NSRF
National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center

CONNECTIONS

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Mindset theory: Why so many people LOVE their Critical Friends Group communities

Perspectives from NSRF Director and International Facilitator Michele Mattoon

I've been doing CFG work a long time. Over twenty years ago, I was teaching at Harmony School, which was one of the first schools chosen by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University to launch Critical Friends Group work. I was convinced by one of my colleagues to join a CFG community early on. After a couple of years as a participant, I decided I needed to be trained as a coach. From there I spent a few more years coaching educators in my school, then decided to further my training so I could become certified as a National Facilitator for NSRF. In early 2010, I was asked to take over as the director of NSRF.

Right from the beginning, participants recognized that CFG communities were powerful forces for improvements in adult and student learning, as well as providing the possibility for deep cultural improvement within their schools. As the NSRF began to refine its CFG Coaches' training, participants started saying it was one of the best professional development they ever experienced (and we still receive this feedback consistently). CFG members and coaches love having the opportunity to talk deeply with their peers about meaningful aspects of their profession. Twenty years ago (and unfortunately, still today, in some regions), teachers were often "siloed" in classrooms, making it nearly impossible to interact with one another beyond a quick congenial conversation in the teacher's lounge. Professional development was mostly done in the "sit and get" style, with slick (or worse, ill-prepared) presenters lecturing "at" huge conference rooms full of teachers. Conference-goers left sessions with big binders that eventually simply gathered dust in the backs of their classrooms. Too often, teachers found little practical applications for everyday teaching and learning.

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In CFG training, teachers recognized and loved that our training gave them many practical tools that were easily used with peers, students, and even parents and community members. And finally, teachers appreciated the idea that they, not external "experts in the field" had all the skills they needed to collaboratively improve their practice, solve their own problems, brainstorm new ideas, and help students experience more success. All of this does help explain why CFG communities (if executed properly) can transform a school's culture into one where everyone (administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents) experience continuous learning.

Fast forward to 2016, new brain research and improved CFG Coaches' Training. Today, we have a greater understanding of how the brain works,

including findings around neuroplasticity, memory, and how emotions affect the learning process. I find myself reading books like ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** by Daniel Kahneman and ***Us and Them, the Science of Identity*** by David Berreby. In these and similar books, I come across various research findings and think, "Of course! That's another reason why protocols and CFG communities work!" While I could write a book about these concepts and how they relate to the work the National School Reform Faculty does, for the sake of this article, I'll simply focus on my latest fascination, mindset theory, and how it relates to Critical Friends Group communities.

Psychologists have identified three mindsets that can motivate students to learn and achieve: growth mindset, belonging mindset, and a mindset of purpose and relevance. Studies have shown that simply by developing these mindsets, students actually learn more and can experience greater academic success. As I learned about these mindsets, I quickly began to see more reasons why CFG communities inspire, nurture and promote adult learning. Let's take a look at each of the mindsets and see how they play out when adults meet in their CFG groups.

Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck, the author of *Mindset, the New Psychology of Success*, and her team at Stanford University researched why some students are motivated to do well in school and others are not. What she found was that the students who had a growth mindset, a belief that abilities can be developed, tend to be more motivated in school and students that have a fixed mindset, a belief that abilities are fixed and innate, tend to not be as motivated.

Overall, people with a growth mindset are more likely to:

- *Put effort into their work,*
- *Take on challenges,*
- *Stay resilient in the face of setbacks, and*
- *See mistakes as a valuable part of the learning process.*

Thinking about those key bullet points, it's easy to see how this relates to CFG work.

NSRF protocols are designed to accomplish specific outcomes based on a few important beliefs, such as:

1. ***Everyone can learn and everything can be improved.***

2. ***Learning takes place in the "risk zone," not the "comfort zone" nor the "danger zone." Without challenges, one cannot learn and grow. It is imperative that educators continuously improve their practices and this requires a willingness to take risks.***

3. ***Human beings are not perfect and will make mistakes. Mistakes are helpful when it comes to illuminating what needs to be learned, attended to, or fixed. Our greatest problems cannot be solved by a magic wand, which is why many problems require us to try a variety of solutions over a period of time.***

4. ***Because the above points are so important, all members of the CFG community commit to bring in some form of "imperfect" work at some point during the school year.***

CFG work relies on educators in a Critical Friends Group community to put effort into their teaching practice, to take on challenges, to stay resilient, and to see mistakes or imperfection as a part of the learning process. For protocols to be productive, each person in a CFG community must hold these beliefs, at least to some extent. Clearly, all NSRF work is closely tied to the importance of having a growth mindset.

GROWTH MINDSET RELATES TO CFG WORK

- **Everyone can learn and everything can be improved.**
- **Learning takes place in the "risk zone," not the "comfort" or "danger" zones.**
- **Human beings are not perfect and will make mistakes, but mistakes are helpful.**
- **Because each of the above points are so important, all members of the CFG community bring "imperfect" work" to the group**

A Mindset of Belonging

People with a sense of belonging feel more socially connected, supported and respected. They have a high level of trust in their group and feel like they "fit in" rather than are viewing everything as an outsider. As a result, they are seen as a vital, individual member of the group, and they do not have to worry that they are being treated as a stereotype. Every participant recognizes and feels that the group sees them as a person of value in their own right. People who have a sense of belonging are more fully engaged in learning, have fewer behavior problems and are more open to critical feedback.

Anyone who's been trained as a CFG coach can immediately recognize the parallels. CFG coaches are trained to carefully lay the foundation of safety and trust that allows participants to build important relationships. This trust is critical: in CFG work, participants are asked to share their problems and their imperfect work, as well as to ask difficult questions that may disrupt the status quo. We find

BELONGING MINDSET RELATES TO CFG WORK

- **CFG work is based on trust within the group**
- **Participation is a positive recursive cycle**
- **New coaches trained together bond intensely and enjoy continued CFG work together**

the more that participants allow themselves to be vulnerable with this kind of sharing, and the more they consistently receive helpful and supportive feedback from their peers, the stronger the sense of belonging becomes. This becomes a recursive cycle as a reinforced sense of belonging encourages more risks to be taken, more critical feedback to be accepted, better practices to be established, and all of this cycles back to even more trust in the group and a stronger sense of belonging.

It is the norm for people who undergo CFG Coaches' Training to bond so much over the five days that they want to continue to meet as a group, even though it means one more two-hour meeting a month, even though (in the case of participants from many organizations meeting in open trainings) it may involve thinking about connecting via Google Hangouts across multiple time zones on an evening or weekend. Because a cohort of trainees are not afraid that their group will evaluate or judge them or their work, they can let go of the worry about whether they have the respect of the group and focus more on the learning at hand.

A Mindset of Purpose and Relevance

Students and adults alike value work when they see it is relevant to their lives. Who wants to learn something new if they think they will never need to use it? Similarly, people value work when it is tied to a higher purpose, something greater than themselves (like contributing to their families, their communities, or even society at large). This is true even when the work is boring or challenging and not something the individual would choose to do, if not for this greater purpose.

Again, this third powerful mindset fits hand-in-glove with CFG work. CFG communities provide relevance for teachers far beyond most professional development, because the participants will bring "work" to each meeting that they actually are (or will be) using. After their critical friends run a protocol with them around that piece of work, they will be able to teach with a better lesson plan, solve a problem that's plagued them for an extended period of time, or help a student that needs a different learning approach. When people bring what is important to them to the group, they can clearly see the relevance of CFG communities.

Also, helping your colleagues improve their practice not only provides added relevance, but also gives participants a purpose greater than themselves for doing the work. By helping each other, they are not only providing better learning opportunities for the students of those teachers, but are also contributing positively to the culture of the entire school, district, and community. Using protocols and the other collaborative tools that NSRF provides outside the school setting nurtures the idea that there is a better way for people to work together in certain situations. By using these protocols, they are improving the world one structured conversation at a time.

PURPOSE AND RELEVANCE MINDSET RELATES TO CFG WORK

- **CFG participants bring actual work product and dilemmas to the meetings for group input**
- **Helping your colleagues improve their practice gives you a purpose greater than yourself and your own practice**
- **Helping improve a teacher's practice in turn contributes positively to student achievement, and improves the culture of the school, district, and community**

"Critical Friends Group Coaches' Training changed my life."

If you have not taken the five-day CFG Coaches' Training yourself, you may be surprised at how often we hear participants say, "This training changed my life." This comment seems a little over the top for a professional development workshop, right? Looking at Critical Friends Group communities through the three lenses of growth mindset, belonging mindset, and the mindset of purpose and relevance, we begin to see why many participants have such powerful responses to CFG work.

Consider the effect, then, that CFG work might have on the individual, the classroom, the school, the community, if all students, educators, administrators, board members, parents, and other stakeholders were regularly engaged in CFG protocols and activities that promoted these mindsets!

LINKS

For more on how this research relates to CFG work, see A Reflection on CFG work and Growth Mindset, published in the March 2016 issue of Connections

Also visit http://www.perts.net for growth mindset tools

Are you ready to:

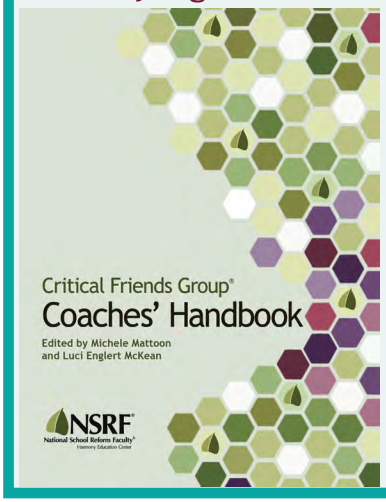
- sharpen your facilitation skills,
- improve your practice,
- build collaboration and trust among your colleagues,
- work on your own professional dilemmas and pieces of work, and
- help your organization improve student achievement?

Certified Critical Friends Group® coaches facilitate and support their peers and students through CFG work.

Check out these training options!

Individuals and very small groups can select one of our "open" training options across the country. In one of these groups, you'll collaborate with a broad variety of educators from all sorts of educational organizations throughout the world. The range of participants bring greater depth and different perspectives to the work you'll bring to the training, helping you find new solutions and support.

If you have 10-15 (or more) of your colleagues to train, we can save you money by bringing an NSRF National Facilitator to you with on-site trainings. If you are considering getting a jump-start on cultural change in your school or district and want to train a "critical mass" of CFG coaches at once, contact us soon — our summer is nearly full. Trainings during the academic year typically are scheduled in three- and two-day segments.



NSRF trainings now use the updated, member-only protocols in the Critical Friends Group Coaches' Handbook! This book is only available within a CFG coaches' training, or may be purchased by NSRF-certified CFG coaches ***(must provide documentation of certification).***

Rave reviews from participants about NSRF CFG coaches' training:

"Best PD EVER!"
~ A new coach in North Carolina

"I'd been using NSRF protocols for years and even wrote about them in grad school, but ***I had no idea how well they worked*** *until I learned the nuances of protocol facilitation in training."*
~ A CFG Coach in Connecticut

"This training introduced me to a ***supportive group of colleagues.*** *I did not have this before this training." ~ A new coach in Toronto*

"I learned that the protocols are really useful in ***bringing out our 'best selves.'*** *They drew me into the activities in a way that nudged me towards being fully present. I developed a greater awareness of the effect of my behavior and how it might benefit or hurt the rest of the participants."*
~ A new coach in Michigan

Visit our website now to plan to attend an open training this autumn or winter, or plan ahead to attend one of many options this summer before those trainings are filled.*

*(*open to any individual or small group)*

To enroll or learn more, click through to the NSRF Upcoming Events page or call 812-330-2702.

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Protocols in the classroom

Scaffolding deep thinking in seventh graders

by CFG Coach in Washington, D.C.. Laura Merrill lmerrill@sheridanschool.org

Laura Merrill is a seventh grade homeroom teacher at the Sheridan School in Washington, D.C. After experiencing the Chalk Talk Protocol during her CFG Coaches' Training last summer, she shared with us this story of a similar process she's used in her classrooms, and how she encouraged her students to think more deeply in response to "silent conversations."

My 7th grade American History class was studying the Columbian Exchange. In order to assess their knowledge as well as their ideas and responses, I asked students to engage in a silent conversation in which the prompt was: The Columbian Exchange lead to dramatic cultural changes.

Our silent conversation began with students writing this prompt at the top of a sheet of paper and then silently writing about specific historical information they'd learned relating to this statement, or writing a response to the statement.

After students had a few moments to do their initial writing, they drew a line under their ideas and passed their paper to their neighbor. (Sometimes when following this process, or protocol in NSRF terms, I have the students move to their neighbor's desk — leaving their sheet of paper at their own desk — rather than having them pass the paper. This bit of physical activity is often welcome after having sat for a length of time.) After the change of papers or positions, students were instructed to carefully read what their neighbor had written on this newly acquired piece of paper, and then thoughtfully respond.

The cycle of passing, silent reading, and then responding went on for several rounds so that each student had the opportunity to read and respond to the ideas of three or four of their classmates.

To wrap up the silent conversation, I asked several students to share out the most interesting/surprising/powerful/important thing they read over the course of the silent conversation.

When I read over these silent conversations later, I noticed that a number of students were doing little more than writing, "I agree" or "I think this is right" in response to the ideas of their peers. I wanted to help students come up with strategies that they could turn to in order to push themselves to think more deeply.

In order to do this, I began by identifying some of the most interesting and powerful student-generated statements in the silent conversation. Then I made myself an example by following the same protocol: Copying each student-generated statement into a new document (in bold), I tried to think deeply in response to each (in bullet points below). Here are a few examples:

"Overall, the Columbian Exchange has helped — for the better — the life of the average American family."

- *When I see the phrase "the average American family," I tend to see in my mind a family that looks like my own. But then I remember that my family is Euro-American. Many American families don't look much like my family at all. Are they not "average?" What does "average" mean in this statement?*
- *What does/should "average" mean when one is studying American history?*
- *Did Native Americans consider themselves "average" until Europeans and Africans arrived? How did Native Americans come to see themselves as they came to grips with the arrival of Europeans and Africans?*

"Not everything about the Columbian Exchange was good. Maybe more efficient farming (iron tools), hunting (guns) and travel (horses) actually turned out to have some drawbacks. Maybe the introduction of these new things resulted in the destruction of some Native American groups at the hands of other Native Americans who now had guns and horses."

- *This reminds me that I shouldn't believe the "myth/misconception" that there was only one group of Native Americans in the New World when Europeans arrived.*
- *Why is this idea that Native Americans were all the same such a powerful idea? Why do so many people believe it?*
- *This statement makes me think about how much we value or appreciate efficiency and "progress." When someone invents a new way to do something that involves less work and less effort, I tend to think that's a good thing. But is this always true?*
- *This statement also makes me think about how there are often unintended consequences when new technologies are introduced. Sometimes when human beings try to do good things, bad things happen as well. How can we better plan for "unintended consequences?"*

To better illustrate the kind of "deeper thinking" I was asking of the students, I shared the complete document

(with five student-created statements and multiple responses from me to each). We read the document aloud as a class and then students were instructed to share their ideas about what I had been doing as I responded to the statements in bold. Together, we distilled a list of strategies for thinking deeply that grew out of that discussion. (See sidebar.) We reviewed this list of strategies regularly throughout the year, considering whether we had new tips to use in the future, and as a refresher, to remind ourselves how to move toward deeper, more thoughtful conversations.

My class and I welcome other educators picking up this list or our variation on Chalk Talk, to generate deeper thought in your own classroom. If you have other suggestions we might add to this list, please do email lmerrill@sheridanschool.org.

LINKS: Chalk Talk Protocol

The Danger of a Single Story TEDTalk

Ms. Merrill's 7th Grade Class's suggestions on

How to think deeply about ideas and information

- Connect ideas to other important ideas.
- Connect ideas from history to ideas and events that are important today.
- Ask important questions.
- Relate ideas to your own life.
- Be skeptical/doubtful (but do this respectfully if you're responding to the ideas of others!)
- Let your thoughts lead you to more thoughts. Give your thinking time to develop.
- Notice and question your own responses/perspectives/biases.
- Ask yourself if you have "dangerous single stories" about something. For more on "The Danger of a Single Story," see the TED talk linked above.
- Break an idea down into its important parts and zero in on those.
- Focus on details (in an idea and in your response).
- Concentrate on finding something interesting in the idea.
- Let images and mental pictures move your thoughts forward.

CFG work spreads to Israel

In April 2016, NSRF director Michele Mattoon visited Israel to lead a workshop training for 30 Darca Schools teachers. Darca Network consists of more than 27 high schools in Israel's geo-social periphery. The network strengthens the schools on their way to becoming high quality institutions. Darca is supported and encouraged by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and its affiliates are Rashi Foundation, Yitzhak Rabin Foundation (YRF), and AIU (Alliance Israelite Universelle).

A year ago, in July 2015, some of Darca's officials and teachers attended an open training for new CFG coaches in Indiana, USA. In this workshop, they were exposed to the Critical Friends Group work, to the NSRF protocols, and to the importance of teachers working together as a professional learning community.

After returning to Israel, the new CFG coaches created CFG communities in five Darca high schools. The teachers in these communities met weekly with the aim of improving their professional practice through collaborative learning. The use of protocols was spread and the success was great: the staff meetings were more productive and efficient and the teachers worked collaboratively to give each other honest feedback and ideas about how to improve their practice, how problems can be solved or new content created.

Due to this success, Dr. Mor Deshen, Senior VP in Darca, decided to invite Ms Mattoon to Israel in order to train more Israeli CFG coaches in other schools throughout the country.

Thirty teachers from Darca schools in many cities in Israel arrived to a three-day workshop in Ashdod. All participating teachers were committed to positive school culture change. The training included many structured tools and protocols that promote meaningful communication, problem-solving, and learning. The participants learned how to analyze dilemmas, analyze data, look at student work, and give and receive feedback. Most importantly, the participants in the workshop learned how to use protocols in a way that gives time for active listening and reflections so that all voices in the room are heard and honored.

The implementation of NSRF protocols was seen immediately, as participants used them in professional days as a preparation for the new school year. Moreover, the plan is to activate at least ten more CFG communities throughout the network in this upcoming school year.

Darca management is certain that the contribution of the CFG work in Darca schools will be meaningful and will create a stronger working environment, a significant improvement in collaborative learning and eventually a better education for our pupils.

— Revital Levgoren, Mor Deshen, and Boaz Ozery

From the Assistant Director's Blog

Core qualities of CFG work

As co-editor of the ***Critical Friends Group Coaches' Handbook*** and co-editor for our updated protocols and activities, I have spent a lot of time trying to recognize and distill the most crucial messages that new coaches need to learn about any given protocol, and around CFG work as a whole. I've been collecting notes and will be soliciting input on some new books for our members, coaches, and National Facilitators, and I thought it might be helpful in the meantime to share a few truisms I've learned in CFG Coaches' Trainings. Readers of ***Connections*** who've worked with me directly will likely remember hearing me say one or more of them (maybe more than once in a given week!), as I think they're key elements to the work.

Critical friends do not criticize or sit in judgment of one another. In our CFG meetings, we develop friendships that go beyond the superficial or personal, and help our friends in critical, important, often urgent situations related to our work. The foundation of all CFG work is the trust created within the group, the way we transform ourselves and our coworkers from congenial relationships to collegial ones—we move beyond simply "being friendly" to one another, to truly helping one another grow professionally and improve each of our practices.

There's a huge difference between "working the protocols" in random meetings and "doing CFG work" within an ongoing community of the same people gathered together regularly to do this work. Sure, individual protocols can be very helpful in all sorts of situations, but the really deep work happens within CFG meetings.

In a trusted CFG, we all "own" ALL of our problems, including those presented by our peers. We don't judge others in the group because we trust each other to be vulnerable together. If I've brought my own dilemma or piece of work to the group and the CFG coach has followed the protocol and protected my space, then nothing but good comes as a result. And once I've experienced that, I will support the same non-judgmental perspective when each of you bring your work.

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Even if I haven't trusted the group enough yet to bring my own piece of work, I can see on the faces of presenters how they feel as a result of a protocol: the evidence of trusting the group and the protocols is right in front of me. Almost inevitably, when someone brings "big work" to the meeting, we will check back with them in future meetings or in the teacher's lounge: "How's that thing going for you now that we've run the protocol last month?" We want to know that our collective input has had a positive impact on their problem. "Their" problem feels like "ours."

When listening to a problem being presented in a CFG meeting, we recognize the distress or concern the presenter feels about it. In response, we think about all the friendships and relationships we've had throughout our lives, and so we want to help our Critical Friend feel better. Likely, the presenter in our CFG meeting teaches in our school, and possibly any students they're describing were once "our own" students. Our gut tells us to think quickly, wanting to help them feel better, we leap to try to solve problems. And if no apparent solution leaps to mind, we still want to help them feel better, so we sympathize, if not empathize. However, we've learned ...

Go slowly to move fast. NSRF protocols slow down and subvert our instinctive response to soothe by attempting to solve a problem immediately, instead helping us all think more deeply about the problem at hand first. The protocols developed by NSRF have been in place for more than 20 years, and yet the research outlined in the 2011 bestseller, ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** by the Nobel prizewinner Daniel Kahneman, confirms that the benefits of "System 2," slower, more deliberative, and more logical thinking brings better results than "System 1" thinking, which is fast, instinctive and emotional.

By taking the time to work the steps of each protocol with fidelity, we accomplish so much more. One of the most powerful and most-used debrief questions is, "How did the results of this protocol compare with other conversations or meetings you've had around this issue?" Almost inevitably, the answer is that previous conversations went around in circles or went off on tangents, and that most meetings last far longer with less results than following the right protocol for a problem.

Our job is not to hand anyone a solution, but to help the presenter think about the situation differently so they can find their OWN best solution. I think most of us, especially at the beginning of

our work using NSRF protocols in CFG communities, "want the cookie." We want our perspective, our suggestion, to be the magical, unique, perfect solution for a given presenter's problem. We wait for the moment in the debrief in which the presenter says, "Wow, when you said that thing, I knew it was exactly what I needed to hear! I can solve this problem now!" We wait for the opportunity to reply, aloud or in our head, "Hurray! I win the cookie! I had the "right answer!"

The more diverse the group, the richer the results. People are so accustomed to meeting with their like-colleagues (same grade level, same subject matter, same school), that they tend to believe that people who teach entirely different sorts of students will not be helpful to "my problems," much less that people who are not classroom educators might be helpful. We underestimate the value that a completely different perspective will bring us. We're shocked when we gain powerful new insights into our problem when, for instance, a school-bus driver gives us insight into how a particular student arrives each morning, or hidden-to-us information about that student's extracurriculars, or the visible consequences of high schools starting classes before daylight. Eureka! Similarly, techniques that are common in early elementary classes, that were never taught to secondary teachers, can profoundly affect classroom management. Even having a CFG member, coach, or facilitator completely outside of the education field can provide "out of the box" thinking that unlocks what has felt like a completely unsolvable puzzle.

CFG work does not require "expertise," only fidelity to the protocols and the agreements. I think some of the reasons that many teachers, especially new teachers, have felt so isolated in their roles is because they neither want their subject matter and curriculum dictated to them, nor do they want their techniques questioned. Thus, they do not want to reveal their work, especially the "unpretty" aspects of their work to their colleagues. Autonomy is a powerful driver for professionals of any stripe, so CFG participants are invited to bring work rather than required to bring *particular* pieces of work.

The beauty of CFG meetings is that every one in the group agrees to provide thoughtful perspectives on the problem presented in each protocol; whether we have expertise in that subject area or not, we are all committed to our own learning and that of the students we serve.

When you don't know what to offer, try converting a probing question into a "wondering." I've learned that when I'm sitting in a protocol around a subject area far outside my comfort zone, rather than staying silent and repeatedly "passing," I can usually glance at some probing questions prompts and convert one of them into a "wondering." Since developing strong probing questions takes practice, and since many attempts at good probing questions are actually thinly disguised suggestions, I thought the reverse—converting questions into suggestions—would be a powerful learning for me as well as unlock some new ideas for the presenter. Or maybe not ....

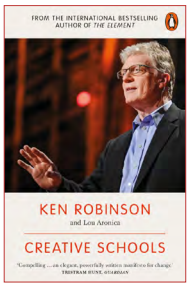
When providing feedback to a presenter in the course of a protocol, you should expect that 70-95% of what you mention may be unhelpful to the presenter. Depending on how long the presenter has been trying to solve this problem, they've likely tried a LOT of possible solutions already. So bear in mind that what you mention may have already been tried, or the presenter considered and rejected it for a reason not explicit in the presentation. (I'd love data around this question!)

However, it is the collective responsibility of everyone in the group to speak their best thoughts aloud, even if they imagine their idea to be "too obvious" or "too wacky." I've sometimes predicated my suggestion with a similar disclaimer: "This may be too 'out there,' but what if....?" and sometimes the look on the presenter's face gives me the "cookie" I still enjoy, even if I'm not so hungry for it in every session. At any rate, if the group as a whole doesn't plow through that vast majority of unusable feedback, you can't trust that the 5-30% of "Aha!" content will be revealed. Also, even if your suggestions are not necessarily helpful to the presenter, they may very well be helpful to someone else in the group with a similar problem, or they may be just the clue to give someone else a completely new idea.

And now, my "big reveal." Although I've been a CFG coach for more than six years, my writings are helping me finalize the requirements for becoming an NSRF National Facilitator. The main reason I'm developing this blog and these sorts of "Aha!" moments around CFG work is that I'm working hard to catch up with the educators I coach. I have never been a classsroom teacher, I do not have an education degree, and when it comes to analyzing data, particularly, I have never taken a statistics class, either. My blog (and future excerpts in ***Connections***) is my practice ground for reinforcing and further developing my understanding of the foundations of CFG work. In contrast with certain members of federal and state departments of education who also have no teaching credentials, I have no intention of attempting to tell any teacher how to do their work. But CFG work can be effective for anyone in any occupation, and the art of facilitation, of helping a group find its own wisdom, is quite separate from education credentials. I hope you'll agree, but if you have any thoughts about the matter, I welcome your emails to luci@nsrfharmony.org

Two book reviews this issue, both by Dave Lehman

Creative Schools, by Robinson & Aronica



Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution that's Transforming Education *by Sir Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica New York: Penguin Press, 2015*

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Many ***Connections*** readers will be familiar with Sir Ken Robinson already through his 2006 TED talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?," currently the most-watched talk in the history of TED.com, viewed online more than 41 million times. (You are familiar with the TED Conference's free collection of short Ideas Worth Spreading, right?) As Robinson says in the introduction to ***Creative Schools***, "The essence of that talk was that we're all born with immense natural talents, but by the time we've been through education far too many of us have lost touch with them." He also states in the introduction, *"In this book, I want to set out how the standards culture is harming students and schools and to present a different way of thinking about education. I want to show, too, that whoever and wherever you are, you do have the power to make the system change. Changes are happening. All around the world, there are many great schools, wonderful teachers, and inspiring leaders who are working creatively to provide students with the kinds of personalized, compassionate, and community-oriented education they need."*

With a doctorate in liberal and performing arts from the renowned Bretton Hall in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Robinson has worked for 40 years as a teacher, researcher, trainer, examiner, and advisor. He sees the following as the central issue in worldwide education, in a nutshell:

"... most of the developed countries did not have mass systems of public education much before the middle of the nineteenth century. These systems were developed to meet the labor needs of the Industrial Revolution and they are organized on the principles of mass production. The standards movement is allegedly focused on making these systems more efficient and accountable. The problem is that these systems are inherently unsuited to the wholly different circumstances of the twenty-first century.... The revolution I'm advocating is based on different principles from those of the standards movement. It is based on a belief in the value of the individual, the right to self-determination, our potential to evolve and live a fulfilled life, and the importance of civic responsibility and respect for others.... [Thus] the aims of education are ***to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens.*** [emphasis mine]"

As he says in the book's subtitle, what's needed is a "grassroots revolution" from the ground up, from the students, teachers, administrators, and parent/caregivers in local communities, and not by *re-forming* the system, but (again. as he says in his subtitle) by *trans-forming* it.

Robinson lived and worked in England until 2001 when he came to the United States. He says this is a global issue, and draws on examples from England and the U.S. as well as other countries involved in transforming education. One example is the U.K. project he and others researched, and which resulted in the report, "The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practices and Provision." Drawing on all of the arts, but particularly drama, the study concludes:

"... the heart of education is the ***relationship between the student and the teacher*** [emphasis mine]. *Everything else depends on how productive and successful that relationship is. If that is not working, then the system is not working.... A great deal of learning – and education – goes on outside the formal setting of schools and national curricula. It happens anywhere there are willing learners and engaging teachers. The challenge is to create and sustain those experiences within schools. The root task is to create*

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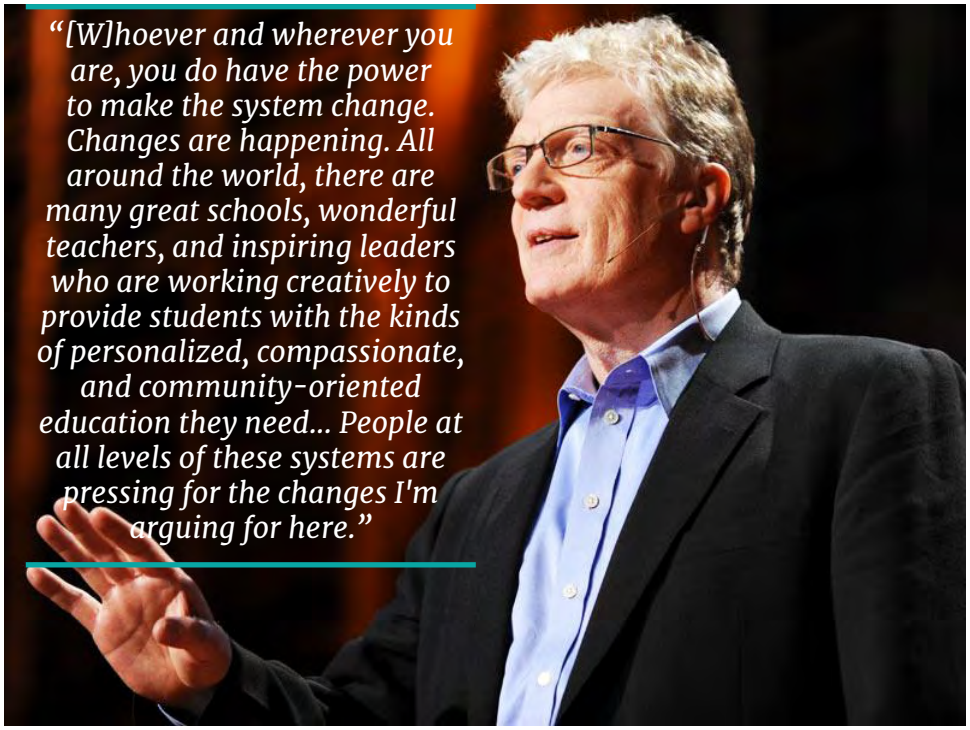

the conditions in which the relationship between student and teachers can flourish."

Robinson then goes on to point out that this kind of transformation of education exists within a "natural ecosystem of responsibilities:"

"At the most fundamental level, the focus of education has to be on creating the conditions in which students will want and be able to learn.

Next, the role of teachers is to facilitate students' learning.

The role of principals is to create the conditions in their schools in which teachers can fulfill these roles.

The role of policymakers [e.g. school board members] is to create conditions – whether at the local, state, or national levels for which they are responsible – in which principals and schools can fulfill these responsibilities."

The Arts in Schools project also published "Learning Through Drama," which identified four areas of "creative, technical, contextual, and critical development" involved in drama productions, noting that these four applied equally well to all other disciplines including the sciences, humanities, and even physical education. For example, in drama the report argued that there are two complementary ways of engaging students in the arts: "making" – the production of their own work, and "appraising" – understanding and appreciating the work of others, and that both of these are vital to a dynamic and balanced education in the arts.

"Making" involves both the individual student's creative voice and the technical skills through which it is expressed, while "appraising" involves a deepening contextual knowledge and critical judgment of others people's work, both artistic and aesthetic. Achieving such a balance requires teachers to "engage, enable, expect, and empower" their students, which Robinson then discusses in detail using examples from various teachers in various fields. One example I particularly appreciated is from teaching horsemanship, since as a high school student I learned to ride and worked at a stable. The instructor's comment to the students was, "You can't ride yesterday's horse," pointing out how a rider has to keep learning from what the horse is doing in the present moment, not simply what the horse was doing yesterday. I believe this lesson is certainly widely applicable beyond ridership.

In the chapter entitled, "What's Worth Knowing?", Robinson notes, ***"The proper starting point is to ask what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education."*** [This is exactly what we did at the Lehman Alternative Community School when we asked the question, "What should students know and be able to do to become global citizens!" Our question led to a list generated by staff, students, and parent/caregivers, of seven essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes of an LACS graduate.] Robinson identifies the following eight core competencies:

"curiosity – the ability to ask questions and explore how the world works

creativity – the ability to generate new ideas and to apply them in practice

criticism – the ability to analyze information and ideas and to form reasoned arguments and judgments

communication – the ability to express thoughts and feelings clearly and confidently in a range of media and forms

collaboration – the ability to work constructively with others

compassion – the ability to empathize with others and act accordingly

composure – the ability to connect with the inner life of feeling and develop a sense of personal harmony and balance

citizenship – the ability to engage constructively with society and to participate in the processes that sustain it"

He then provides examples from various schools of each of these, and ends this discussion with the following three characteristics of the curriculum as a whole:

"Diversity – It should be broadly based to cover the sorts of understanding that we want for all students and to provide proper opportunities for them as individuals to discover their personal strengths and interests.

Depth – It should provide appropriate choices so that as they develop, students can pursue their own interests in proper depth.

Dynamism – The curriculum should be designed to allow for collaboration and interaction between students of different ages and teachers with different specialties. It should build bridges with the wider community, and it should evolve and develop in the process."

There are additional chapters on testing, pointers for principals, changing the school climate and an afterword in which Robinson notes three key things: *"First, there is a rapidly changing context in which we are living that makes it urgent that these approaches are properly understood and applied on a mass scale. Second,* ***we now have technologies that make it possible to personalize education in wholly new ways.*** *Third, there is a groundswell of feeling in many parts of the world that a tectonic shift in how we think about and practice education is essential."*

It is this second point which is a perfect segue to my second book review in this issue of ***Connections***.

LINKS

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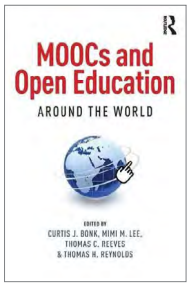
Robinson's TED Talk: "Do Schools Kill Creativity?"

Book review #2, also by Dave Lehman

MOOCs and Open Education Around the World

By Curtis J. Bonk, Mimi M. Lee, Thomas C. Reeves, Thomas H. Reynolds, editors



MOOCs and Open Education Around the World
Edited by Curtis J. Bonk, Mimi M. Lee, Thomas C. Reeves, and Thomas H. Reynolds
New York: Routledge, 2015

This book is an amazingly thorough, up-to-date, incredibly important, encyclopedic review of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Open Educational Resources (OER), and Distance Learning (see sidebar for links to definitions). Organized into eight sections of 32 articles by 64 contributors from 15 different countries, thoroughly fulfilling the "Around the World" promise of the title. Authors include voices from Australia, Canada, Germany, Kenya, India, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The book includes two insightfully written Forewords: one by George Siemens, known for teaching the first MOOC in 2011, and another by Fred Mulder of the Open University of the Netherlands. Mulder points out that UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) coined the term, OER in 2001. Also, there is an introductory Preface by the team of four Editors, and a Closing chapter by the Editors as well. **In fact, I strongly suggest you begin reading this book with the final chapter, number 29, "Open Options: Recapping This Book with Eyes on the Future," to assist you in selecting what chapter to read next.** (I know, I know, it's "cheating" to read the last chapter of a novel first, but this is non-fiction and full of important information that can seem overwhelming to read front-to-back.)

From the initial Foreword, Siemens makes the important point that "MOOCs were never about higher education," college and university education solely. They were a response to larger societal needs related to education and training, and such information tools as Google search, Wikipedia, and social media in the globally connected 21st century. He goes on to recount the following crucial example:

"Consider the SARS outbreak of 2003. In a connected world, disease travels more quickly. So does information, as indicated by the rapid response of medical researchers to identify the virus causing SARS. While science often moves in multi-year cycles of peer review research and publication, identifying and understanding how to deal with SARS was a critical emergency. In a span of only a few months, the identification of the coronavirus enabled medical professionals to explore treatment and offer solutions. The speed of this research was only possible in a connected, networked, and online world."

In their Preface, the four editors—from Indiana University, the University of Houston, the University of Georgia, and National University—make the important multicultural point, *"We hope that this book starts a dialogue about how MOOCs and open education* ***might accelerate access to education by those living in poverty or without adequate access to traditional educational resources*** *as well as those coveting a move up in their careers or starting a new one."* The 29 chapters of ***MOOCs and Open Education Around the World*** are organized into the following eight parts:

Part 1 – MOOCs and Open Education: Historical and Critical Reflections

Part 2 – Open Education Opportunities Now and On the Horizon

Part 3 – Researching and Evaluating Notions of MOOCs and Openness

Part 4 – Thoughts on the Quality of MOOCs and OER

Part 5 – Designing Innovative, Courses, Programs, and Models of Instruction

Part 6 – MOOCs and Open Education in the Developing World

Part 7 – MOOCs and Open Learning Alternatives in Corporate Settings

Part 8 – Future Glimpses and Open Options

These sections are designed to meet the following ten goals of the editors:

- *"Help the reader better understand the range of MOOC initiatives and open education projects currently underway around the planet.*
- *Understand how MOOCs and open educational resources are impacting learners in different ways around the world. This goal includes obtaining a better grasp of the potential global impact of MOOCs and open education.*
- *Highlight pressing issues and controversies where there presently is passionate debate.*
- *Reflect on and plan for near-term possibilities, obstacles, and trends related to MOOCs and open education.*
- *Gain insights into emerging trends in e-learning as well as future plans and visions, especially as they relate to MOOCs and informal or self-directed learning.*
- *Learn how culture interacts with e-learning and open education across regions of the world.*
- *Emotionally connect to the stories, experiences, pilot testing situations, etc., of those who have attempted a MOOC or developed significant open educational resources.*
- *Grasp the challenges and barriers facing different organizations and institutions as well as entire countries in implementing MOOCs and other forms of e-learning and open education.*
- *Learn from some of the key instructors, trainers, researchers, administrators, government officials, instructional designers, entrepreneurs, consultants, and for the reader to get a sense of who some of the key players currently are in this space as well as what issues they are attempting to address.*
- *Realize that many of the questions, criticisms, possibilities, and opportunities related to MOOCs and open education are global issues. While the contributors to this book represent diverse regions of the world, they have much in common in terms of their concerns, goals, initiatives, challenges, problems and successes."*

Illustrative of the thoughtful discussions in each chapter, and of particular interest in Part 5 are Chapter 16, "The Collaborative Design and Development of MOOCs for Teacher Professional Development," written by two professors from the University of Houston, and Chapter 17, "Feminist Alternatives to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): The Inception of the Distributed Open Collaborative Course (DOCC)," co-authored by eight feminist educators.

In Chapter 16 the authors describe the "Webscape model" for developing web-based, multimedia-enhanced educational environments with the following five components –

"First, students, faculty and content experts work collaboratively in small teams to design and develop multimedia-rich educational projects.

Second, we use a range of technology tools and resources, including sophisticated multimedia authoring programs, dynamic databases, digital storytelling software, and advanced uses of digital video editing.

Third, we create actual projects that will be used by real teachers and students, as well as Web visitors from around the world.

Fourth, Webscape projects use a constructivist, team-based approach to instructional design (IL).

Fifth, because the Webscape projects are complex and multifaceted, they often cannot be completed in a single semester. As a result, work on such projects often continues throughout the school year."

In Chapter 17, the DOCC, "Distributed Open Collaborative Course," is a collaborative project motivated by feminist pedagogical insights utilizing recent advances in learning technology with "shared learning tools," and "shared learning activities." DOCC and FemTechNet initially involved some 200 students on 18 college campuses with 27 instructors. All but two students successfully completed the initial, trial course.

Finally, in closing the last chapter, the editors repeat the important statement they made in the Preface – ***"we hope that this book provides some guidance toward an educational future where options and access are open for all learners – the highly inquisitive, informal, and nontraditional learners as well as the educationally disadvantaged, underprivileged, and at-risk."*** I encourage you readers of *Connections* to take the time to become familiar with the crucial topics in this book as we look increasingly to a digitally dominated age.

LINKS

Add NSRF/Harmony School Corporation as your beneficiary at http://smile.Amazon.com

Purchase MOOCs and Open Education Around the World: Via Amazon Smile

Define Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) here

Define Open Educational Resources (OER) here

Part two of a two-part series

Building collaborative communities: By teachers, for teachers, part 2

Every school has its own unique story. and we share our experience at ACS Athens as a vignette of our practice not a sole recipe for success.

Over the past five years at the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS) we have created an environment of collaborative professional development with NSRF® Critical Friends Group® work at its core, studying the impact of the expanding CFG® work here.

ACS Athens is an international school serving American students and the wider international community who live in Athens, Greece. Part of a wider network of international schools providing quality education, ACS includes students from junior kindergarten (JK) through 12th grade. We are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to offer the IB Diploma Program.

— Penny Kynigou and Dave Nelson

EDITOR'S NOTE: The American Community Schools of Athens refers to its professional learning communities that use Critical Friends Group coaches and NSRF protocols as "Collaborative Learning Communities." As such, in this article, "CFG" and "CLC" are used interchangeably.

Introduction

...So you've taken the CFG training, you feel inspired by the excitement of tapping into the spirit and collective intelligence of teachers working together, and you wonder whether it is worthwhile to get a group started at your school? At the American Community Schools of Athens, we have conducted our own action research and have surveyed our CFG members over the past two years to find out their reactions to these meetings and to the impact that their participation has had in the classroom.

At our school, we currently have a thriving CFG culture that has been steadily growing over the past five years, and in last month's article "By Teachers, for Teachers: Part 1" published here in Connections, we shared the story of how we initiated and developed our CFG community, some of the strategies that worked well and the challenges we encountered.

Penny Kynigou and David Nelson are both NSRF National Facilitators and we work at ACS Athens, an American international school which serves families of diverse nationalities living and working in Greece. Our school has recently undergone reaccreditation with the Middle States Association and as part of this process, the entire school has been involved in multiple action research projects that led each faculty member to review literature and reflect on their current teaching practices.

As coordinators of the ACS Athens Collaborative Learning Community (or CLC, the name we give our CFG groups), we were curious to learn to what extent our participating teachers felt they were gaining from these meetings, and if they found value, to find out what elements they believe make our CFG meetings worthwhile. Was there evidence in the current literature on collaborative groups and organizational growth that supported these findings? In this second article we set out to share what we learned in our action research project.

Over two years of research, we surveyed teachers, gathered reflections at the end of meetings, and collected "CLC stories." Many of those stories expressed how our participants, whether they presented work or were participants in others' work, transferred what they learned in CLC meetings to their classrooms. In these meetings, teachers engage in dialogue amongst themselves to create plans, refine curriculum artifacts, and inquire into dilemmas of classroom practice. Sifting through this data we were able to identify three core beliefs that seem to underlie why the CLC members at ACS Athens feel that these meetings offer them something unique:

NSRF protocols and activities used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth; the diverse make-up of the groups generates a high level of creativity;the focus on inquiry during the meetings was a key component in successful problem-solving.

1. NSRF protocols and activities used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth

As we analyzed the collective reflections, we noticed that many commented on how the CFG meetings have been uniquely energy-boosting, fun, relaxing, and rewarding. Many spoke of a sense of safety, the importance of a confidential place where teachers can freely share problems and receive non-threatening feedback. They identified how the friendship and trust developed within the groups help to create greater integration within the school community and a sense of common purpose across all grade levels. Our teachers frequently commented that they valued not only

the support of the group in solving dilemmas but also the act of service, the opportunity to help others by sharing

Quotes with photos taken from video presentation by David Nelson and Penny Kynigou:
http://bit.ly/ACSAthensCLCs

their expertise and contributing ideas.

Without a doubt the foundation of trust is instrumental to each group's success. When that trust is combined with a shared vision under the careful guidance of trained CFG Coaches, who understand the subtleties of facilitating the NSRF protocols, the processes inspire risk-taking and empathy essential to growth. By opening dialogue with one another about their professional concerns, teachers gain insights from one another in a non-threatening way and they feel empowered as active agents.

This all-important sense of safety is created through the NSRF protocols and the skill-building structure provided in CFG training and put into practice by trained CFG coaches in our school. Recognizing and honoring that teachers' days are busy and often fraught, every meeting begins with refreshments and the Transitions activity to help teachers release the issues of the day, follow-up from previous meetings, and reconnect to the group. By openly articulating expectations and establishing group norms through the Setting Agreements Activity and then holding each other accountable for those agreements, meetings become significantly more productive. The shared language developed through the Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger Activity, and Compass Points Activity, helps to address moments of interpersonal tension in a productive stress-free manner. Planning during the final day of our initial Coaches' Training helped us to create a carefully scaffolded set of skills over the year, with participants learning warm and cool feedback strategies, and the proper use and construction of clarifying and probing questions. These feedback and questioning techniques foster a climate of curiosity and open dialogue about the craft of teaching as educators come together to share expertise and generate possibilities. Meetings act to connect teachers in a shared and purposeful endeavor where each feels that their personal areas of expertise, interest, and experience becomes a valued contribution.

In his book ***The Fifth Discipline***, Peter Senge analyzes the need for learning organizations to cultivate three core learning capabilities among professionals: fostering aspirations, developing reflective conversations, and understanding of complexity. CFG meetings accomplish each of these capabilities by providing a space for educators to foster a shared vision of education, and by encouraging reflection and dialogue in which the group analyzes the complexity of classroom craft. We find, just as Peter Senge states of successful learning organizations, "Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world."

In the unique context of CFG work, colleagues have the opportunity to share areas of personal mastery and learn from one another. Senge highlights some of the benefits of such an organization by stating, "When we give up this illusion [that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces] — we can then build 'learning organizations,' organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."

Psychological safety is a key factor in freeing up thinking, and strong collegiality helps participants get into a state of flow where they can play with ideas and come up with creative solutions. The collegial relationships fostered within the CLC groups widens the peer support among the faculty and encourages growth. Dave recently participated in a workshop with Steve Barkley, specialist in instructional coaching, who helped him to realize that when teachers are not being evaluated by a superior, they are less concerned with exactly what they're doing, but rather how they can do it better.

In 2015 Google concluded a two-year study of over 180 Google teams to identify

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David Nelson is an NSRF International Facilitator based in Athens, Greece, facilitating trainings in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. David teaches high school Social Studies at the American Community Schools of Athens, where he is also Faculty Development and Growth Program Coordinator. He may be reached at nelsond@acs.gr

David and Penny together co-founded and coordinate the ACS Athens Collaborative Learning Communities.

the key dynamics of successful groups in their company. Psychological safety topped the list as the most important of the five that they identified in the study — "it's the underpinning of the other four," the researchers noted. The Google analysts discovered, as we have similarly found, that "the safer team members feel with one another, the more likely they are to admit mistakes, to partner, and to take on new roles... more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates." The correlations with Google's study and the success of CFG and CLC communities extend further — Google concluded that their teams were also successful due to the structure and clarity of the processes, the meaning of the work, and the empowerment employees feel for creating change.

For example, Christina, first grade teacher and CLC Coach, found CLC meetings both inspirational and productive. She felt that the spirit of trust and acceptance found at these meetings was the key to their effectiveness :

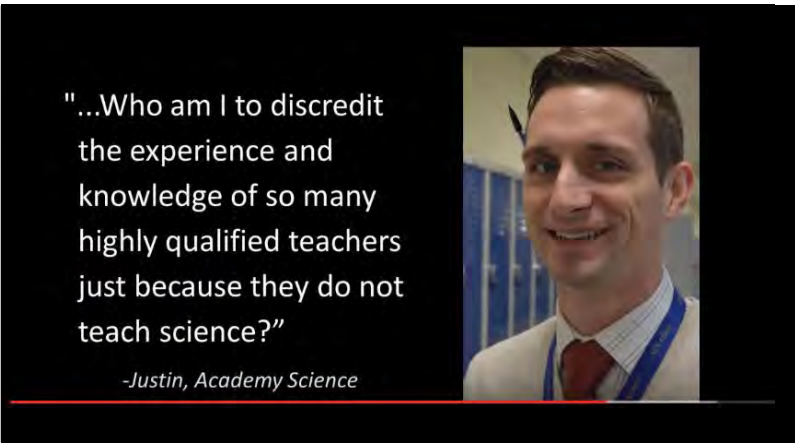
"Even though a CLC group is filled with grown-ups who are all there for similar reasons, it is important to develop a foundation of trust ... so that people can feel safe ... to have their dilemmas or work looked at so deeply. One thing I have walked away with since [my] beginning with the CLC is: 'Always assume positive intent.' It's amazing how it has changed my perspective inside and outside of the school/work environment. When one feels accepted as part of a team, the empathy and security is there because we have all been in the same boat at one point or another - so there is no judgment. CLC groups, by their nature and design, are geared to make the experience a very forward-moving process... and we all like to progress, don't we? We all like to feel productive and meaningful. We get this support in our groups...which then inspires us to tread further, freer and with more confidence in the things we do..."

Growth and learning are optimal in the tension of that creative space where one is neither too comfortable nor feeling actually in danger, known in CFG communities as "the risk zone." CFG work provides both security and challenge, inviting participants to venture into the risk zone together, as Christina's reference to the 'Always assume positive intent' strategy shows. Our ACS Athens participants found this shared adventure in professional growth not only bonding, but also valuable and stimulating.

2. The diverse makeup of the groups generates a high level of creativity

The second consensus that emerged from the data was that the diversity of the participants in the CLC groups generated a high level of creativity. ACS Athens is an unusual school in that we have elementary, middle, and high school all located on one single site. This means that we are one of the few JK-12 schools able to create highly diverse CFG groups including participants from across the JK-12 range. When composing the groups at the beginning of each school year, we consciously aimed at the richest possible mix, considering length of teaching experience, grade level, and subject specialty. Although the participants initially found the mix counterintuitive, they soon discovered that they highly valued interactions and found the discussions most stimulating when elementary and early childhood practitioners shared insights on middle school and high school dilemmas, and vice versa.

Many participants identified the importance of approaching the presenter's topic with a "beginner's mind." They noted that this enabled them to rethink issues and challenge each others' assumptions. For example, a fresh perspective on a handbook for parents could uncover basic elements, which might have been overlooked by the author because they were too close to the issue. Initially participants were concerned that their lack of knowledge of a particular domain might prove a barrier to making useful contributions during the protocol, yet most participants came to realize that their insights could turn out to be the most stimulating and helpful of all. One participant also observed that a CLC meeting is the only forum in our school where we gain the opportunity to look at issues from the perspective of the whole child, something we educators too



often forget while working in the "silos" of our departments or grade levels.

In another example, one of our participants, Justin, HS Science teacher, tells the story of how he brought to his CLC group his dilemma on motivating reluctant science students. He was not expecting to get much valuable insight, as no other science teacher was in the room:

"I'm in the tenth year of my teaching career, and I am finally to the point where I would call myself an excelling teacher. Not that I've never thought I'm terrible, but after 10 years of experience I feel that I have a solid grasp on all aspects of my teaching: lesson planning, classroom management, integrating technology, teaching to differentiated learning styles, connecting with students, etc.

I should've been more optimistic. I should've been thinking, "I will certainly get some fresh ideas," as that is exactly what happened. I tried two of the ideas from my diverse group of advice-givers the next week with positive feedback from my students. The diversity of the group opened me up to all new perspectives way outside of my comfort zone that I (or any teacher) would never experience typically. Even though those ideas come from different disciplines, with some minor tweaking, I can apply them to my classroom. Who am I to discredit the experience and knowledge of so many highly qualified teachers just because they do not teach science?"

Diversity of groups is the key to getting the most creative ideas. We are always at our most creative and open state when exploring potential solutions to problems outside of our own sphere. As Justin himself pointed out, the Dilemma Analysis Protocol used in the CLC meeting helped him as presenter to solicit and hear the feedback of his peers in a context which encouraged "out of the box thinking." This shift in intent and listening circumvents any potential knee-jerk response of defensiveness and self justification which interferes with hearing and benefitting from the advice of others. ACS Athens participants find the diversity of the groups an essential component. In fact, when asked at the end of the year whether we should restructure the groups school by school, they were adamant that we should retain the diversity claiming, "This was the best part!"

3. The focus on inquiry was the key component in successful problem solving.

The third core belief that emerged from our data was that the focus on inquiry was identified as a key component in the successful problem-solving that happens in these meetings. As Senge points out, in inquiry, "people begin to explore the thinking behind their views, the deeper assumptions they may hold, and the evidence they have that leads them to have these views... They begin to ask each other questions." Inquiry is at the heart of the NSRF protocols in which questioning techniques guide participants to explore an issue where the outcome is always unknown. (NSRF differentiates between "protocols," used to explore many possible outcomes, with NSRF "activities," which lead to a specific outcome.) In a protocol, the focus question provides the direction, clarifying questions map out the known territory, and probing questions unfold new horizons both for the presenter and the participants alike. The focus of inquiry in these meetings is on the craft of teaching rather than the content areas. Teachers explore the complexity of their craft through dialogue rather than suggesting simple, temporary fix, solutions. Protocols give the opportunity for reflection on teaching practice not only for the presenter but also for the participants, resulting in many "Aha! moments" for everyone involved as they challenge their own assumptions. Through reflection and dialogue, an understanding of systematic causes of problems emerges. Teachers themselves become thinkers and learners experiencing a range of collaborative learning activities in the same kind of vigorous learning community that they hope to create in their classrooms. Furthermore, many of our teachers report being able to transfer activities used in CFG meetings successfully to their classrooms, using them to challenge students to think more deeply.

Once again, the NSRF coaches' training transparently teaches that tight structures provided in the protocols

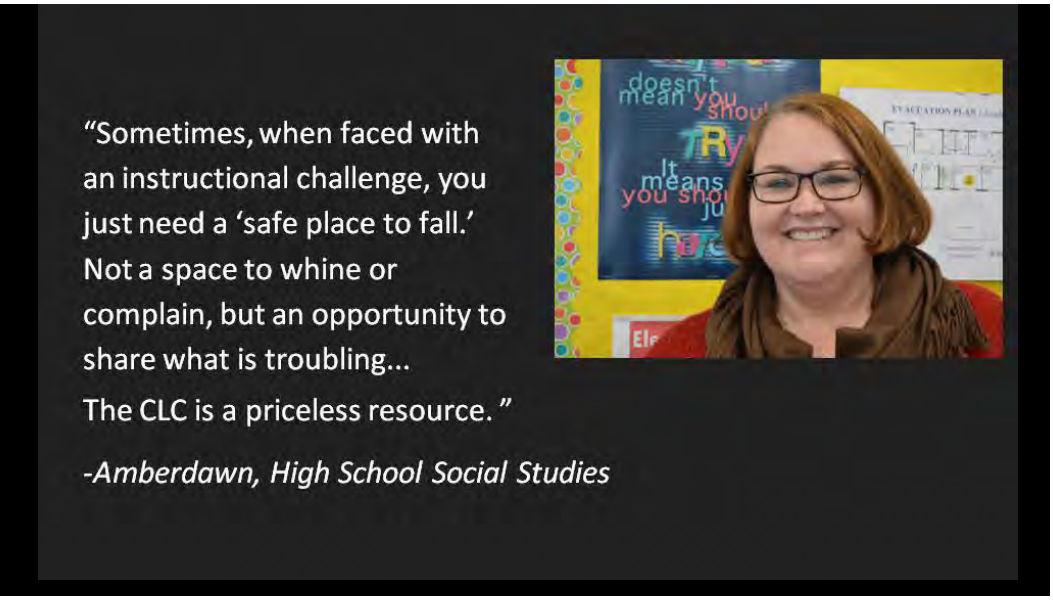
ensure that inquiry is not haphazard but focused. Most protocols are preceded by a pre-conference with the presenter, typically complete the week prior to the CLC meeting. During the pre-conference the trained coach helps the presenter to identify and refine a focus question, to check that the issue is within the presenter's locus of control (thus ensuring that meetings are productive), and to confirm selection of the most effective protocol for the presenter's desired outcome. The focusing question then drives the protocol in order that the dialogue during the protocol helps to meet the presenter's needs.

At ACS Athens, we've conducted multiple trainings to reach a critical volume of trained coaches in each CLC group. The coaches all have a deeper understanding of the value of probing and clarifying questions, so conversations within the meetings have become more meaningful and focused and our participants report "coming away with a plethora of ideas." Several reported how they found the probing questions even more valuable than the suggestions offered to them, as these questions helped to unlock their thinking and opened them up to new possibilities. Because it is a tenet of CFG practice that presenters may only bring dilemmas that are within their locus of control, the effect is to empower teachers to discover solutions and expand their toolkit of choices.

Amberdawn, High School Social Studies teacher, in this example, reflects both on the supportive aspect of working within a CFG community and the way in which collaborative inquiry challenged and stimulated her thinking, leading to even more creative teaching ideas.

"Teaching can be a very isolating experience. Sometimes, when faced with an instructional challenge, you just need "a safe place to fall." Not a space to whine or complain, but an opportunity to share what is troubling you about your practice without fear of judgement. Knowing that others have had or are currently facing similar problems is reassuring. Moreover, being able to benefit from the experience of others and knowing that there is a team that wants to help you to solve the problem in an empowering and energizing way is a priceless resource.

"You're not alone. You are part of a group with professional purpose. Even when the ideas might not be a perfect fit for your classroom, having someone with a totally different approach can help you make your own thinking more visible. And the suggestions can reinvigorate your thought process and lead to more inspired and creative learning activities. Even if I don't implement the exact suggestions of the group, I always walk away with something that I can develop further to meet my goals."



Learning through an open-ended collaborative process of inquiry is not necessarily a familiar approach to all teachers, who have been taught that they must be the authority on their subject. Through participation in Collaborative Learning Communities, ACS Athens teachers experienced both the value of this style of collaborative learning for their own professional growth and how to set up and adapt the processes for their own classrooms.

Reflective comments

In every school there is an untapped wealth of experience, research, and training held within the faculty themselves. In ACS Athens, a portion of our faculty are hired stateside on short contracts, and others are Greek locals whose relationship with the school lasts much longer. In schools like ours, it can be difficult to integrate these diverse groups both socially and professionally, yet the school has much to gain from the cross-fertilization of knowledge bases.

CFG groups provide the time and space for their integration and as Peter Senge says, allow us to "tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn." The challenge for organizations, he says, is "how to initiate change and deal creatively with the challenges of sustaining momentum." At ACS Athens these meetings provide a vehicle for new Stateside hires to gain insights into the cultural context of Greek parenting, learn from the experience of long-term colleagues while also sharing ideas from their own teaching experience and recent Stateside training. Furthermore, the CFG communities have been significant in mediating the school's shift in practice toward a constructivist approach to learning in which children negotiate meaning through collaboration and discussion. Teachers experi-

ence collaborative learning with their peers, facilitation rather than training, and the powerful conversations which happen in the reflective debrief during CFG meetings. They become familiar with protocols and are then often able to experiment with this new skill set in their classrooms and make them their own.

In this study we have tried to capture the diversity and range of influence these communities have had by gathering anecdotal evidence on the participants' perceptions of the experience of working within CFG communities over the past two years. Yet this was just a initial attempt at framing research, and we are well aware, was quite limited in scope. One of the problems in researching this kind of community is to find a way to assess the extent of its value. Senge quotes W.E. Deming, pioneer of the quality management revolution, as asserting, "You can only measure 3% of what matters."

One ***Connections*** reader, fellow NSRF National Facilitator, Terry Daugherty from Indiana, wrote to us in response to our previous article, telling of his own experience in beginning a CFG in a middle school consisting of 55 teachers. "We began with a few and ended up with 80% of our staff in a CFG at the end of the fourth year. We have no evidence to really prove it, but many of us felt that the CFG work helped sustain us, innovate our work, and actually improve test scores."

This sentiment echoes, we think, what many people who work in CFG communities are sensing. So we would like to pose a focusing question to the ***Connections*** readership to help us tune this research project: "In what way could we most effectively gather data and analyze the effect of CFG communities on our schools?" We would be delighted to receive your warm and cool feedback! Please email us with your comments!

Part one of this two-part series appeared in the June 2016 issue of ***Connections****.*

LINKS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Part one of this article series in June 2016 Connections

Add NSRF/Harmony School Corporation as your beneficiary at http://smile.Amazon.com

Purchase The Fifth Discipline: Via Amazon Smile

Barkley, Steve, Education Consultant. "Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud."

Rozovsky, Julia, , Google Operations. "The Five Keys to a Successful Google Team.

Compass Points Activity

Dilemma Analysis Protocol

Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger Activity

NSRF STAFF NEWS

Ivan Harris is the new Operations Manager for the National School Reform Faculty and a CFG Coach in Indiana. In previous years he worked for Indiana University Libraries and the United States Department of Navy as a Human Resources Specialist. Ivan earned a B.A. in Industrial Organizational Psychology from DePaul University and a M.A. in Organizational Management from George Washington University.

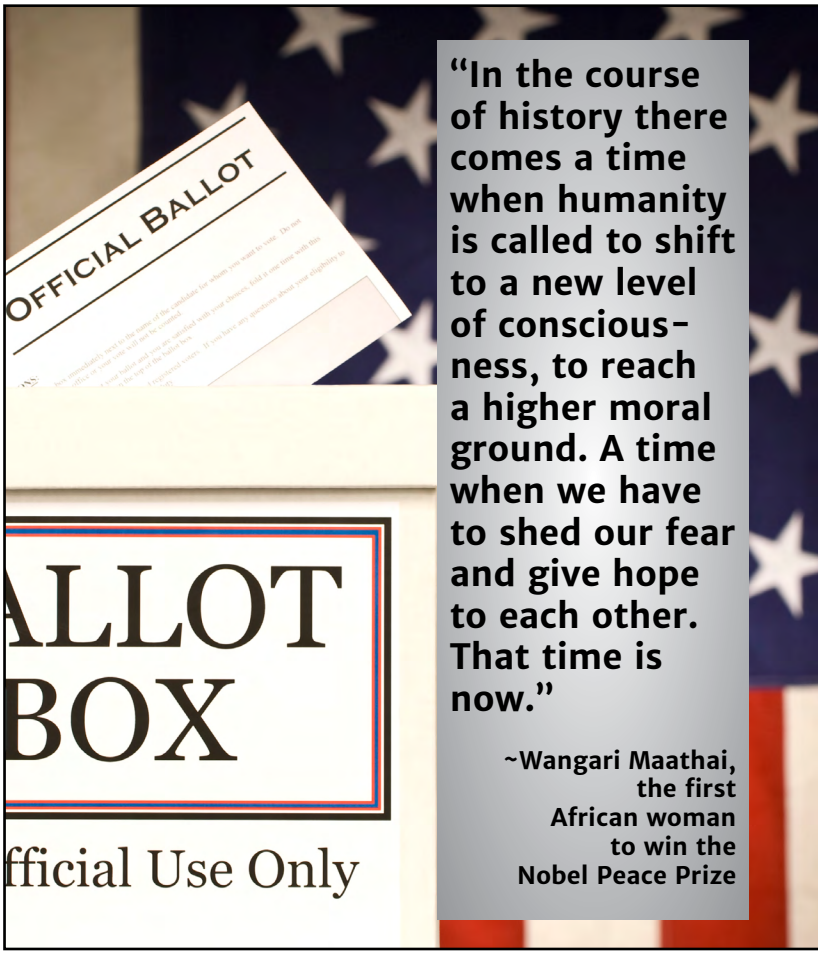
Serendipity led Ivan to NSRF and our mission of improving student achievement and adult learning: with his older daughter enrolled in Harmony School and his wife in a doctoral program at Indiana University, Ivan had been a full-time stay-at-home dad with his youngest daughter. Now he's happy to be working within the Harmony School building, with Evelyn upstairs and Olivia just down the hallway in "the baby room" on a part-time basis.

With responsibilities for new client contact, managing the website, and improving customer satisfaction, you may contact him with your questions or comments at ivan@nsrf-harmony.org.

Dotty Sharp continues her work in the office, now as our part-time Office Manager. She answers the phone and the general office email at nsrf@nsrfharmony.org, handles billing, fulfillment of web orders, and membership documentation.

Luci Englert McKean continues her role as Managing Editor of ***Connections***, and has been promoted to Assistant Director of the NSRF.

Michele Mattoon continues as Director of the NSRF.



Special Advertisement for *Connections* readers

EQUITY MAPS™ IPAD APP: A NEW TOOL TO HELP PROMOTE WIDER COLLABORATION, ENGAGEMENT AND REFLECTION IN OUR WORK!

By David Nelson, NSRF National Facilitator and Founder of Equity Maps™, and Coordinator of Professional Learning and Growth at the American Community Schools of Athens, Greece

Editor's note: Although the NSRF does not profit from sales of this app, we find it extremely beneficial in CFG work. We encourage our members to consider purchasing a copy for your use in CFG meetings, other meetings, and in your classrooms. Also, if you have developed an app or other materials for sale that you believe might be beneficial to practitioners of CFG work, please write an article about it and submit it to *Connections* for our consideration!

The average American spends 5.3 hours per week in front of a mirror (according to Gfk marketing research). According to another study, the average millennial "spends one hour per week dedicated to selfies" typically capturing seven selfies a week. I suppose, at best, it is at those moments we reflect on our style, demeanor and appeal, while seeking to preserve our best images for ourselves and others. At worst, we are forced to confront, among other realities, that we aren't as young as the day before.

I'm excited to share Equity Maps™, an iPad app inspired by my work as an NSRF National Facilitator and practitioner of collaborative processes both in and out of the classroom. Developed to promote deeper reflection and increased equity of participation, Equity Maps allows group members to view compelling illustrations and data of their dialogue, inviting them to reflect more deeply on their work. It's like providing a mirror into the group's interactions to promote wider collaboration, engagement and reflection!

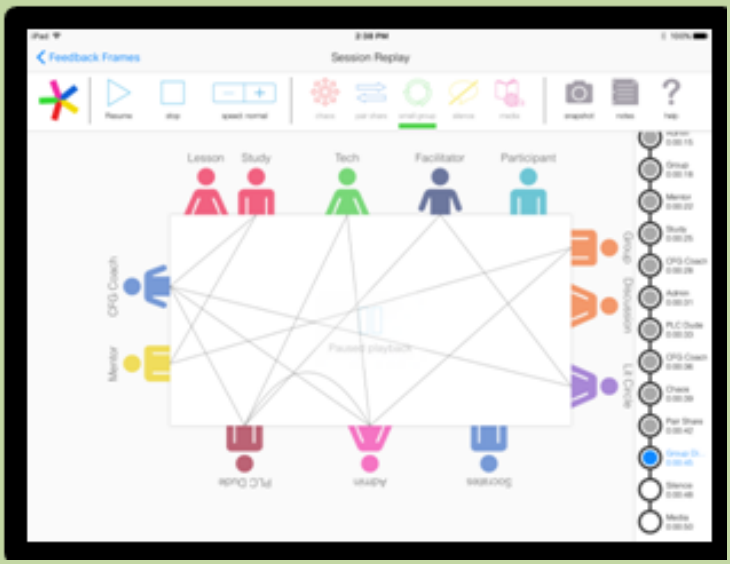


Fig. 1, Equity Maps™ playback screen

As CFG coaches and facilitators, we all know the power of reflection, especially in our debrief sessions as we seek to understand and apply the outcomes, processes and personal insights. As a NSRF National Facilitator and high school social studies teacher of 26 years, I continually strive to find ways to encourage deeper reflection and wider involvement, both in the classroom and within my CFG communities.

Equity Maps is being used both in CFG-style meetings and in the classroom. It allows you as the CFG coach, facilitator or teacher to chart the interactions of students or participants as they interact during the class or meeting and upon completion, you can show them what happened. When the meeting or class is over, you can instantly replay graphic illustrations (see fig. 1) of their interactions at multiple speeds, as well as display statistics related to participation (see fig. 2). Let the group members see for themselves how the dialogue unfolded! Who dominated floor time? Who spoke very little, or not at all? You can even display data of gender equity and overall group equity based on time and times spoken.

What we've found most successful is that the images and data allow the group members to see for themselves how their session unfolded. While the data are descriptive and non-evaluative, they allow group members to reflect and/or share their own conclusions. As well, the user can always choose whether or not to record the audio, of which permission is paramount before any protocol begins so that confidentiality and trust are not broken.

With many stories coming out of those of us who have field tested the app in our work, I would like to share a few things I've realized about the power of such a tool:

First, I've found that Equity Maps is especially helpful as a less confrontational "third point" of reference, enabling the group to point out how the actions of participants affect the group's interaction. During the debrief I often display the images of data and ask, "What do you notice?" Inevitably, the overly outspoken students or participants quickly see just how much they had dominated the conversation, and it suddenly becomes safer for the group to point it out; in doing so, the group is no longer confronting the individual, rather they are referencing the charts and wondering how more equitable involvement might in-

Fig. 2, Gender Equity within Feedback Screen from my class, average time spoken per gender and average times spoken per gender

crease the effectiveness of the group. Of course, the loud-mouths are still required to realize it for themselves and must choose to alter their own behavior, but the group has an ally in the timely data to point that out.

Additionally, using the app in my high school history classes, I've seen how it can help alter student behavior over time. I've watched the students virtually come to the rescue of their quietly disconnected peers by making a point to invite them into future conversations. I've seen other groups set goals before a student-run Socratic Seminars discussion regarding the degree of equity they want to achieve.

On another level, the visuals provided by Equity Maps have helped groups to surface other factors impacting the group's success, including the impact of the seating arrangement, the positioning of the facilitator, the proximity of participants, or the use of rounds versus the popcorn method of engagement. In each of these cases, the data have helped the group to more deeply reflect and improve their collaboration through the process. Also exciting, many times the presenters within an NSRF protocol ask to listen to the Equity Maps recording following the meeting so that they can more carefully write down the participants' suggestions, re-consider the probing questions, or simply listen to the dialogue to gain more clarity on the dilemma.

My favorite anecdote comes from my US History class when a sophomore girl spoke out during the group's debrief, immediately after seeing that the boys had, on average, spoken over twice as long and nearly twice as many times as the girls had done (see fig. 3). The images provided by the app opened a door for several of the girls within the class to share how they often feel when in conversations or lessons, especially when a few dominant boys are present. Interesting enough, and I facilitated very lightly at that moment, the dialogue of the class debrief did not become confrontational; many of the girls found a voice, while many of the boys were "invited" to reflect. It sure seems that many boys listened to what was said and, because the debrief and reflection were so recent and followed with specific data, I'm convinced that many of them internalized the feelings that their peers had risked sharing.

With v1 now available in the iTunes App Store, I hope that you can give it a try in your CFG work and/or in your classes. CFG coaches, facilitators, and teachers have already found tremendous success with using the app with CFG protocols, Socratic Seminars, Spider Web Discussions™, Harkness discussions, and with instructional coaching, to name a few. With complete transparency, I share that we've resisted the freemium model of pricing and have priced the app like an inexpensive book at $9.99, which leaves no surprises later, such as advertising or in-app purchases. We may still change the pricing model in the future and possibly offer a cheaper trial version, with limited participants available, but that will also require an in-app purchase for the full version. Either way, I hope that you download it today for your iPad and I would love to hear your warm and cool feedback about its use!

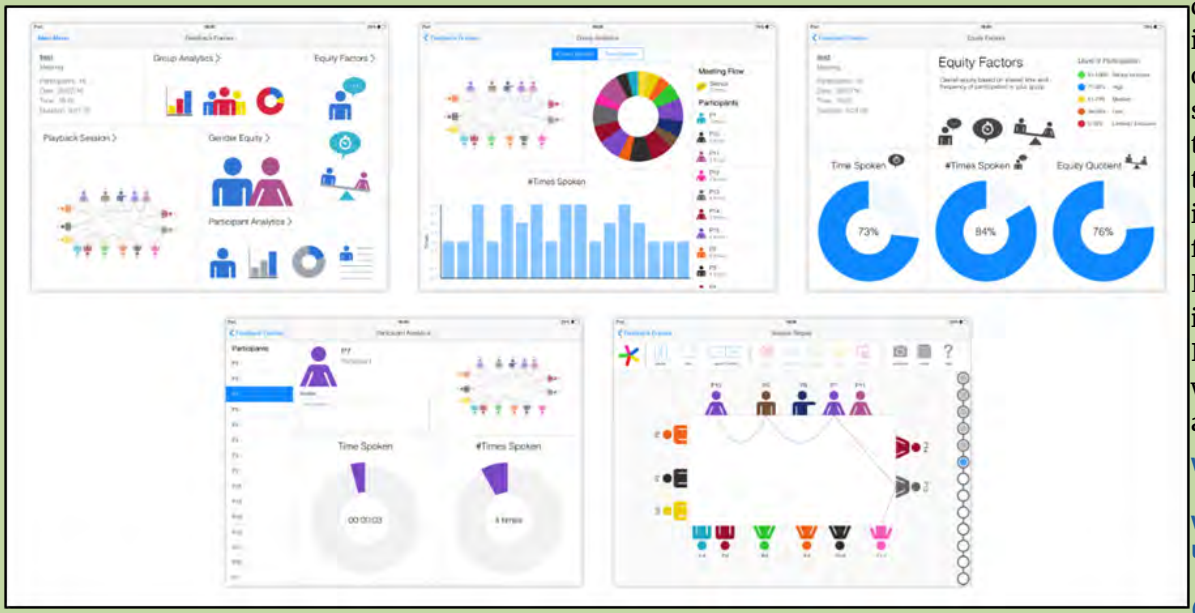


Fig. 3 – Equity Maps™ equity reporting screen

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NSRF is a non-profit, professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through a specific variety of professional learning communities. Part of Harmony Education Center, we train educators to coach Critical Friends Group communities. CFG communities use NSRF protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning.

Paid membership helps us continue to provide NSRF materials via our website, as well as support our mission to offer training across the nation and world. We encourage you to support the Lois Butler Scholarship fund so that any teacher could participate in a training regardless of ability to pay our fee.

Shout-out to researchers

Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?

Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We're happy to share research we have on file, but realize that it's a bit dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

Want to see YOUR ideas, research, and work reflected in Connections?

We're always interested in improving this publication.

Article submissions must be directly related to Critical Friends Group work and/or NSRF protocols, or reviews of organizations or media that closely align with the NSRF mission. We welcome submissions discussing protocol use in classrooms and in other settings in and outside of CFG community meetings, including non-education settings. If you're unsure whether the idea you have for an article meets this guideline, email luci@nsrfharmony.org describing what you'd like to write about, and we can discuss it. Article length vary from a few hundred words to two or three thousand.

Authors of published articles receive one free year's subscription to NSRF.

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We're just starting to learn about LinkedIn, but we'll be here soon, too.

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