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From the Director

The importance of reflection

*We don't learn from experience.
We learn from reflecting on
experience. – John Dewey*

Most of us believe that learning takes place through experience. When you were younger, if you put your hand on a stove and got burned, you probably learned a valuable lesson about “things that get hot.” In my childhood, I often heard the reprimand, “That’ll teach you,” spoken with a knowing look when the choices I made resulted in painful consequences.

However, for us to truly learn from our experiences, we have to take another step: reflection. It is often said that reflection is what gets us from experience to understanding. Research shows that, without actively thinking about our experiences and questioning ourselves about what they mean, learning won’t happen. We also know that by writing down our reflections, the learning becomes even more “sticky” and chances are we’ll be able to retain it for longer periods of time.

Reflective practice plays a paramount role throughout our work as CFG™ coaches. Every protocol and activity is set up to take the participant (the adult or younger learner) through a particular cycle of thinking: we are asked to actively listen and take notes, to ask questions that fill in the gaps of our understanding, to reflect on what has been presented, to analyze the information through the lens of a focusing question, and then, finally, to brainstorm solutions.

The presenter in protocols must spend time reflecting before the protocol begins, sorting out exactly what outcomes they desire from the protocol. Then they must carefully craft a focusing question that will guide the group to deliver that result. Presenters provide context around their question and spend a great deal of time listening and noting any important points that arise. In most protocols, the presenter will have the opportunity at the end of the protocol to reflect on what was helpful and relay any next steps that they may take.

Finally, everyone in the protocol is asked to debrief the experience by answering questions such as: *What did you think of the protocol? Did you learn anything useful? How might you use something like this in your work (or with your students)? What might have made this experience more useful?*

NSRF® National Facilitators model and employ this reflection and debrief process whenever they conduct a Five-Day CFG New Coaches training. After experiencing every new activity and protocol, participants are asked to debrief and do some reflective writing to enrich their understanding. Facilitators also emphasize how crucial this step will be when the coaches begin leading their own CFG meetings.

At the end of every training day, NSRF National Facilitators ask participants to take five to 10 minutes to do some reflective writing around a prompt. Once the reflections are turned in, the national facilitators read

through them, marking anything significant to share out with the group the next morning. When reflections are shared, there are no names attached and “negative” as well as “positive” comments are read. Why is this such an important part of the training?

1. **Sharing these reflections helps build trust and encourage bonding within the group.** When a facilitator is willing to share the “negative” notes as well as the positive, it models the importance of transparency, the need to replace defensiveness with curiosity, and an attitude of continuously striving for improvement. Listening reminds the participants that it is up to them as individuals to determine what works for them and to tweak or abandon what doesn’t. When participants hear their words read to the group, they know that their ideas and opinions are taken seriously. Others hearing those comments are also validated when they realize that they have similar experiences, thoughts or feelings as other members of the group.
2. **Sharing creates buy-in.** Sometimes a group includes a “resistor” or two. These are people who are not attending the training voluntarily, or have previously experienced such bad “professional development” that they are highly skeptical that they can learn anything remotely useful this week. These folks are obviously predisposed to dislike what they are experiencing—to create reasons why “this” will never work. After the first day, the facilitator asks everyone to reflect on **“What worked today? What didn’t work for you today?”** Believe me, you will hear what didn’t work! So, how does this create buy in? It seems as if it would just fan the flames of discontent. Let me illustrate with

an example.

Let’s say that someone reflects that the tight structure of Micro-labs “didn’t work” for them. They resented that they ran out of time during their turn to speak. When it was someone else’s turn, they wanted to ask questions and were told they couldn’t. All in all, they felt very constrained by this protocol and felt it would have



been more beneficial to just have a conversation about each of the questions.

The next morning, the facilitator reads that comment to the group, without judgment, naming names, or replying. Soon after, the facilitator reads a different person’s comment that revealed how much they liked the Microlabs protocol. They liked that there was time built in to really think about their answers to the questions before it was their turn to talk. They liked that they actually had time to talk without being worried that others would interrupt them. They liked being able to simply listen to their colleagues without the pressure of having to comment on their comments. They liked the fact that all voices were heard—each one given equal time.

Once the “resistor” hears the positive comments from fellow members of the group (not just from the facilitator’s perspective), they are more inclined to give the experience another chance. This is a very non-confrontational/non-personal way to show the resistor

that others in the group found the experience beneficial and perhaps they might too, in the future.

3. **Reflections give valuable information to the national facilitator.** Reading what works for a group and what doesn’t gives the facilitator a window into the thinking of each participant. After reading “what doesn’t work,” a national facilitator can choose to (a) address points that might have been misunderstood, (b) ask the group to share their thoughts around the comment, or (c) admit that that particular piece could have been better and perhaps talk about what changes they may make in the future. Again, when facilitators are open and honest about their own learning, they create an atmosphere of trust so that others can do the same.

Often, people will divulge details on these reflection sheets that they don’t want to be shared out in the group, but they want the facilitator to know. In our daily instructions for reflections, we give them the option

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to “put a box around anything they do not wish to be shared with the group.” These private notes often offer incredible insights into the culture of the school or district or about the writer specifically. Either way, the information is bound to be helpful when the facilitator fine-tunes the agendas for the upcoming days.

How might all of this work for you? CFG coaches often use the last bit

of their CFG meeting time to allow participants to reflect on what happened during that session, and to write reflections to be read at the start of the next CFG meeting. In this way the group can benefit from this process the same way participants of a Five-Day CFG New Coaches training do.

Remember—as a facilitator or coach, your prompts for reflective writing will determine what kind of responses you'll get! For example, if you feel that you have a group that might be more on the negative side, you may not want to start with the “*What works/what doesn't*” prompt. Instead, you might want to start with a prompt more along the lines of “*What is one learning or Ah-HA! moment you had today?*” This prompt will reasonably ensure that you'll start the next CFG meeting on a positive note, as you will be reading out one positive learning after another.

Making time for reflection ensures that greater understandings will arise from any experience. Although solitary reflection can be beneficial, we know that reflection is enhanced when we share our learnings with others. Framing “mistakes” as opportunities for growth is an important part of continuous improvement as professionals. However, this will never happen if we don't actually make the time for this to take place. Five minutes of reflection, followed by sharing is a powerful tool for developing our skills, confidence, and motivation. 🍃

REFLECTIONS PROMPTS LIST *developed by Michele Mattoon for the NSRF*

1. In what ways have you gotten better at this kind of work?
2. In what ways do you think you need to improve?
3. What problems did you encounter while you were experiencing this (CFG meeting, protocol, activity)? Did you solve them? How?
4. How do you feel about this work? What parts of it do you particularly like?
5. What did/do you find frustrating about it?
6. What were your goals around this (CFG meeting, protocol)? Did your goals change as you went through this experience?
7. What does this work reveal about you as a learner?
8. What have you learned about yourself as a result of this work?
9. Did this (CFG™ meeting, protocol, activity) meet your needs?
10. What is one goal you would like to set for yourself in the future?
11. What might you need more help with?
12. What are your hopes around this work? Fears (or concerns)?
13. In what ways have you improved as a coach/teacher leader/facilitator? What brought about those improvements?
14. What skills did you acquire in this experience?
15. What are your challenges? How will (could) you address them?
16. What surprises came up?
17. What felt risky to you? Did anything put you in the danger zone?
18. What knowledge or understanding do you wish to gain? What skills do you wish to develop?
19. Why are you here? How is this related to your professional goals as a teacher, administrator, etc.?
20. What was the best thing that happened today/this week?
21. What was the most difficult/satisfying part of this work?
22. What do you think is your most valuable contribution to this group?
23. What did you contribute to the day?
24. What was accomplished?
25. Were you comfortable today or uncomfortable? Why?
26. Did anything frustrate you? What?
27. What was the best/worst/most challenging thing that happened?
28. How will these new skills you developed benefit others?
29. What were your interactions like?
30. What feelings or emotions (if any) did you experience?
31. What did this experience make you think about?
32. How have your assumptions been challenged by this experience?
33. Where will you go from here? What's your next step?
34. How will you share this experience and your learning with others?
35. What do you want to do with this experience?

MOMENT BY MOMENT REFLECTIONS, *developed by Tonio Verzzone for the NSRF*

1. At what moment during the training did you feel the most engaged? Why?
2. At what moment during the training did you feel the most disengaged? Why?
3. What activity did you find most helpful? Why?
4. What activity did you find most confusing? Why?
5. What moment during the training did you most enjoy? Why?