Time for a refresher, anyone?

“That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you’ve understood all your life, but in a new way.”

— Doris Lessing (1919-2013)
British author

Maybe you’re an experienced CFG coach or a school administrator wonder how to make your CFG work more effective after it’s been in place for more than a year. So, let’s talk.

I’d like to draw your attention to our Experienced Coaches’ Trainings, and other links related to the many training and facilitation options we offer beyond our standard five-day Critical Friends Group® New Coaches’ Training.

Many years ago, when I first became a National Facilitator for NSRF, we began to offer Experienced Coaches’ trainings. These offerings are really training and refresher courses wrapped up into one neat package. Depending on the goals and desires of the organization hosting the training, there are many options for how new material can be modeled. Experienced Coaches Trainings can provide a three-day, deep-dive into areas such as Peer Observation, Facilitation Skills, Leadership, Equity, Inquiry, or Strategic Planning. Or, if your schedule is tighter and/or this training needs to tie into a larger professional development event, we can arrange for a one- or two-day refresher, obviously with a narrower scope.

In planning for any Experienced Coaches’ Training, we ask the organizer planning the training: “What’s working well? What challenges are being encountered with this work? What strategies might be helpful in dealing with these challenges?”

Often, one of the biggest challenges schools and districts face a year or more after having a group of CFG coaches trained is flagging interest from their faculty: without care, CFG meetings and protocol use can begin to feel repetitive, over-used and lacking in the dynamic group energy it once had. Experienced Coaches’ Trainings or Refreshers provide certified coaches the ongoing support they need to extend their skills, add to their tool belt and recharge their batteries.

Some of the options include:

1. Learning new protocols or activities. Since several standard protocols work very reliably, many coaches find themselves using a few over and over again. After a year or two, members of the group may feel inclined to sigh at seeing yet another Tuning Protocol or Dilemma Consultancy Protocol on the agenda. You may be feeling a bit like a “one-trick pony.”

Sometimes, a group member wants to present a project or situation that

What’s working well?

What challenges are being encountered with this work?

What strategies might be helpful in dealing with these challenges?
doesn’t seem to be a good fit for any of a coach’s “go to” protocols. Experienced Coaches’ Training can specifically address the needs of that particular coach (or school) so that the coaches leave with a variety of new activities and protocols to try. Or maybe your school is considering working on specific issues like equity or inquiry. Learning new activities and protocols with an eye to how your coaches can support a larger agenda can go a long way to nurture these kinds of initiatives. (See related story about the American Community Schools of Athens, and references to focusing on curriculum mapping on pages 12-15.)

2. Reconnect with colleagues in your CFG coaches’ group. Immediately after an on-site CFG Coaches’ Training, some schools and districts create one or more CFG groups just for their coaches, to keep the new cohort of coaches supported, or to integrate the new coaches with ones who’d been trained previously. Ideally, everyone who has been trained as CFG coaches meet monthly to help each other with facilitation or coaching challenges, to try new protocols and activities, and sometimes to plan protocol use for non-CFG meetings.

If your school has such a group, has it met recently, or regularly? And if not, an Experienced Coaches’ training can allow the coaches to dive once again into meaningful professional work over the course of a few days.

3. Get expert help with your specific challenges. NSRF’s National and International Facilitators are people who have actually “been there,” with years of CFG coaching experience under their belts. Part of their training includes maintaining one or more CFG groups, as well as training people from other schools to do the work. Many of them have experience in other geographic areas (even other countries!) as well as very different types of school settings. Any of these National Facilitators can offer suggestions that have helped other schools dealing with similar situations. And using our protocols, these National Facilitators can also help your group itself discover solutions that would fit your unique circumstances.

4. Provide clarity around “Where do we go from here?” Most schools who ask for Experienced Coaches’ Training have been doing CFG work within active communities for three to five years and are uncertain how to keep them productive as their school changes over time. They also might be struggling with questions like, “How can we best train others to fill vacant coaches’ positions?” or “Should we now require everyone on staff to be in a CFG community?”

NSRF-certified National Facilitators can provide neutral expertise to give you options based on your particular school’s wants and needs.

5. Tighten up sloppy behavior. Let’s face it, it’s easy to backslide into old habits of breaking protocol by interrupting one another, not being careful with timing, not doing the steps in their proper order, or allowing certain individuals to overpower others in the group (just a few examples). Having a facilitator correctly model activities and protocols reminds others of the importance of following protocols with fidelity. (See related article on page 3.)

6. Showing ongoing support of your CFG communities and your Coaches. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is for the rest of the school to see their administrators visibly supporting CFG groups and coaches. If administrators demonstrate support of CFG work on a public level, the message received by your faculty, staff, and school community is that CFG work is a vital part of the school’s intention to continually improve.

Remember, NSRF has over two hundred protocols and activities already on our website and we continue to add to that number routinely. If your school hasn’t had formal CFG coaches’ training in the past couple of years, chances are that you have not yet worked with any of our new materials. What better way to become familiar with our new offerings than to once again submerge yourself in the work you love, and know to be so effective?
Leading protocols with fidelity

Perspectives from NSRF National Facilitator Terry Daugherty and some of the new CFG Coaches he’s recently trained. You may contact him at terry.daugherty.nsr@gmail.com

Updated protocols available to members, and the Critical Friends Group® Coaches’ Handbook used in CFG Coaches’ Trainings are big steps up from the original protocols and the Resource Book previously used in trainings. In the new Handbook, each protocol, activity, and text appears in a logical order, divided into sections by its use. The coach’s guide in the back of the book offers tools around protocol usage, and around creating and sustaining a CFG community. The fact that every protocol is broken down into fine, granular steps gives coaches clearer directions on administering the protocol, increasing the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Recently, I led some trainings that included classroom coaches (peer support specialists), and the power of these changes became manifest. These classroom coaches have impressive resumés of training and have acquired useful skills. Most had already been using some type of protocols in their work with classroom teachers, so their inclusion in this training proved ... interesting for all of us.

Early in new coaches’ training, we introduce the Microlabs Protocol, a simple and disciplined way to discuss topics with equity of voice and active listening. Afterwards, we debrief, asking participants to first write what they want to remember about the use of this protocol, then proceeding with a shared debrief. Particularly with this first protocol learned in a training, we model the debrief carefully in order to set the expectations and reveal the importance of debriefing. Because this training cohort expressed a familiarity with protocols, I was pleased that they did not seem impatient—in fact, they seemed to debrief deeply.

The training progressed, and some more participants noted that they had already used these protocols, but they were willing to “go with the flow” and not insist on agenda changes. As always in training, each protocol was shared with attention to detail, transparent discussion around facilitation, and a debrief session. When participants began to practice facilitating protocols on their own, I noticed that their facilitation included clear instructions and were rich with powerful debriefs.

Reflections from the group revealed their shifting opinion about use of protocols. They were saying “By doing the protocols with fidelity, I have a clearer view that I did not have before.” Several had used the term “fidelity,” meaning that they were now careful to follow every step, not skipping over or speeding through some parts that weren’t previously valued by them. They also recognized the debrief as a defining moment for advancing thinking around what a given protocol was trying to accomplish.

Talking further with these participants, they said that they previously weren’t always clear what protocols were supposed to accomplish. In fact, their experience reminded me of the childhood game Telephone. Staff learned to use a protocol from someone who learned it from someone else, who learned it from someone else, who may or may not have been certified to teach protocols. Slowly, the usefulness and fidelity of any given protocol diminished and the reason to use protocols got lost in the whirl of educational noise.

With our CFG coaches’ training, these classroom coaches now felt they both had clear expectations of what the protocols were supposed to accomplish and the knowledge of when to use them. This gave them a new excitement about using these tools in their work. Their daily Reflections indicated this change: “I now see the power of using a Tuning Protocol in my work with teachers. I want to use this as soon as possible with some of my teachers, to help them work on improving some of the lessons they struggle using.”

We are reminded that we can learn something new about a protocol every time we use it or watch someone else facilitate it. Many facilitators offer instructions like these when participants have experience with protocols:

“Trust the process. Be true to the protocol and to the presenter’s focusing question. Since the personality, background, and skills of every NSRF National Facilitator vary, the way everyone delivers and facilitates the protocols necessarily varies somewhat. All current NSRF National Facilitators know how to lead the protocols properly, so learn from this opportunity to watch a certified pro lead these protocols the way they were meant to be led, and see what you learn from our transparency around facilitation.”

The process of creating a trusting group, developing and holding agreements that allow tough work to be done, the selection of the right protocol to use and then doing so with fidelity are all powerful learning experiences for everyone. Participants discover that CFG work—not just individual protocols—can be a powerful tool for change when applied to people intent upon improving work in the classroom.

It’s also a good idea to refresh one’s coaches’ training if one learned about protocols long ago. NSRF continues to evolve and “tune” our work: new steps or language that improve a protocol’s success will continue to be added to existing and new protocols and activities, and then added to our trainings, be they for new or experienced coaches, or administrators. There will always be new learnings and new insights about familiar tools—tools that ultimately will improve staff’s success and thus help students improve their learning.
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).
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?

A few seats are still available this summer in open trainings* at our “home base” in Bloomington, Indiana.

(*open to any individual or small group)

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

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

The Transitions Activity saved my life and reinvigorated my passion for teaching!

True story. I am a 16-year education veteran who has been teaching in the same classroom for the last 13 years. To say that I had grown “comfortable” with my environment and my teaching lessons over these years would be accurate. It’s not that I haven’t worked at tweaking lessons and changing things up from time to time and it’s not like I haven’t ever tried anything new, but I had been feeling that it was time for a real change. Then, last summer out of the blue, one of our administrators invited me to participate in a CFG Coaches’ Training. I really had no idea what this was about, but the invitation came from a person I admire and respect and so I said “sure, why not?”

The five days I spent with my CFG Coaches community were some of the most valuable days I have ever spent in any professional learning environment. I came away from that experience knowing that I had found the answer to the real change I had been looking for.

Transitioning into Transitions  I have always made it a practice to greet students at my door and say “hello” before each class period. I teach grades 6–7–8 and middle schoolers (in my humble opinion) are some of the most challenging and yet fun kids to be around. This year, one of my goals was to not only build better relationships between myself and my students, but I also wanted to find a way to help them build better relationships with each other. So, after doing the Critical Friends Group training last summer, I thought one of the first things I could incorporate into my classes was the Transitions Activity.

Right from the beginning, I had my students come into my newly redesigned room (a tech lab) and make a circle around the center of the room. I shared with them how Transitions works and we began. Oh my goodness! BINGO! I had no idea what a difference these five minutes would make. Students LOVE it! They love to lead it. They won’t let me start class without doing it. They give me high fives when they enter my room and they are excited to come to class. I have learned so much more about my students that has allowed me to really see them and understand where they are coming from, both on good days and on not-so-good days. Transitions has truly reinvigorated my passion for teaching!

The Motivation...Seventh graders as Critical Friends Groups? Huh?  As I said, when I finished the Critical Friends Group training last summer, I felt truly invigorated and excited about the coming school year. You see, in addition to teaching several technology classes at Highlander Way Middle School, I had been told that I was scheduled to teach four sections of Communication Arts. I was a little worried about what I would do for that class. There is no set curriculum, but I was given the flexibility to create a curriculum as long as it would fall under the heading of “Communication.” I have a speech and debate background and I thought maybe I could work through those topics with the kids.

Something did not settle with me though. I wanted my class to be different. I didn’t want the kids to come to class and think “this is just like any other class.” That is when I decided to create a Critical Friends Group with each of the Communication Arts classes.

I knew it would be a bit unorthodox for kids to work with protocols and create a Critical Friends Group, but it turned out even better than I had expected. I had two classes (one section had 18 students and the second one had 12 students) for a total of 42 days. Each class period lasted 48 minutes. When I looked at the sample agendas listed in the back of the Critical Friends Group Coaches’ Handbook for starting a Critical Friends Group community, I knew I could make this work. It turns out that 7th graders really found value in going through this process as well. In fact, it turned out so well that I am doing the same thing this quarter with two more sections of Communication Arts students.

The Process  It has been said that necessity is the mother of all invention. Because I teach what are called “Encore” classes, I get all new students every nine weeks, and therefore, my instructional time with students is brief (just 45 days.) Some quarters actually have fewer than 45 days and during the wintertime here in Michigan we...
can pretty much count on having at least a few snow days where school is closed. That means that I have to be pretty flexible with lesson planning. As a result, I have always prepared lessons from a “backward design” type of philosophy. I typically look at the calendar to find the end of the quarter, then plot where I need students to be by that time, and then simply organize and plan backwards to the first day. I started my planning for this Communication Arts class in the same way.

By the end of the quarter I wanted students to have fully experienced the protocols, communications skills, and camaraderie that I felt going through my CFG coaches’ training. Most importantly, I wanted students to have developed a strong connection with each other so that in their future they might look to these peers for help with a dilemma or to share their personal success stories. Again, I referred to the sample agendas in the Coaches Handbook and began looking for protocols that I felt would be applicable and work well with seventh graders. I was concerned at first that perhaps many of the protocols would be boring for them or above these students. It turns out, I was wrong about that.

**We Begin** I started classes the way I normally would. On the first few days, there are always general “housekeeping” things to be done, but I did begin Transitions on the second day of class. Students really took to the idea that we would start each day with this protocol. I tweaked it a bit to allow students the flexibility to be creative with the way we ran it. Students volunteered to lead each day and the leader got to decide if we were doing what I called “formal or informal” Transitions. If they chose formal, we adhered strictly to the rules of the protocol. If they chose to go the informal route, then they picked a topic for that day, or we had general conversation where students either shared something good that was happening in their lives, or get something off of their chest that they wanted to put behind them.

In either case, only one person was allowed to speak at a time and still they did not have to speak if they did not want to. I now run this activity in all of my classes and it is amazing to me how much students are willing to share and how much they look forward to it. One caution I would suggest is to remind students of the agreements they set using the Setting Agreements Activity (which I keep posted throughout the class time). At times, I will admit, students just want to talk. When I sense that students are in that type of mood, I will generally let them run with it. Even then though, I make sure someone is facilitating the conversation.

The Setting Agreements Activity was a great way to build a class social contract; students liked that they were the ones deciding what the behavior expectations would be for class. I have a smartboard in my classroom and I improvised by having students write their ideas there instead of flip chart paper. Once they shared their first ideas out with the entire group, then they transferred them to the flip chart so we could keep it posted.

One of the next protocols I facilitated was the Compass Points Activity. Students really liked this activity. Before class began I prepared large Post-It chart papers on four tables in the room. I had already written the four directions with a short descriptor as well.

Reading student reflections about this protocol were very interesting. One student said, “Knowing my compass point in the future will help me by knowing what MY work style is so I can make sure I’m paired with different types of styles. Working with the other styles will benefit people’s grades and will help me in other classes…Therefore I will know what kind of people I need to work with for success in the future.” Another said, “It would’ve been good to know everyone’s compass direction when we did the Rube Goldberg project in science. I was the only south and there were two northerners and one easterner. The two northerners wouldn’t ask about anyone else’s opinions or ideas before starting the project and we ended up with a bad grade.” I found that after doing this protocol students referred to it when telling me about other aspects of their lives. One student told that she is on a pom team with 23 girls and how difficult it is to get so many girls to all learn the same routine. She is one of the more veteran girls on the squad so it often falls on her to help coach some of the others. She told me that once she had gone through the “Compass Points” protocol and realized the different dominant styles that the girls had, it made it easier for her to work with them. I thought this was pretty insightful for a 7th grader.

I followed the Compass Points activity with Feedback Nightmares. Most students found this protocol to be valuable. Many of them had never really thought about feedback as being cool or warm. Through this activity, they began to see how it might be really helpful for someone to receive constructive feedback that may be cool even more so than just receiving warm feedback that has no meat to it.
I have a large rectangular rug in the middle of my classroom that worked great for marking the boundaries for each of the zones. Students really had a good time with this protocol to the extent that once I had run out of scenarios to ask their level of comfort, they began to add their own scenarios. One student wrote, “I learned that everyone has different levels of comfort when learning based on the Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger activity we did. . . . This might help me in the future as we work on developing the critical friends group. As human beings, we are meant to be social and that helps us learn about ourselves each day. Not everyone can learn as quickly as another, or not everyone is comfortable with certain activities.”

One protocol that turned out differently than I expected was the Tuning Protocol. I had students write a five-paragraph essay (choosing any one of the seven prompts I gave them) and this way I was able to incorporate more formal writing into the class as well. I asked for volunteers to have their work presented for Tuning.

At first, it was difficult to get a couple of volunteers, but amazingly after those two students went through the process, several others asked if we could do a Tuning for them. One of those students is autistic. I felt really good that he was willing to put forth his work and have his peers help him tune it. To me, that spoke volumes about the effectiveness of what we were doing.

The Dilemma Consultancy Protocol was somewhat difficult for the students. I think it was hard because they struggled with understanding what a true dilemma is. We talked about some scenarios that might actually exist in their lives and I thought they understood the concept of dilemmas, but when we did the protocol, I noticed that some of the kids really did not get it at all. They came up with dilemmas about washing the dishes or not washing the dishes. While I fully understand that, for a seventh grader, this may be a dilemma, it wasn’t exactly what I was hoping for. I think the next time I do this protocol, I may have to do a sort of “practice” run where I give them hypothetical dilemmas and then hopefully, they will be able to relate to something in their own lives that they can use.

Still, based on student reflections, I believe that they did get something out of participating in this protocol. One student wrote, “I felt nervous when I was sharing my dilemma. It was hard because I didn’t know if they would be any help. I felt good when my back was turned because they only said positives. After knowing they actually were trying to help my nerves went away. I finally made my decision after doing the Dilemma Consultancy Protocol.” This was a typical response from most of the students.

We also did a Chalk Talk Protocol. My students already are familiar with this type of activity as we do them in many classes. I loved watching them write their thoughts out silently onto the large papers at their tables. I included a teaching strategy called Gallery Walk so that they could rotate from table to table to add to the conversations being written at each station. It was interesting to watch their facial expressions as they read something that resonated with them personally and then wrote their response. I think I might do this protocol at the beginning of the term and then again at the end of the term next time to gauge how they are feeling. As I write this I am thinking that next time it might be good to keep these Chalk Talks posted throughout the quarter so they might become a living dialogue and an open ongoing conversation.

Final Thoughts... All in all, when I began the quarter and introduced the idea of Critical Friends Group communities with students, I really wasn’t sure how they would respond and whether or not they would feel as I did after completing my Coaches’ Training last summer. By the end of the quarter, I was convinced that students did feel a stronger connection with each other and, into the future, they will use what they learned during the class. I was also left feeling really good about how the quarter went and felt encouraged enough to do it again this quarter.

In retrospect, I think middle schoolers are at a perfect age group to learn these protocols and skills, although I can also see the value in it being done at the high school level as well. The thing about middle school students is that they tend to be pretty open about trying new things.

I am not truly certain whether (or not) these students feel closer to each other or whether they will actually turn to each other in their future, but I do feel confident that they know each other better and hopefully will remember the protocols as a helpful tool. It is also gratifying for me personally when students come back to visit me and see me in the halls and just want to say “hi” or share their news, good or even not-so-good. When this happens, it tells me that I was successful at building a better relationship with them.
In the spirit of “connections,” author Sherry Turkle begins the “Contents” page of Reclaiming Conversation with this connection to a quote from Henry David Thoreau – “I had three chairs in my house’ one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” Turkle uses this quote as the framework for the organization of her book into six sections – “The Case for Conversation, One Chair, Two Chairs, Three Chairs, The Path Forward, and A Fourth Chair.” To understand her use of this quote and the book’s organization, you have to visit Thoreau’s Walden (or the book’s alternate title – Life in the Woods). Published in 1854, you may well recall the detailed account of his two years, beginning in 1845, living in a cabin he constructed himself outside Concord, Massachusetts; his experiment in “essential living.” There he fed himself by the labor of his own hands, reading, writing, and making friends of beast, birds, and fish, and welcoming the occasional visitors from town. It is in section #6, “Visitors,” that Thoreau speaks of the three chairs, and continues to explain:

“When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economized the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another.... One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words. You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port.... My ‘best’ room, however, my withdrawing room, always ready for company, on whose carpet the sun rarely fell, was the pine wood behind my house.”

[Incidentally this is not the “fourth chair” of Turkle’s book; that is the age that looms ahead; of artificial intelligence where our conversations are with machines!]

It is in this spirit that Sherry Turkle counters our passions for technology and makes the case for face-to-face conversation, believing that conversation is the cornerstone for empathy as well as democracy. She believes it is conversation that sustains the best in education and in other fields of endeavor from business to the legal profession.

Turkle is a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and has spent the last 30 years studying the psychology of people’s relationships with technology. She has authored a trilogy of books on the subject beginning in 1997 with Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. Drawing on the brief descriptions of these books by Amazon, this first book is not about computers, but about people and how computers are causing us to reevaluate our identities in the age of the internet. She describes trends in computer design, in artificial intelligence (AI), and in people’s experiences of virtual environments that confirm a dramatic shift in our notions of self, other, machine, and world.

In 1984 she published the second book in this series, The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit, based largely on interviews with young children, college students, engineers, AI scientists, hackers, and personal computer owners, Turkel discovers a new way that people are thinking about human emotion, thought, memory, and understanding.

Then in 2012 the third book of the trilogy was published, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. Again based on hundreds of interviews, she describes new unsettling relationships between friends, lovers, parents, and children, and new instabilities in how we understand privacy, community, and intimacy, leading to a new solitude, confusing tweets and wall posts with authentic communication.

The latest, fourth book on the subject came in 2015. Sherry Turkle’s Reclaiming Conversation is thoroughly researched with extensive footnotes, not just citing her numerous references, but with useful explanations accompanying her referring to these resources, fully 48 two-column pages worth. And like her other works, much of her analysis is based on ex-
In solitude
we find ourselves;
we prepare ourselves
to come to conversations
with something to say
that is authentic, ours.
When we are secure in ourselves
we are able to listen to other people
and really hear
what they have to say.
And then in conversation
with other people
we become better at inner dialogue.

tensive interviews with young children, teenagers, college students, and adults.

There is so much here, I choose to share this lengthy quote to give you the essence of her plea for deep conversations among all of us, not at the total expense of the use of our technology, but to re-humanize us. Here is how she summarizes much of what she has to say about the “Power of Talk in a Digital Age:”

“We are being silenced by our technologies – in a way, ‘cured of talking.’ These silences – often in the presence of children – have led to a crisis of empathy that has diminished us at home, at work, and in public life. I’ve said that the remedy, most simply, is a talking cure. This book is my case for conversation.

“I begin my case by turning to someone many people think of – mistakenly – as a hermit who tried to get away from talk. In 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved to a cabin on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, to learn to live more ‘deliberately’ – away from the crush of random chatter. But the cabin furniture he chose to secure that ambition suggests no simple ‘retreat.’ … [His] three chairs plot the points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to the capacity for empathy and for self-reflection. In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversations with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue.

“Of course this virtuous circle is an ideal type, but taking that into account, it works. Solitude reinforces a secure sense of self, and with that the capacity for empathy. The conversations with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as, alone, we prepare to talk together, together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude.

“Technology disrupts this virtuous circle.

“The disruptions begin with solitude. Thoreau’s first chair. Recent research
shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts, even for a few minutes. In one experiment, people were asked to sit quietly – without a phone or a book – for fifteen minutes.

“At the start of the experiment, they were also asked if they would consider administering electroshocks to themselves if they became bored. They said absolutely not: no matter what, shocking themselves would be out of the questions. But after just six minutes alone, a good number of them were doing just that.

“These results are stunning, but in a way, not surprising. These days, we see that when people are alone at a stop sign or in the checkout line at the supermarket, they seem almost panicked and they reach for their phones. We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem technology should solve.

“And this is where the virtuous circle breaks down: afraid of being alone, we struggle to pay attention to ourselves. And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other. If we can’t find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others.

“Or you can work the circle the other way: we struggle to pay attention to each other, and what suffers is our ability to know ourselves.

“We face a flight from conversations that is also a flight from self-reflection, empathy, and mentorship – the virtues of Thoreau’s three chairs. But this flight is not inevitable. When the virtuous circle is broken, conversation cures.

“For there is good news. Despite the pull of our technology, we are resilient. For example, in only five days at a summer camp that bans all electronic devices, children show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people’s faces. In my own research at a device-free summer camp, I hear what this resiliency sounds like.

“At a nightly cabin chat, a group of fourteen-year-old boys talk about a recent three-day wilderness hike. One can imagine that not that many years ago the most exciting aspect of that hike might have been the idea of ‘roughing it’ or the beauty of unspoiled nature. These days, what makes the biggest impression is time without a phone, what one boy calls ‘time where you have nothing to do but think quietly and talk to our friends.’ Another boy uses the cabin chat to reflect on his new taste for silence: ‘Don’t people know that sometimes you can just look out the window of a car and see the world go by and it’s wonderful?’

“In closing I return to Walden Pond, this time with a quote from E. O. Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-winning professor and honorary curator in entomology of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Wilson offered a similar message in his introduction to The Future of Life – still timely, though written in 2002! The 13-page prologue is a letter ‘to Henry’ [Thoreau] and ends, “Affectionately, Edward.” Here Wilson states:

“You [Thoreau] brought me here. Our meeting could have just as well been a woodlot in Delaware, but here I am at the site of your cabin on the edge of Walden Pond. You [Thoreau] searched for essence at Walden and, whether successful in your own mind or not, you hit upon an ethic with a solid feel to it; nature is ours to explore forever; it is our crucible and refuge; it is our natural home; it is all these things. Save it, you said: in wildness is the preservation of the world....

“The race is now between the techno-scientific forces that are destroying the living environment and those that can be harnessed to save it. We are inside a bottleneck of overpopulation and wasteful consumption. If the race is won, humanity can emerge in far better condition than when it entered, and with most of the diversity of life still intact.... In order to pass through the bottleneck, a global land ethic is urgently needed. Not just any land ethic that might happen to enjoy agreeable sentiment, but one based on the best understanding of ourselves and the world around us that science and technology can provide. Surely the rest of life matters. Surely our stewardship is its only hope. We will be wise to listen carefully to the heart, then act with rational intention and all the tools we can gather and bring to bear.”

And I believe Sherry Turkle would agree; telling us to use our incredible technological tools for the greater good. Holding face-to-face deep conversations, listening closely to each other about these matters that are so important, not only to we Homo sapiens (“man–the wise!”), but to all life, acting with empathy and compassion!
Over the past five years at the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS) we have worked to create an environment of collaborative professional development with NSRF’s Critical Friends Group® work at its core. As co-coordinators of the initiative, we simultaneously studied the impact of the expanding CFG® work among faculty through our own Action Research. In this two-part series, we’d like to share some of the steps that we took, a few snippets from our findings, some setbacks that we built upon, and most importantly, the successes that our school celebrates.

ACS Athens is a student-centered international school serving not only American families but also the wider international community who live and work here in Athens, Greece. Founded in 1946, ACS Athens is part of a wider network of international schools throughout the world providing quality education. The school accepts students from junior kindergarten (JK) through 12th grade. All lessons are taught in English and the school embraces American educational philosophy. We are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and are authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to offer the IB Diploma Program.

Our faculty and administration are committed to implementing best practices, and so we have established what we call Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs), wholly based on Critical Friends Group work. Since their inception, these groups have become a driving force in professional development within this JK–12 International School in Athens.

The ACS community recently completed a four-year self-study through school-wide Action Research projects as part of the pioneering implementation of a freshly designed accreditation protocol through the Middle States Association, known as “Sustaining Excellence.” Our research focused on the CLC and its impact on the faculty and led us to identify three core beliefs that underlie why teachers feel that these meetings offer something unique:

1. the CFG processes used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth;
2. the diverse makeup of the groups generate a high level of creativity;
3. the focus on inquiry is key to successful problem solving.

For the past five years, CLCs have been developed at ACS Athens by teachers for teachers. Participation remains voluntary and 65% of our faculty have chosen to join a CLC group. The CLCs meet monthly in 80–90-minute sessions after school, holding time dedicated to professional devel-
These teachers choose CLCs rather than using that time to work on individual projects independently.

We have held four coaches’ trainings at the school and currently have a core group of 13 trained coaches who help co-facilitate the four CLC groups. (Our CLCs, which each have around fifteen participants with three coaches, work on a somewhat different model than traditional CFG groups coached by a single person.) While teachers frequently present classic CFG material, such as student work, instructional designs, and dilemmas, at ACS Athens teachers have also used the collective power of the CLC “think tank” to refine and improve their Action Research designs.

CLCs are a thriving and vital part of professional growth at our school and their impact has gone beyond the dedicated CLC time. As one of our trained coaches, Ginger Carlson, commented, “There is a cross-pollination of both ideas and the tools that are used and they have impacted faculty meetings, small groups, and classroom teaching.”

Lessons Learned:

So what factors have contributed to the successful growth of the CFG concept within our school? What lessons can we share with other teachers who seek to create thriving CFG communities?

First, if you hope to start CFG meetings in your school, find yourself an ally: a new idea is a fragile spark and as they say, “it takes one to light the candle and one to protect the flame.” Share the idea with a few more like-minded people. Start it on your own time because it brings joy and reinvigorates your teaching. (It’s a good excuse to spend time with the colleagues you really admire, talking about your shared passion for education.) Let the group be a sandbox. Play and have fun!

Second, keep it voluntary. Nothing kills fun and passion as fast as people who feel mandated to do something they don’t want to do and don’t see the value in. Start out small, but think big. Avoid using what sometimes can be seen as “off-putting jargon” that excludes the uninitiated; “protocol” sounds faintly threatening and “process” is a softer term that everyone understands. Make occasional presentations, not only to faculty but also to administration, about what the group is doing and why, and use the opportunities to solicit more volunteers.

Pitfalls:

Not everything we tried worked as well as we’d hoped. For instance a couple of years ago, we ran a Fishbowl Technique around the Issaquah Protocol (now the Dilemma Analysis Protocol), adding the complications of observers to one of the most complex protocols that NSRF offers (5 “leaves” out of 5 on our Facilitation Difficulty scale). Being unfamiliar with CFG work, our observers found the process incomprehensible, the strict format of questioning irritating, and the time constraints bizarre. At the same time, even this misstep was a compliment to our open lines of communication—we could hear the feedback without taking it personally, and shift our approach for the future. We had clear evidence of advice shared in CFG Coaches’ Training: it’s ill-advised to attempt dilemma protocols outside of a trusted, established CFG group.

And successes:

Without a doubt, we learn best by doing and we found tremendous success in using protocols in faculty meetings that directly involved everyone and modeled the processes. We facilitated versions of Success Analysis in each of our respective schools, and applied the Text Rendering Protocol and Save the Last Word to the school-wide effort to conceptualize constructivist theories of education. The Future Protocol helped the elementary faculty to envision Design Time, in which students pursue projects of their own creation weekly (akin to Genius Hour or Passion Projects). Both the Future Protocol and the Data Analysis Protocol (used to examine school-wide MAP scores measuring academic progress broadened the CLCs’ appeal and helped communicate the potential of CLCs more effectively. The data protocol, led by CFG coaches, modeled a non-threatening approach to open dialogue about sensitive material. All of these experiences were insights into the power, productivity and fun of using structured meeting processes and brought
us many eager recruits.

**Administrative support:** Getting administrators on our side was critical, and not always easy, given that initially none of them had a background in CFG work.

How did we get started? Just by asking, initially; the president of ACS Athens, Dr. Stefanos Gialamas supported us as a sort of start-up, allowing core faculty to exchange a day of work on Saturday to attend our Critical Friends Group orientation for a professional day during the year. Perhaps we were seen as hobbyists at first, but soon our participants turned from hobbyists to lobbyists, sharing their enthusiasm for our groups with their administrators during the end of the year evaluation meetings.

We also made repeated presentations to administration, first bringing in NSRF Director Michele Mattoon to lead an initial admin training, and then, as David Nelson became a National Facilitator, offered more training to the wider school community, encouraging the development of more CLC groups.

As we coaches and facilitators were invited to lead protocols outside the CLC meetings (such as during faculty and department meetings), our administrators saw and appreciated the equity the processes offered and the value of the trained facilitators’ skills—this was especially significant during the roll-out of the Action Research process. In many ways, as the administration helped us to achieve our goals, we helped them to achieve theirs.

**More pitfalls:** The first time we attempted to roll out the CFG work school-wide and were granted a monthly meeting time, we found ourselves hindered as meetings were repeatedly postponed and rescheduled, and then postponed again. The school was focused on the truly massive project of mapping out its own curriculum standards and benchmarks that would fit the unique nature of an international school. Somewhat baffled by the mixed messages we were receiving, we decided to put the roll-out on hold and go back to holding a core group with those who valued the process so much that they were willing to give up their own time to participate.

**Protocols to the rescue!** Proactively, we brought the dilemma of how to secure administrative support to the core group. Two key ideas surfaced through the process: first, we reframed our perspective, presuming positive intent and recognizing that with curriculum mapping as a priority for accreditation, the truth was that there was little time in the schedule; second, we wondered if there was a way to invite our school president and the dean of academic affairs to actually participate in a protocol themselves.

Choosing the Future Protocol and aligning with the school’s mission of creating a constructivist school with students as architects of their own learning, we invited the president and dean of academic affairs to participate in envisioning what ACS Athens might look like in five years. As David facilitated the process, ideas flowed so thick and fast that Penny’s hand hurt as she transcribed to the butcher paper—the room was electric, brimming with vision and collaboration! The following fall, when we once again presented the school-wide roll-out of the CLC to the Academic Leadership team, we now had significant allies in the room!

**Fine-tuning the plan:** With CLC meetings firmly on the agenda for the coming school year, we returned to the core group to tune our year-long plan. We wanted to prioritize by scaffolding the trust-building activities and structures, including Setting Agreements in the initial meetings, then scaffold the development of feedback and questioning skills as we led the participants deeper into the work of the CFG.

We have found the existence of the core group of trained coaches essential for planning and supporting the roll-out of the school-wide CLC. Working together to preview protocols, brainstorm solutions to our own dilemmas (such as soliciting presenters for sessions), and develop timelines, helps us to norm the groups. As coordinators we provide support with preconference sessions, prepare the materials, plans and even debrief sessions.

Throughout the entire process of building collaboration in the CLCs, open reflection and dialogue have been the
most important elements in their creation. After the initial year of rolling out the CLC to the wider school, we decided to make the final meeting of the year an all-CLC debrief session, bringing together all the membership to reflect on the year. We sought complete transparency with the faculty, emphasizing that the CLCs are a work-in-progress and something that teachers are doing for teachers to collectively improve our craft. We wanted to solicit input in such a way that everyone could feel free to add suggestions for improvement for the following year. To do so, we created three large Chalk Talks to collect feedback on these key questions:

1. What did you get out of CLCs this year?
2. Based on your needs, what do you see as the potential for CLCs next year?
3. What elements need to exist to maximize the potential of CLCs to help us to improve our work and to improve student learning?

Encouraging small groups of diverse teachers to interpret each Chalk Talk, we provided a method for the faculty members to reach wide consensus on the goals, outcomes and potential for CLC meetings. Specifically, participants first had time to add their voices to each Chalk Talk and then move into triads to observe and analyze trends in the data. These triads then reported their observations to the whole group, thus depersonalizing comments while still getting them out on the table. During the debrief, members themselves addressed the few negative comments that had emerged by urging each other to be proactive and share concerns directly with their coaches, to commit to the CLC process through regular attendance, and to present work in order to see the benefits of the process.

There was a strong up-swell of positive feeling shared in this CLC-wide debrief session. We were able to collect the distilled observations on the Chalk Talks, create a Wordle (see image on previous page), and use the information as data. We then shared this with the administrative team as we planned together to continue CLC groups in the following year.

Our willingness to be transparent, open and responsive has been key to building trust both with our membership and with the administrative team. We are fortunate that our administration has realized that just as teachers need to change their role in the classroom to become facilitators of their students’ learning, administrators, too, need to take that leap of faith to become facilitators (rather than directors) of teachers’ continuing professional growth. Our dean of academic affairs, Steve Medeiros, often uses the metaphor of fractals when describing the ideal working relationships within schools. In our experience, there’s little doubt that there has to be a fractal relationship between learners at all levels of the school, with teacher learning communities mirroring the ideal conditions for learning in the classroom.

At the recent ACS Colloquium last month where teachers shared the results of their Action Research in a conference-style gathering of MSA Accreditors, visiting educators from around the world, and parents and students alike, we presented the findings of our Action Research into the impact of the CLC at ACS. We invite you to watch our presentation here.

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. As National Facilitators ourselves who sometimes lead trainings for participants outside of ACS Athens, we sometimes hear comments from participants who feel alone as the one or two new CFG coaches within their school. We would like to remind them and other readers of Connections that our process, too, began with just the two of us and a shared idea. David attended a Bloomington open training for new CFG coaches and returned to ACS Athens eager to put CFG work in place. Penny, who is a natural born collaborator and has always sought to develop close collaboration with her teaching partners, leap at the chance to participate in the development of CLCs. We pooled our ideas and enthusiasm, and together we began to develop the CLC rollout. Penny took her CFG coaches’ training with David as facilitator in 2013, and most recently she interned with Michele Mattoon.

Instrumental to our success with the CLCs has been our ability to build capacity through offering more trainings for new coaches. In total we have had four trainings at our school since we’ve begun. Remember too, that each of our CFG trainings equipped us with numerous resources: our initial school rollout plan was tuned for the first time within that open training that led to David becoming a CFG coach! That plan is still in use today. Our facilitator’s guidance was invaluable and the Tip Sheet that now appears on page 106 of the Critical Friends Group Coaches Handbook came to life. As she always said, “Trust the process” and we did!

Part two of this two-part series will feature findings from David and Penny’s Action Research, revealing how this work is impacting their schools and teachers. Look for it in the next issue of Connections, coming in August 2016.
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.

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