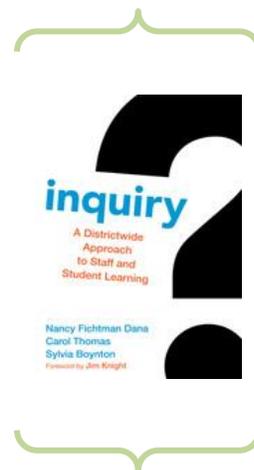


From the Director:

In this current wave of “school reform,” our poorest children’s education consists of being drilled in facts, learning rules and following directions with the explicit intent of raising test scores. Maybe more than ever, educators need tools to raise student achievement by developing critical thinking skills, fostering creativity and encouraging reflective practice. In conveying the power of CFGs to those unfamiliar with the practice, it can help to reference schools that have successfully used them to help create a positive school culture of high achievement.

A good example is illustrated in the book “District-Wide Professional Development: An Inquiry Approach” by Nancy Fichtman Dana, Carol Thomas and Sylvia Boynton. By using the inquiry model of learning, the educators in Pinellas County School District brought out their student’s passions by showing them how to target their interests, collect and analyze data to inform their questions and share out the results. Just as importantly the central office administration sent out a very clear message to all students, teachers, principals and other administrators—learning is the most important job of everyone in the school district. As such, all educators were required to participate in inquiry themselves through ongoing, job-embedded professional development, (CFGs). The result? A school culture where all students and staff members are dedicated to achieving high levels of learning by continually improving their performance.



Questions/Comments Contact Michele Mattoon at Michele@nsrfharmony.org

ARTICLE: CFG’S IMPLICATIONS FOR PROJECT BASED LEARNING BY AL SUMMER

Al Summer has been working in education for 40 years. He is an instructional coach for Region 8 ESC who provides follow up coaching to teachers who were trained in project based learning this past summer under a generous grant from Talent Initiative. Previously, he taught middle school science for 28 years in a rural district in Ohio.

We were in our fourth day of training being led by members of NSRF when, out of the blue, one of our group said, “every meeting should be run like this!” Although to a casual observer that statement may have seemed a

revelation, to those of us in the training it was a rather matter of fact remark. It could have come from any one of us.

We were a group of instructional coaches, trained in Project Based Learning (PBL) and charged with working with

teachers throughout the coming school year. We had gotten a “taste” of critical friends on the third day of PBL training when we were involved in a protocol they called “Critical Friends.” This protocol was actually a slightly

modified Tuning protocol- something I later determined. But we were each wondering just how the five-day training from NSRF would enhance our coaching capabilities. We are now a Critical Friends Group of coaches, staying together to further extend the influence we have received from the critical friends' training.

Culture and Climate. In our training, it was about noon on the second day when I exclaimed, "This is what I have been waiting for -- this is the stuff that will help us in our PBL work!" Later in the day, one of the NSRF trainers talked about my remark and the first day and a half of training. He explained that the protocols they were getting into would not have worked well had the proper climate not been first created. And, of course, he was correct. We had learned fundamentals -- good listening, clarification, watching air time -- and, above all, we had built the kind of trust necessary to go deeper into the work that would help us learn how to create a Critical Friends Group. This lesson was called up on a number of occasions in my work with the teachers and principals in their schools. Although most principals were not trying to create a Critical Friends Group of their faculty and most teachers were not trying to create a critical

friends group of their classes, the same climate that must exist for the success of Critical Friends must exist for a faculty to operate at its optimal level and for a classroom to be effective with peer feedback and peer evaluation.

Early in the school year, a high school principal told me that the adults in the school were not doing well in their discussion circles. The culture of the group had not gotten to the place it needed to be. I also had several teachers tell me that they had originally planned on initiating their first PBL project at the beginning of the school year but were postponing the project because they needed to do some work on the culture and climate of their classroom.

A faculty, a class, almost any group you care to mention is just like our group of instructional coaches- a climate of trust and responsibility must be created before the group can function effectively. Just as our NSRF trainers would have been remiss to move into the more involved protocols of CFG with us before making sure the climate was conducive, a teacher cannot expect success with the all-important 21st century skills in her classroom unless the climate is right. And each class is made up of different students --

which means that the work a teacher must do to create that climate may vary depending on the make-up of the class.

21st Century Skills. Project Based Learning focuses on teaching important content and 21st Century Skills through engaging projects in which the students have significant voice and choice and take a major role in -- and responsibility for -- their learning. As the students take on more and more responsibility, the teacher's work can actually be lessened as the feedback, questioning, and providing answers come more from other students and less from the teacher. The teacher truly moves from being the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. However, to be successful in the 21st century skills like collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, students must learn how to do them effectively. Working in a group and doing a lot of talking is not necessarily collaboration. Students must practice and learn how to ask clarifying and probing questions, distinguish between observations and assumptions, learn effective ways to select team members, analyze other students' work and provide feedback, and learn how to inquire deeply -- all things that CFG protocols can be helpful with. In Project Based Learning, students

create products of their learning which they present to authentic audiences. The ability to communicate comfortably and effectively with significant adults is another characteristic that can be honed through CFG protocols. As these “end” products are developed, the students themselves must engage in reflective dialogue and collaborative work. The students then decide what

parts of their work are good, what parts need improvement, and set about to make those improvements.

Although a classroom of students may not become a Critical Friends Group in the truest sense, their learning will be more effectively facilitated if their classroom displays the characteristics of a critical friends group. And, no longer will it be the adults analyzing student work and discussing

ways to improve it, the students themselves will take on part of that responsibility and be able to do it effectively -- thanks to lessons learned from CFG tenets and protocols.

Questions/Comments?
Contact Al Summer at asummers@r8esc.k12.in.us

Staff changes at NSRF

This issue of Connections is one of the last responsibilities of Sierah Moore, our Office Manager since 2009. Sierah's leaving NSRF to return to her hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana for new opportunities. We will miss her professional attitude, her consistent support and her smiling face.

Joining our team is Luci Englert McKean, our new Special Projects Manager. Luci's background is in marketing and publications, and she was the co-curator of TEDxBloomington in May. Look for a newly-reorganized website and more benefits to membership in NSRF, coming soon!

Our Apologies

We'd like to apologize again for the "reply all" problem on November 2 when we migrated our email list from one service provider to another. Isn't it amazing how much email can be generated by accident in an hour? If you're reading this, know that we **truly** appreciate your "hanging in there" with us through that complication, and we have taken steps so that problem never arises again! If you know of any friends who unsubscribed, but who might be missing us, please let them know that the problem is solved and we'd love to have them back in the family of subscribers.