

Tips for Setting Up a Successful CFG

by Michele Mattoon

Director, National School Reform Faculty

Over the past year, I have been compiling a list of tips for new coaches who are interested in putting together a successful Critical Friends Group. Generally, during a five-day new coaches training, much of the fifth day is used toward planning. Over and over on this planning day, I get asked questions such as these:

“How do I start a CFG in my school?”

“Do we ask people to volunteer to join CFGs or should we make attendance mandatory?”

“How should I introduce protocols to my school?”

“What protocols should I introduce first?”

“What can I do about ‘push-back’ from teachers who think that CFGs will be just “another thing on their plates?”

Here are some suggestions (in no order of importance) that can set the stage to having a successful CFG experience for all involved:

1. Start with a small group that you feel will be successful. A group of people who want to give it a try are much more likely to succeed than a group that is forced to be there. Once that group is excited by the process, create opportunities for them to share their excitement with others, (for example, during staff meetings or retreats).
2. Reference schools that have been successful when it comes to setting up CFGs. There are many schools that have incorporated CFGs and protocols into their culture. Sharing the web-sites of these schools with your colleagues can show them the value of collaborative learning communities.
3. When you introduce CFGs, talk openly about the rewards, but also acknowledge the difficulty of learning protocols, active listening, giving and receiving feedback and reflecting.
4. Get allies—partners. The “strong” people in the school (the people with strong voices and perceived power) might be the very people you need to get on your side. Asking them to help you introduce a protocol to the school is a good way to do this. If you can convert one of these people, they will be strong advocates for the work in the future.
5. Make sure to get a read of the group’s needs by survey or “pre-conference.” This way people feel that their needs are being heard and will be addressed. Design your CFG agendas around the results of these surveys. It is a wonderful way to encourage “buy-in”.
6. It is very important to set agreements and talk about expectations for participation during the

first or second CFG meeting. Without agreements, the group doesn't know what to expect or how to work together in an atmosphere of safety and trust.

7. Make sure to share with your group what your "job" is as a facilitator before you begin a protocol. That way when you have to refocus a conversation or remind someone to follow the protocol, participants won't perceive the instruction as rude.

8. Front load, front load, front load! Be transparent about what you are doing and why it is vital so that participants know what to expect. This encourages trust in the process. Be sure not to skip important "scaffolding" activities (for example, make sure to go over Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger and how to give and receive feedback before doing a Tuning Protocol).

9. Remind participants that CFGs are a process that educators use their entire career to improve their practice, not something that "will be done" sometime in the near future.

10. Practice responsive facilitation. Your job as a facilitator is to meet the needs of your CFG, not to push your own agenda.

11. Pass on facilitation responsibilities when your group members are ready. Although you are the coach, sharing facilitation enforces the notion of a democratic, collaborative community—all voices in a CFG are heard and honored!

12. Introduce protocols in other meetings (staff meetings, for example) to show your staff how effective and efficient protocols are for getting work done. Once they experience the benefits of protocols, they will be more likely to want to join a CFG.

13. Serve food and drinks—make it special. This is especially important if you meet after a long school day.

14. Be professional. If you are organized and prepared as a coach, people will be more likely to trust in your leadership. Having a notebook for each person in your CFG with the protocols you will be using for that day, posting the agreements and coming to meetings having already had a pre-conference with the presenter makes a CFG meeting go smoothly and will lead to success.

15. Set times to meet ahead for the year. Avoid trying to find a different time each month to meet.

16. Use a timer—a bell is more impersonal and feels less rude when interrupting speech.

17. Have a CFG of coaches for support!

I am always interested in adding to my list of tips for new CFG coaches. If you have any tips that aren't mentioned here, please email them to me at Michele@nsrfharmony.org and I'd be pleased to make room for them.

A Tribute to Lois Butler

By Steve Bonchek, Executive Director, Harmony Education Center



It is with great sadness that on behalf of NSRF and Harmony Education Center I announce that longtime NSRF and Harmony leader Lois Butler passed away in Chicago earlier this week.

Lois was a visionary. She envisioned a world that treated both children and adults with much more respect and equality than is common today. Even in the face of overwhelming obstacles and evidence to the contrary, Lois believed that through people learning to collaborate, both the education community and the greater society at large could truly become a different and better world.

Her belief and support for both the national network and protocols of NSRF, through all its trials and tribulations, were unwavering. Her support and guidance to me personally and the entire Harmony organization is something I will always be grateful for.

Lois was an eternal optimist and always a calm voice in the storm - she will be sorely missed.

Common Problems

by Dave Lehman, *Connections* Editor
National School Reform Faculty

(adapted from *How To Make Meetings Work* by Michael Doyle and David Straus)

Introduction -

Many of the difficulties in CFGs have to do with behaviors from group members that can be problematic, creating road blocks or difficulties in even getting a group to collaborate on anything. This protocol provides an opportunity to anticipate many of these kinds of problems and to discuss possible ways to approach them so they don't come as a complete surprise.

The Activity –

For each of the following “Common Problems Encountered in All Kinds of Meetings and Groups,” have two people take two of the problems and discuss among themselves how they might deal with those problems should they arise in a group with which they are working, which they are facilitating, and possibly Coaching as a CFG. Then, have each pair report out their ideas to the whole group :

- 1) multi-headed animal syndrome - everybody going off in different directions at the same time
- 2) confusing process and content – are we talking about how to discuss the topic or what topic to discuss?
- 3) personal attack – attacking individuals rather than their ideas
- 4) traffic problem – difficulty leaping into the conversational flow and getting a chance to participate.
- 5) unclear roles and responsibilities – who is supposed to be doing what?
- 6) data overload – having to hold onto too many ideas in your head at one time
- 7) repetition and wheel-spinning – going over the same old ideas again and again
- 8) win/lose approaches to decision-making – partial solutions, lack of compromises, polarization
- 9) confused objectives and expectations – what is the group supposed to be doing?; hidden agendas
- 10) unresolved questions of power/authority – do we have the power to make this decision?
- 11) problem avoidance – “everything is fine;” there are no problems around here
- 12) general negativity and lack of challenge – there is nothing we can do about it, so why try?

13) communication problems – not listening to, or understanding others, making faulty assumptions

14) poor meeting environments – can't hear, can't see, too stuffy, etc.

15) personality conflicts – lack of openness and trust

16) underlying tension, elephant in the room - racism, sexism, classism, homophobia



The Power of Formative Assessments Featuring the “Ticket to Leave” Protocol

by Dave Lehman, *Connections* Editor, National School Reform Faculty

In the September issue of the education journal, Phi Delta Kappan, a new section has begun – the “Kappan Classic” – where an article from the Kappan archives is re-published with an invitation to the original authors to: “update this [article] with a short introduction about what they learned after writing this article, what still needs to be learned, or, perhaps, how the field managed to misinterpret what they were suggesting.” The first of these “Classics” is **“Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment”** by Paul Black and Dylan William, originally in the October 1998 Kappan, over ten years ago. Paul Black is emeritus professor of science education at King’s College London, and Dylan William is deputy director of the Institute of Education at the University of London, both in the United Kingdom, or England.

I believe that we in NSRF need to expand our thinking, our writing, and our practice to include protocols with provocative ideas and strategies for classroom teachers in improving education for all learners, and “formative assessments” are one of the most powerful tools at our disposal. Many – although obviously not all - of our protocols, our research articles, and book reviews are about how to develop productive “professional learning communities,” or “Critical Friends Groups;” I would like to include more about how teachers can change their actual classroom teaching practices. This article attempts to begin to do that, to expand the discourse, and to create a sample protocol that will involve a skill that teachers could work to develop. And I invite you Connections’ readers to submit your articles and/or protocols about how to help teachers make changes in specific classroom practices.

In that landmark article of 1998, Black and William defined “formative assessment” as: “all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities.” In their meta-analysis of more than 4,000 research studies over the past 40 years – “All of these studies show that innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains...for age groups ranging from 5-year-olds to university undergraduates, across several school subjects, and over several countries.” And they go on to point out that – “Many of these studies arrive at another important conclusion: that improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall.” It is essential here, to point out, that the kind of formative assessment being referred to here is that short-and medium-cycle formative assessment in which students receive the feedback with in minutes, or hours, or at least days. Whereas in contrast, there is no evidence standard kinds of assessments, that take weeks or months for students to know the results, achieve any increase in student achievement.

In a more recent article by one of the authors of the original Kappan piece, Dylan William, **“Changing Classroom Practice”** in the December 2007/January 2008 issue of Educational Leadership, five non-negotiable components or key strategies of an effective formative assessment system were described:

- 1) “clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success of students;

- 2) engineer effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks;
- 3) provide feedback that moves learners forward;
- 4) activate students as the owners of their own learning; and
- 5) encourage students to be instructional resources for one another.”

In their most recent article – **“Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment”** – in the January 2009 issue of the journal *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, Black and William together simplify this, noting that there are three key processes in learning and teaching – “establishing where the learners are in their learning, where they are going, and what needs to be done to get them there.” The last two strategies are particularly important as they involve engaging students in their own self-assessments and learning activities, including collaborative learning, reciprocal teaching, metacognition, motivation, interest, and attribution. The role of the teacher then becomes one of providing useful feedback to students, and promoting meaningful discourse, teacher-to-student and student-to-student, which can become quite complex when the discourse involves a whole class of students’ input to a problem they are seeking to solve, rather than dialogue with a single student.

Two examples from Black and William show the crucial nature of the teacher’s role in discourse. In the first, six year-olds drawing pictures of a daffodil are asked, “What is this flower called?” – and one response is “I think it is Betty.” Here the teacher has to decide whether to use the opportunity to discuss the different ways in which “is called” may be used as it will potentially move the students psychological development further than a simple response – “No, it’s called a daffodil.” In the second example, students are asked to explain “infinity” and one of the first to respond is a boy who has behavioral problems for which he is receiving special counseling – “I think it’s the back of a Cream of Wheat box.” – to which the teacher immediately responds – “Don’t be silly, Billy.” In a later discussion with his counselor, Billy explains how there was a picture on the back of the box that showed a man holding a box, and this picture showed a man holding the same box, and that picture showed a man holding the same box, with pictures getting smaller and smaller – approaching infinity perhaps. Here, if the teacher had asked Billy to explain what he meant, the explanation would have been quite appropriate, underscoring the importance of teacher-student discourse or dialogue, which underscores what Black and William state about the complexity of teacher’s actions: “In formulating effective feedback the teacher has to make decisions on numerous occasions, often with little time for reflective analysis before making a commitment. The two steps involved, the diagnostic in interpreting the student contribution in terms of what it reveals about the student’s thinking and motivation, and the prognostic in choosing the optimum response: both involve complex decisions, often to be taken with only a few seconds available.”

William in his article on **“Changing Classroom Practice”** goes on to describe, therefore, what he believes to be the most effective, practical method for changing day-to-day classroom practice - namely creating groups of teachers into “teacher learning communities” (TLCs, groups of teachers only, specifically those engaged in classrooms teaching students, not a more all encompassing “professional learning community”). He recommends that these groups – run for at least two years, start with volunteers who have the same basic assignment, are building-based, meet at least monthly for at least an hour and fifteen minutes, have 8-10 members, and have a facilitator.

Sound familiar? – like a “Critical Friends Group”? – expecting teachers to make detailed, modest, individual action plans about things they want to change, to improve with their students in their classrooms. Some examples of such plans might include:

- improve my wait-time/think-time;
- change the grading system to be a standards-based, color-coded, comment-only system;
- change the way I use peer assessments; or
- have students take more ownership of the quality of their work.

Thus, a more nuanced definition of “formative assessment” is offered by Black and William: “Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited.”

To become an integral part of the instructional process, teachers will need to: 1) use assessments as sources of information both for themselves and their students, 2) follow the results of the assessments with corrective instruction, and 3) give students second chances to demonstrate success with a later assessment that follows soon after the corrective instruction. All of which leads to the following **protocol** I suggest we who are NSRF National Facilitators begin to try with our teachers in our CFGs.

“Ticket to Leave” (or “Exit Ticket”) Protocol - Changing Classroom Practice Using a Formative Assessment

Goal – To provide teachers with the opportunity to practice modifying their teaching practice, and receive feedback from colleagues, based on the use of a simple formative assessment

Procedures – [Note: to be done in 2 phases – first, teachers decide on the formative assessment to use (see examples below) in their classrooms, and second, teachers practice modifying their teaching based on their students’ responses on the formative assessment. The student responses are shared with a group of teacher colleagues - a CFG - who offer suggestions for modifying classroom teaching practices. Can be done in an hour depending on how many teachers present in their small groups]

1) Teachers use a “Ticket to Leave” by having students write their name on one side of a 5 x 8 index card, and write a brief statement or summary of what they just learned in class, or a solution to a problem given, or a response to a question about what was just taught. Examples:

“name one important thing you learned in class today”

“ give at least one reason why _____”

“write a question about something that has left you puzzled”

“read this problem and write what unit you will use in the answer”

“read these three sentences and decide which form of (there, their, they’re) to use”

Students hand these to the teacher as they leave or “exit.” The teacher then collects and reviews them, and possibly sorts them into groups (i.e. students who have not yet mastered the skill, stu-

dents who are ready to apply the skill, and students who are ready to go ahead or to go deeper), and makes decisions about what adjustments to make in their teaching the next day.

2) These student response cards are brought to a CFG. Breaking into small groups of 3-5 people, one teacher in each small group begins by sharing his student responses, explaining what he intends to do to modify his classroom teaching in light of these responses on the formative assessment. - OR - If the teacher has already done some “corrective instruction,” he describes the teaching modification he tried, and discusses the effectiveness of this modification, noting if it resulted in any change in the student or students’ understanding of that which was being taught, or the skill being developed or practiced.

3) The teacher then poses a focusing question about what she might do next. Participants in the small group first ask clarifying questions, then discuss among themselves possible next steps in modifying instruction that the teacher might take, while she turns around, listening-in and taking notes. Then she returns to the group to share how the experience went, and what was learned.

4) This process (steps 2 and 3 above) is repeated, time permitting, for each teacher in the small group.

Debrief the process



NSRF Protocols and World Café In Kid-Friendly Language

by Dan and Jillian Fowler, Washington County Elementary Schools, MD

and presented at the 2009 "Fall Forum" of the Coalition of Essential Schools

Essential Question: How can structured conversations strengthen equity of participation and learning in elementary classrooms?

National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) Protocols
Modified for Use in Elementary Classrooms

NSRF Protocols

Microlab

Structured discussion: best used to build equity and listening skills. Helps build understanding of a concept from basic to higher-order

Possible Classroom Uses

- Literature discussion
- Getting-to-know you activities
- Math and science warm-ups

Primary Modifications

- Best taught by using one question when introducing the protocol (beginning of school year), then building to two and three questions once stamina increases.
- Use numbered/colored popsicle sticks to help students understand the order in which they will be talking (color-code questions with sticks for visualization).

Intermediate Modifications

- Before each turn during discussion, identify students who will speak by having them raise their hands.
- Have students share their discussion with the class in between questions to keep students engaged.

4 A's Math

Problem-solving text based discussion; best used to analyze word problems and maximize the students' ability to supply a full defense of thoughts

- Analyze
- Agree
- Answer
- Argue

Possible Classroom Uses

- Word problem solving
- Vocabulary understanding

Primary Modifications

- "Analyze" for younger students should be a list of vocabulary words they notice in the problem.
- Break apart each step by using questions under the "A words". Example: Analyze- What words in the problem are important?"
- Answer should simply be the answer to the problem.
- Students will need instruction on how to use the words agree and argue prior to beginning the protocol.

Intermediate Modifications

- "Analyze" for older students should include a list of vocabulary and important numbers from the problem as well as any computations they may need to solve the problem.

4 A's Reading

Text-based discussion; best used with a non-fiction text.

- Agree
- Argue
- Assume
- Aspire

Possible Classroom Uses

- Identify an author's purpose
- Identify an author's point of view.
- Model persuasive writing

Primary Modifications

- Use a section of the text.
- Break apart each step by using questions under the "A words". Example: Assume- What do you think the author knows a lot about?"
- You may want to begin with just one "A" and then build on each one more each time you use the protocol to build understanding.
- Have students work on one "A" at a time. Reduce the amount of time spent on each "A".

Intermediate Modifications

- Use a full text
- Use each "A" word within a question. Example: What do you assume the author knows a lot about?"
- Give students one set amount of time for all four "A's". This allows them to spend more time on one "A" if needed.

World Café*

Open-discussion based protocol; best used to promote equity and gain of multiple understandings

Possible Classroom Uses

- Literature discussion
- Solving world problems in Math
- Discussion of concepts in Science

Primary Modifications

- Hand out necklaces that identify the host of the table.
- Allow students to also draw and label pictures.
- Have chairs set up for each group so that when switching, students can easily see which group needs more members.
- Use 2 questions that build higher order thinking and real world connections.

Intermediate Modifications

- Students number themselves within their groups and the teacher assigns a specific number to be the host.
- Use a statement for the first round to bring in a variety of knowledge of the content. Use a question for the second round to make a real world connection.

Tea Party

Pre-reading text-based discussion protocol; best used to introduce new readings

Possible Classroom Uses

- Predicting skills
- Drawing conclusions
- Inferring
- Warm-ups in all subject areas

Primary Modifications

- Supply a phrase or sentence for each student.
- Reduce time of discussion to keep students focused.
- Supply a question students should use to help make meaning of their supplied texts.
Example: Why might the author have written this text?

Intermediate Modifications

- Supply a sentence or two for each student.
- Increase time of discussion to encourage deep discussion.
- Allow students to freely make meaning of their supplied texts.

Chalk Talk

Written conversation amongst an entire class; best used to share individual thoughts and make connections to other readers.

Possible Classroom Uses

- Discussion of character traits
- Personal reading dialogue
- Compare/contrast multiple character (reading) or objects (science), etc.
- Fast finisher discussion
- Morning meeting/ message

Primary Modifications

- Use 4-6 different charts with different topics or questions that students can move around to. This keeps students moving and thinking.
- Make 2 copies of each chart and split the class into two groups to manage writing space and number of students in each area.

Intermediate Modifications

Split students into 4 to 6 groups with one question to answer to help build deeper discussion.

Text Rendering Reading

Text-based discussion; best used to construct meaning of a text.

Possible Classroom Uses

- Identify main idea
- Identify mood
- Identify tone
- Identify author's language

Primary Modifications

- A lesson will need to be taught prior to protocol to identify the difference between words (one word), phrases (two to four words together), and sentences (includes many words together with punctuation at the end and uppercase letter at the beginning).
- Use a section or two of text.
- Give students a chart to write in to keep them focused on that purpose.
- In the final part of the protocol, compile words, phrases, and sentences as a whole group.

Intermediate Modifications

- Use a full text.
- Have students highlight or record multiple words, phrases, and sentences and then narrow their selections down to the most meaningful one of each.
- In the final part of the protocol, have students work in small groups to compile words, phrases, and sentences and then bring those lists to be combined as a class.

Writing Rendering

Text-based protocol; best used to peer edit writing.

Possible Classroom Uses

- Identify good uses of language in writing, e.g. alliteration
- Identify new vocabulary in writing
- Identify good uses of grammar in writing

Primary Modifications

- Have students highlight one word, phrase, and sentence.
- Give students a chart that includes a section for the word, phrase, and sentence chosen and a section for why they chose each of them.
- In the final part of the protocol, compile words, phrases, and sentences as a class.

Intermediate Modifications

- Have students highlight multiple words, phrases, and sentences.
- Use post-it notes to explain students' highlighted choices.
- In the final part of the protocol, have students work in small groups to compile words, phrases, and sentences and then bring those lists to be combined as a class.

The following are modifications made in directions given to students for each protocol:

Microlab

1. Read Question #1 and think about how you might answer it.
2. Person #1 tells their team members their answer.
3. Person #2 tells their team members their answer.
4. Person #3 tells their team members their answer.
5. Read Question #1 and think about how you might answer it.
6. Person #2 tells their team members their answer.
7. Person #3 tells their team members their answer.
8. Person #1 tells their team members their answer.
9. Read Question #1 and think about how you might answer it.
10. Person #3 tells their team members their answer.
11. Person #1 tells their team members their answer.
12. Person #2 tells their team members their answer.

4 A's (Reading)

1. Read and think about the question.
2. Read the text by yourself, with a partner, or with a group.
3. Write down what you assume (believe) the author is trying to say.
4. Write down what you agree with what the author has said.
5. Write down what you argue with what the author has said.

6. Write down what you aspire to do (want to do) after reading this text.
7. Answer the question by using your 4 A's.

4 A's (Math)

1. Read and think about the question.
2. Analyze- Write down words that may help you answer the question.
3. Agree- Write down how your group agrees to the question.
4. Answer- Answer the question with your group.
5. Argue- Argue, or defend why your answer is correct.

Text Rendering

1. Read the question.
2. Read the text by yourself, with a partner, or with a group.
3. Highlight a word that might help you answer the question.
4. Highlight a phrase that might help you answer the question.
5. Highlight a sentence that might help you answer the question.
6. Meet with your group and collect your words, phrases, and sentences.
7. Answer the question with your group by using your words, phrases, and sentences.

World Café

1. Read the first statement or question and think about what it means to you.
2. Discuss the statement or question as a group.
3. As a group, write down everything that the statement or question makes you think of.
4. Rotate to a new table (the host always stays at the same table).
5. The host shares ideas they have just discussed.
6. As a group, add, change, or make connections to the previous group's work.
7. Rotate to a new table (New Host)
8. Read the second question and think about what it means to you.
9. Discuss the question as a group.
10. As a group, write down everything that the question makes you think of.
11. Rotate to a new table (the host stays at the same table).
12. The host shares ideas they have just discussed.
13. As a group, add, change, or make connections to the previous group's work.

Chalk Talk

1. Read and think about the statement.
 1. Silently add any thoughts, comments, or ideas.
- *** You may comment on other ideas by drawing an arrow to connect your idea.

Text Rendering

Focus Question: What language does the author use to set the mood of the text?

Word

Page Number

Mood that it creates

How?

Phrase

Page Number

Mood that it creates

How?

Sentence

Page Number

Mood that it creates

How?

A simple artifact for the discussion is a piece of paper divided into four boxes:

North Quadrant: Agree. How are your thoughts and the author's thoughts the same?

East Quadrant: Aspire. What does the author want you to do after reading this text?

South Quadrant: Argue. How are your thoughts and the author's thoughts different?

Here is a second taxonomy for the piece of paper divided into four boxes:

West Quadrant: Assume. What does the author seem to know a lot about?

North Quadrant: Analyze. What words are important to solving the problem?

East Quadrant: Argue. Defend why your answer is correct.

South Quadrant: Answer. What is the correct answer to the problem?

West Quadrant: Agree. How does your group agree to solve the problem?

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Protocols in Practice: Windows and Mirrors

*(adapted by Joe Greenberg and Dave Lehman
from the work of Emily Style, Co-Director, National SEED Project
"Inclusiveness in the Curriculum," Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA)*

"Windows and Mirrors" - an introductory inclusion activity –
Introduction –

Every Learning Organization deserves to view each member as fully as possible. Each of us has the possibility of becoming a "mirror" to the others – to reflect their own experience back, upon occasion, thus validating our inter-relatedness. But we must also insist upon the fresh air of "windows" in order to validate and celebrate the unique offerings that each of us brings to the whole.

The Activity –

From the pile of cards* on the table, choose a photograph of a person and their quote that interests you, that speaks to you, that has personal meaning.

In what way(s) is it a "window" through which you receive insight that you admire in another person, and in what way(s) is it a "mirror" reflecting back to you something you believe to be true about yourself, something that you value and try to emulate.

Share this with the others in your group, first giving the name of the person portrayed in your card, then reading their quote, and your "window" and "mirror."

Discussion –

How could the concept of "windows" and "mirrors" serve you as a Facilitator with any Learning Organization?

[*Cards are from the series "Americans who Tell the Truth" by Robert Shetterly – for information and curriculum

go to www.americanswhotellthetruth.org.]