an NSRF Group Agenda Planning for the next meeting that each group would have.
- We shared our Action Plans and Agendas.
- The training was done.

Time was up and it was time to go home.

The hard-right-turn of the last few days’ work brought a completely different dimension to my training, profoundly different from other trainings I’ve conducted over the years. I learned there was more than one way to do a training. I also realized that although there are many trainings that don’t go where you think they will, it’s imperative to not give up on the process. It was important that we had the protocol and facilitating experience, but so was meeting the group’s needs. Through this experience, I hope they discovered the power of Critical Friends Groups in improving professional practice and I hope they seek out more opportunities to use and be trained in more NSRF protocols. I definitely learned the absolute imperative of knowing a group’s goals for a training before planning the event. Lastly, now I also know that if a group doesn’t know what they hope to get out of a training, the agenda will change as their goals begin to surface.

I believe the lessons I learned through this training also apply to other group experiences, not just CFG trainings. We indeed “went someplace different,” but the protocols still provided a clear map to a solution.
In this age of standards and high stakes testing, it is becoming more difficult for teachers to respond to their own or their students’ intellectual interests. While at one time, teachers were expected to make curriculum decisions and even to create curriculum units of study of a variety of topics, today’s teachers are encouraged only to “hit” standards. Unfortunately, the current environment leads to what some call the “skipping stone” curriculum. Like a stone skimming across the water, the goal is to “hit” as many standards as possible within a given time frame. Rarely are teachers, today, encouraged to thoughtfully consider what they are teaching in their classes. Getting students “through” the curriculum as quickly as possible seems to be the current goal of our political leaders.

Given the current conditions in our schools, perhaps the best we can do is carve out a few hours during a given grading period to select topics, develop curriculum themes, obtain interesting materials and resources, and plan learning experiences that will intellectually engage our students. One strategy is to schedule about 3 hours a week (e.g., three 1 hour time blocks) for two to four weeks, and teach students what I like to call “classroom-based” (as opposed to textbook or test-based) curriculum units. Many times these units can be on topics that are related to conventional curricula, but takes students in a slightly different journey.

For example, if teaching about World War II, we could teach a related unit on “The Homefront” which would explore such themes as: food (ration cards, victory gardens, popular dishes, innovative preparation), clothing (e.g., styles, where made, fabrics used, types of shops), entertainment (e.g., popular music, movies, radio shows, games, books, vacations), work (in and out of the home), changed roles of women, significant national events unrelated to battles, dating rituals, education (e.g., examples of curriculum, classroom size, rules and punishments, schools), transportation (e.g., types of autos, trains, airplanes, boats, buses, roads), work (type, laws governing, factories), medicine and illness, famous crimes, treatment of Japanese Americans, and life of other marginalized citizens such as Blacks, Latinos, and children. These types of themes could, of course, be used for any history unit.

The goal of these classroom-based units of study would be to emphasize children’s powers of inquiry. Instead of emphasizing the short-term memorization of facts, the goal in the above example would be to challenge the students’ powers of imagination, speculation, and analysis. The central question would be: What was it like to live in the United States during WWII? In developing these units, it would be important to diversify the resources and activities. Some children learn best by listening to lectures, some by having discussions, others by looking at films or photos, still others by engaging in role plays, games, simulations, or learning centers, and/or going on field trips. By diversifying the learning materials and activities of a unit, students will naturally gravitate to those resources and activities from which they learn best, thus individualizing your curriculum. Instead of rigidly predetermining what will be learned, leave some room for student inquiry. Let them teach you what it was like to live (as a child,
parent, woman, person of color, war veteran, young man deemed unfit to fight) in the U.S. during WWII. Instead of over-emphasizing assessment through tests, consider other options such as papers, roleplays, and art projects as ways for students to manifest what they have learned. As the teacher, think of assessment as anthropological. As students learn about the topic, your job is to discover what they are learning through discussions, interviews, and observations, as well as their written work.

In selecting topics, take your students’ interests into consideration, but also your own. I’ve known teachers to teach very substantive units on topics that on the surface seem silly. For example, one elementary teacher I know taught a unit on chocolate. This unit explored several “themes” such as: its history, ingredients in chocolate candy, the geography and growing of coca plants, types of chocolate (including unsweetened chocolate), health issues related to it, the digestive system, chemistry and wrapping of chocolate (how to preserve it), its psychological effects (why so many of us love it), and types of jobs connected to the production and selling of chocolate. This teacher also had students look at popular chocolate candy from the 1950s and today, as well as study the price of candy during this time period. She ended the unit with a chocolate festival where students showed their parents the chocolate products they made in the school kitchen.

I’ve known teachers who have developed these units on other topics in which they have an interest. One teacher taught a unit on bicycles. He was a cross-country bicyclist, and knew much about this machine. Again, he taught lessons on its history, mechanics (its parts and how to put a bike together), physics (laws of motion, friction, and gravity), reasons for owning and riding (e.g., pleasure, racing, transportation), books and stories about bikes, significant events in history involving bicycles (e.g., the Wright brothers), and types of bikes among other themes.

In each case, the goal of these units was to have children intellectually engaged in the study of a topic. The emphasis was on encouraging student exploration, speculation, synthesis, and analysis of ideas and information rather than the memorization of details. As one of my former students once said, these units “are like taking an intellectual vacation from school.” So, do it now. Take your students on a short but meaningful intellectual vacation.

Want to clarify your understanding of NSRF’s Critical Friends Groups? Want some support explaining CFGs to friends, colleagues, and administrators? Click these links to review our new promotional materials, or email us to request copies and links:

A Self-Guided Tour to NSRF Critical Friends Groups (pdf)

and

Video Glimpse of NSRF New CFG Coaches Training
CFG TRAINING: Exploring Levels of Collaboration Within NESA and its Schools  

By David Nelson, NSRF National Facilitator, CFG Coach in Athens, Greece, nelsond@acs.gr and Corey Watlington CFG Coach in Mumbai, India, coreywatlington@hotmail.com

Last May, the Near East South Asia Council of Overseas Schools (NESA) awarded the American Community Schools of Athens and the American School of Bombay (ASB) a NESA Collaboration Grant, which helped to set in motion cooperation between our two schools as we explore the vast applications of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). While both schools had already begun to recognize the potential of learning communities and Critical Friends Groups, the grant helped to initiate an invaluable collaboration between members of the two faculties.

ASB selected one teacher to represent its faculty and to attend a new coaches’ training, held in the summer of 2012 at ACS Athens, Greece. A total of fifteen educators came together in the week-long training conducted by the Director of the National School Reform Faculty, Michele Mattoon, who flew in from Bloomington, Indiana.

The CFG training provided a framework for educators to improve student achievement by engaging in collaborative protocols and multiple levels of inquiry. The strength of the training lay not only in the diversity of the participants from different institutions, but also in the spectrum of grade levels and subject areas. By the end of the training, participants had learned methods to improve student learning, create equity in collaborative groups, increase efficient and effective communication, and enhance personal and institutional performance through the use of protocols and reflective practice.

The training provided skills needed for educators to apply a variety of approaches as

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they seek to initiate their own groups in their schools. These skills have great utility for the classroom as well as for other educational contexts. Reflecting on the experience, one teacher wrote, “Complex issues are ‘slowed down’ by the protocols so people have time to consider before they react/speak.”

Another echoed the finding of many that “good protocols allow people to think, share, and REFLECT.” While yet another appreciated “the structured way to deal with a variety of issues.”

For us, the power of CFGs resonates from professionals coming together to share insights and solutions that might otherwise remain hidden within their own classrooms. The group members rely on their critical friends to help provide alternate paths for solving professional dilemmas, for tuning lessons and projects, for examining student work and for exploring institution-wide implications. Above all, the group reminds us of the virtues of using focused time to reflect and share on the things that we care about most and do best, and perhaps most importantly, reminds us of the importance of listening to each other.

The NESA Collaboration Grant helped to initiate what has become an ongoing relationship between our two schools. In November, 2012 ASB Mumbai held its fourth CFG training for a group of its teachers. As a representative from ACS Athens, one of us, David Nelson had the opportunity to participate as a training intern, side by side with ASB Mumbai faculty to collaborate as we seek more effective ways to widen participation on our campuses.

Finally, both of our schools look forward to sharing our findings at the 2013 NESA Spring Educators Conference, where a special institute for the training of new coaches of Critical Friends Groups will be offered. On behalf of our schools, we want to thank NESA and the Professional Development Advisory Committee for helping to make this collaboration possible.
When Can You Trust the Experts? How To Tell Good Science from Bad in Education


Daniel Willingham, PhD professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has once again produced a useful book for all educators. When Can You Trust the Experts? is a practical guide, as the subtitle indicates, to telling good science from bad in education. The book is conveniently organized into two parts: Part One, “Why We So Easily Believe Bad Science,” and Part Two, “The Shortcut Solution,” Willingham’s four step process for answering the question in the book’s title. He states the purpose of the book as “telling you how to evaluate new ideas – in particular, those related to education,” so that you are less likely to be persuaded by bad evidence.

Willingham sucks us in with the “Golden Ratio” in his introductory chapter, reviewing this key number, 1.618, first described by the twelfth-century mathematician, Leonardo Fibonacci. Perhaps you’ve heard of the “Fibonacci sequence” in mathematics. The Golden Ratio is observed in the dimensions of various forms of architecture (the ratio of the height to the width of the Parthenon), throughout the animal world (Fibonacci arcs in seashells), plant world (leaves of many plants growing in a Fibonacci spiral), and in proportions of various parts of the human body (e.g. the ratio of the length of the wrist to the tip of the index finger to the length of the wrist to the elbow). Well known and frequently shared with students in math classes, the Golden Ratio is a fascinating number that seems universal. There’s just one small problem, Willingham notes, “The Golden Ratio is bunk.” He then proceeds to innumerate examples where the number does not hold true, concluding:

“The Golden Ratio is not interesting because it’s true. It’s interesting because the idea survives and continues to attract believers even though it is known to be wrong. In that way, it’s an object lesson for the book. Knowing what to believe is a problem.”

In education, Willingham points out that often all it takes to sell a new teaching approach, a new professional development program, a new reading series, or a new classroom product is to say it is “research based.” This seems particularly true regarding claims from ed-marketers using neuroscience where all that is needed to sell an education product is to indicate it is “brain-based,” or “based on brain research.” Thus, the question for the practitioner is, “How can I know if the ‘research’ has been conducted in a valid and
accurate manner, without having to become an expert researcher and statistician?” Here Willingham suggests a “research shortcut” involving the following steps:

“First, we need to understand what sorts of things people find persuasive….

Second, we need to understand how laypeople – not scientists – think about scientific evidence….

Third, if we’re to have a research shortcut, we need to understand the path that we’re cutting short.”

In chapter one, “Why Smart People Believe Dumb Things,” Willingham gives the reader various examples of how easily people can be persuaded to purchase or believe something. For example:

- “unconscious persuasion” as used in subliminal advertising,
- familiar ideas being more believable,
- what we might call “social proof,” believing things that others believe, particularly people who are like us,
- or the use of attractive people to sell us something.

Going further, Willingham gives various examples from real life situations, not just education, where “confirmation bias” steps in. In that case, we believe something new simply because it confirms something we already believe. We say to ourselves, “Yes, yes, I already know this. I’m so glad you agree with me.” And our beliefs help us “maintain our self-identity,” “protect our values,” “maintain social ties,” and “manage our emotions.”

In subsequent chapters, Willingham traces the dramatic changes in reasoning that accompanied the European transformation of the “enlightenment” and “romanticism” with the rise of scientific evidence and personal experience as the key elements involved in supporting peoples beliefs. He provides useful summary charts at the end of each chapter. In discussing what is “good science,” Willingham’s summary chart includes these seven principles of good science:

- Science is dynamic and self-correcting,
- Scientific theories apply only to the natural world,
- Scientific method works only if the phenomenon under study can be measured,
- Theories cannot be proven true, only falsified,
- Good theories are cumulative,
- Scientific tests are empirical, and
- Scientific tests are public.

It also provides insightful implications for education for each of these summary points. For example, in looking at the education implications for “good theories are cumulative,” he notes “education has a history of reintroducing theories under a different name, even though the theory has been tested and found wanting.” And in ending Part One of When Can You Trust the Experts?, Willingham reviews four challenges to applying data from natural science to education:

1. Goals are often unstated or implied. Because education is a goal-driven enterprise, this vagueness makes it hard to know which findings from basic science are relevant, and to draw implications from those that are relevant.

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2. Feedback is essential to knowing whether we’re moving toward or away from our education goal, and feedback is lacking for many of the outcomes we might care about (for example, creativity or analytic problem solving).

3. We know much more about children (the inner environment) than we do about classrooms (the outer environment), and we need knowledge of both if we are to apply basic scientific knowledge to education with confidence.

4. Even if you can manipulate a cognitive process and be confident of the cognitive consequence, you can’t guarantee the same outcome in education because (a) you may unintentionally change other cognitive processes too, and (b) the changed process may interact with other cognitive processes in ways you didn’t predict.”

From this rather discouraging, pessimistic end to Part One, Daniel Willingham proceeds in Part Two to offer a four-step process to help evaluate the likely scientific soundness of a proposed curriculum, teaching strategy, textbook, or anything else that is purported to help children learn.

He notes that in order to do this kind of evaluation in education you will need to be clear about three things: 1) precisely what is being proposed in a given, recommended change, 2) precisely what outcome is promised as a result of the proposed change, and 3) the probability that the outcome promised will actually happen as a result of the change.

The first step in Willingham’s evaluative process he calls “Strip It and Flip It.” You need to strip the claim to its bare essentials, eliminating pat phrases and images meant to call to mind themes from Enlightenment thought (technical jargon, terms such as “research-based” or “brain-based”) as well as phrases still evident from the Romantic period (such as “unleash” or “natural” or “tailored to your child”). Also strip out proposed change of emotion, as emotional appeals don’t provide evidence that a particularly proposed change will actually work. And strip out statements that claim to be “just like you,” or that draw potentially convincing analogies. Such claims or analogies don’t really increase the probability that the solution will work.

Then, to “Flip It,” means to summarize in the following ways:

1. Consider whether the promised outcome can be described another way. If it’s described positively, is there a negative side to it? (For example, a “pass rate” can also be described as a “failure rate.”)

2. Consider not just the consequences of undertaking the Change, but the consequences of doing nothing.

3. Combine the two flips. When comparing the consequence of undertaking the Change (versus doing nothing), also be sure to make that comparison with the outcome flipped.

The second step is “Trace It.” This involves tracing the source of the proposed change and being extra cautious of claims from authorities. Here Willingham suggests we can trust authorities when: (1) a reliable licensing professional organization certifies their expertise (such...
as having research published in a peer-reviewed journal), (2) there is a known truth in the field on which acknowledged experts agree (and the original study has been successfully replicated, preferably more than once by different researchers), and (3) this agreed upon truth allows experts to analyze problems accurately and prescribe solutions that work in most situations and don’t require skill from a non-expert.

The third step is “Analyze It.” In this chapter, Willingham helps the reader to know how to think about evidence in considering adopting a proposed change. Use one’s own experience to assist in evaluating claims, and detect what may look like evidence but really isn’t. He also encourages using the technical scientific literature. For example, he points out the importance of being able to recognize the “bait-and-switch” technique common in some marketing materials. Some unscrupulous marketers cite perfectly sound research, which happens to relate only slightly, if at all, to the proposed change. Personal testimonials can be another caution worth analyzing, and here, too, Willingham ends this chapter with a useful summary chart.

The fourth and final Step of Willingham’s evaluative process involves answering the key question, “Should I Do It?” Here, he begins the chapter with a summary chart of the “principles of good science” as a review to use in considering whether or not to adopt a proposed change. This chart is organized around four groups of key questions. The first set yields answers that are what Willingham calls “deal breakers” which should indicate an end to considering the proposed change. The second set yields disappointing answers that should at least raise your suspicions about the efficacy of the change. The third set would indicate there isn’t scientific evidence in support of the change— it may be difficult to measure and so it still might be worthwhile. Answers to the fourth set of questions may simply indicate that the change is not a good fit for you in your educational situation.

Here Willingham suggest a checklist, not unlike that used by airplane pilots, to determine if you should adopt a proposed change. And he ends with three changes he believes would significantly improve education: 1) individuals who are better able to discern good science from bad, 2) institutions that are willing to help in that job, and 3) a change of mindset for all in how science relates to educational practice.

This is a useful guide to any educator at any level from elementary to college, and if they only used the summary charts, it would be worth the price of the book.

I would be interested in what those who use Willingham’s suggestions think of his process. Let us know at NSRF if you try the practices he suggests and your results.
CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESS: A Method For Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, From Dance to Dessert


Art students in undergraduate and graduate programs undergo regular critiques of their work. From the stories I’ve heard, one either quickly develops a very “thick skin” or changes majors. I’ve heard stories that sounded more like hazing or military boot camp than an academic process designed to help grow an artist.

Liz Lerman, a renowned choreographer, felt that the standard artist’s critique format was often unnecessarily brutal and frequently not very helpful, so she developed a four-step process to help put the artist in charge of the critique process. After using and tweaking the process over several years, she wrote a book and added “facilitation fundamentals,” variations, and examples of the process in action.

As a CFG Coach, I find Lerman’s 64-page book quite helpful in thinking not only about protocols for creative projects, but also NSRF protocols in general. She writes very transparently with suggestions for facilitating her process, offering instructions and specifics that participants should achieve in particular steps. The similarities and differences between her Process and our Protocols is worth considering. I was inspired to draft a new protocol that combines what I feel are the best aspects of CFG perspectives and tools with her specifics around the creative process.

The most important tweak I made was to prioritize the goal of the group helping the artist/presenter grow and explore, over the “critics’” desire to express themselves and get answers. Some users of the Process already did that, “Liberating moments were when I just sat still and listened; when I answered that I didn’t want to hear an opinion about an issue I was tired of discussing; and when I left a question unanswered, to probe for future investigation.”

Additionally, it seems that most artists’ critiques require the artist to think on their feet and respond to every criticism, while this new protocol prioritizes time for silent reflection and eliminates the need for the artist to “defend” the work.

But even if one never uses this protocol to support an artist or critique a creative project, this small book provides many insights good for any CFG coach to consider. Lerman has given considerable thought to the perspective of people who give criticism for a living or for fun,
noting how uncomfortable they can be when asked to restrict their offerings and follow the rules of her Process. Sound familiar? Didn’t we all chafe under restrictive aspects of protocols until we recognized and internalized the benefits of following them?

One step of Lerman’s process requires the forming of “Neutral Questions,” which are practically the same as our familiar “Probing Questions.” She says, “For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. But the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play. Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.”

She continues, “People who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority—teachers, directors, adjudicators—may feel at first that forming Neutral Questions makes them sacrifice the right to tell the truth very directly. But many quickly discover that they can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and in the process, get the artist to think more reflectively than he might if the opinion or solution were directly stated. The opportunity for opinions comes soon after, anyway.”

Lerman suggests a possible warm-up activity—pairing group members to practice forming neutral/probing questions regarding objects in the environment including your partner’s attire. Doing this practice, the difference becomes readily apparent between “Wouldn’t a textile hanging on the wall help muffle the noise level in here?” and “What is the primary intent for this room and might the wall decor have an impact on that?”

The book also talks about “The Challenge of Fixits.” “When asked to respond to a work in progress, it is remarkable how quickly we slide from observation into opinion, and then to a ‘fixit,’ that is, a directive suggestion for a change. The arrival at the fixit can be so unconscious that the responder may need to do some mental backtracking to realize that an opinion underlies the fixit.”

What a great explanation for the difference between a Probing Question and “a suggestion with a question mark at the end.” Sometimes suggestions are welcome, but they can come with a hidden pricetag. Lerman herself describes a situation when she once welcomed fixits on a dance with which she was struggling. She later incorporated the suggestion gleaned from the group, and “People loved it. Critics loved it. And what they loved about it was the very thing she had fixed. I always felt that I should put an asterisk in the program and explain that the device that made it work was not my idea. I might have solved the problem myself if she had asked me enough questions: Did I have other tools for making my ideas more concrete? Was there a visible metaphor that could focus the audience’s attention? How could I use a prop to convey my meaning? I know I would have grown the creative muscles I needed to develop my own solution.”

Although it seems to me that “fixits” are a bit antithetical to NSRF protocols, I decided, like Lerman, to allow the artist/presenter to decide whether to accept them or not, and so created a pair of Critical Response Process Protocols, one with, and one without fixits. (Use those links to download PDFs or email us for copies.)

I’d recommend CFG coaches consider obtaining a copy of this book, particularly if they work with artists or art students, or if they’re seeking greater understanding of the use of Probing Questions.

Practitioners of Lerman’s Process or this adapted Protocol may benefit from “internalizing the process,” as she describes on page 52. “Sometimes I can use the Critical Response Process backwards. I am in a conversation, and I hear something about my work
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How’d we do?

How did you like this issue? Do you have ideas for future articles, book reviews, or topics you’d like to explore (or you’d like us to explore)? We’d love to hear your experiences with NSRF Protocols and CFGs. Email us, or call 812-330-2702.

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Links:

NSRF Critical Response Process Protocol
NSRF Critical Response Process Protocol (with Fixits)
Critical Response Process Rubric (Betty Lark Ross, Latin School)
Four-part Art Rubric (Jennifer Handrick, Chippewa Falls)

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