Change is hard. But CFG communities and NSRF protocols can make it easier.

“It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement, there is life, and in change there is power.”

~ Alan Cohen, life coach and author

Awhile back I ran into a friend of mine (let’s call her Jennifer), at the gym. I could immediately see her exasperation and asked her what was wrong. “I’m so sick of this whole peer observation process at our school. It is just a colossal waste of time! The idea in the beginning was that the teachers could learn from each other. Instead, what winds up happening is that it’s just a big hassle that’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Observation can be a great learning tool if it’s done right,” I said. “Why is it such a problem at your school?”

“Well, first of all the person who was being observed would have to be okay with not showing their best lesson when the observer was present. To be a real experience, the observer would have to see an actual example of what routinely happens in their classroom.

The person who was observing would actually have to give honest feedback about what they observed, but without seeming like they were judging or “grading” the observed teacher’s performance.

The person who was observed would need to avoid taking the feedback personally and really be open to thinking about what they could do to improve.

Ideally, each person would learn something from the experience that would actually result in better teaching practices for the both of them.

Jennifer agreed that she would love to actually learn from her colleagues. When I asked her what would have to change for real learning on both sides of the observation experience to happen, she paused for just a minute, but quickly came up with these points:

› The person who was being observed would have to be okay with not showing their best lesson when the observer was present. To be a real experience, the observer would have to see an actual example of what routinely happens in their classroom.

› The person who was observing would actually have to give honest feedback about what they observed, but without seeming like they were judging or “grading” the observed teacher’s performance.

› The person who was observed would need to avoid taking the feedback personally and really be open to thinking about what they could do to improve.

› Ideally, each person would learn something from the experience that would actually result in better teaching practices for the both of them.

Analyzing difficulties around change

We all know how difficult it is to make real changes in our personal or
work lives. Change seems to require an incredible amount of willpower and determination. Inevitably the person trying to make the change reverts back to the old, unwanted behavior more than once during the process. Research on changing habits shows that anywhere from 81-92% of people who make New Year’s resolutions fail to achieve their sought-after changes—one quarter of the process. This means the more you do something, the more likely you are to continue to do it in the future—hence the phrase “become set in our ways.” If we’re not careful, we become prisoners of our habitual behavior and decide that this way of being is “just who we are” or “it’s just how we do things here.” As educators, we resist students making these declarations about themselves, but why do we think it’s different for adults? Research shows that adult brains can change, that they can learn and grow throughout our lives. Change is made easier when structures are put into place that support the wanted change, while excluding the unwanted behaviors.

Another reason change is hard is that we are often forced or expected to change by circumstances (or bosses) beyond our control. Autonomy is always more comfortable than powerlessness. When significant changes are demanded to begin immediately (such as new initiatives being rolled out ASAP or changes in state law that affect how you teach a particular subject), we are unable to easily predict what will happen. Beyond the discomfort of actually making the demanded change, this inability to prepare for the future leaves us uneasy and can trigger our survival instincts. Unpredictability = Risk = Stress. Because our known situation is replaced by an unknown one, we can become fearful and not know how to move back into our comfort zone. For positive change to occur in these situations, we need a concrete plan to deal effectively with risk, one that will actively nurture a sense of safety and comfort.

Helpful things to remember

When trying to make changes or doing your best when forced into them, it’s wise to keep two important ideas in mind:

1. Change is not an event, it is a process. We all know that concept of change is simple, but not easy. Need to lose weight? Change your eating habits. Need to be better at getting to work on time? Leave for work 15 minutes earlier every day. Right. These seemingly simple solutions require not only that the person sees the benefit of making a change, but that they break a number of bad habits to cultivate the change. (For example, losing weight may mean extra food shopping time, learning how to cook healthy food, beginning to keep a food log, and maybe incorporating exercise into daily routines.) One change can naturally lead to another, with no end in sight. Instead of thinking “I’ll have this down in a couple of weeks,” it may be better to think about change as something that is a part of life, and that even if you successfully change one collection of habits, you’ll be changing something else in the future. Change itself is inevitable and ongoing.

2. Change does not happen in a linear fashion. It is completely unrealistic to think that once you decide to make a change, you won’t ever fall back into the habitual way you did it in the past. Remember the statistics from the failure rate of New Year’s resolutions? One quarter of people who make their resolutions decided in the first WEEK that they were a failure and stopped trying. How many times could they have possibly tried and failed in that period of time? Once? Twice? Research has shown that people who make real changes don’t quit after failure. They pick themselves up, learn from it, and then try again. And again. And they do better as they go.

What did Jennifer do?

So, let’s go back to Jennifer’s problem with the classroom observation time. Luckily for her, she is a part of a Critical Friends Group community that meets once a month. How could she use her CFG group to help make real change in this area?

1. First, pinpoint exactly what needs to be changed. Clearly, Jennifer already put quite a bit of thought into this. She was able to list the many aspects of the experience that weren’t working, from trying to schedule observation times, to being unclear how to give and receive feedback that could improve teaching practices for both teachers. Unfortunately, at this stage, she doesn’t have a clue how to make the situation better or even if it can be made better.

I pointed out that this sounds like a dilemma, and doesn’t she belong to a CFG community? No longer feeling helpless, she decided to present this problem to her group, knowing that together, they might be able to come up with some ideas to make the situation better. A couple of months after our initial conversation, she called me with an update.

2. Getting help from her (critical) friends. Jennifer met with her CFG coach to preconference and determine which protocol fit this particular situation. The coach and Jennifer eventually decided that the Dilemma Analysis Protocol might be the way to go. At the next CFG meeting, Jennifer presented her dilemma of being unsatisfied with the current process for peer observations, the group analyzed the problem, and through the protocol, gave her many possible suggestions. Some of them were:

- Everyone involved in the peer observation process could go over the Giving and Receiving Feedback sheet and/or the Feedback Nightmares activity.
- Any two people planning a peer
observation could pick one of the NSRF observation protocols to structure their observation time and to ensure that deep conversations about teaching practice occur.
› Observation and the post-conference time could be scheduled all at once at the beginning of the year, rather than trying to find time each month.
› She could work on a proposal and take it to the director of professional development.

3. Making an action plan. Jennifer told me she decided to present a proposal to the director of professional development that included clear action steps for the change process. She included these suggestions in the proposal:

› Observations will be scheduled when all other meetings are scheduled before the beginning of the school year.
› Teachers will become trained during an in-service day on how to give and receive feedback and on the observation protocols they could use for the process.
› Teachers who observe one another plan on meeting after the observations during their prep time (or at another designated time of their choice), not more than a week after the observation.
› To promote trust and honesty, people who observe one another would be in the same CFG community. Once the experience is over, they would then report back to their CFG group about how helpful it was.
› At the end of the school year, a simple survey would be sent out to see if the new system is working. If there are areas that can be improved, the CFG groups will follow up with suggested changes in those areas.

At the time of our second conversation, Jennifer was waiting to hear back about her proposal, but the conversation reminded me of another step that would be helpful to her school over the long-term.

4. Evaluate and support the new process over the course of the next few years. CFG communities along with the professional development director could make sure needed changes are made to help the process move more smoothly the next school year and giving the participants time to celebrate successes (perhaps by using the Success Analysis Protocol or the Celebration Share Activity), either in their CFG communities or with a larger group like a staff meeting. It also might include refresher trainings or learning new observation protocols in the upcoming years.

Using your own CFG communities to support change

To recap, CFG communities nurture successful changes by making sure that:

› Change begins with people who see the need and are self-motivated to put in the effort it takes to make the change, (like Jennifer and her CFG group).
› Through the use of protocols, change is described in concrete positives like, “Here’s what we think will occur as a result of this change” and “If this change occurs, what do you hope to get out of it?”
› Specific, manageable goals are created answering all the “who, why, what, where and how” questions, which is often the last step of NSRF protocols.
› Once goals are attained, CFG groups can celebrate them to show progress.
› Problems that occur in the change process are always addressed promptly, effectively, and without blame.
› People who want change can interact with others who positively view the change process.

I’m looking forward to hearing the outcome of Jennifer’s proposal she made with the support of her critical friends, and I was glad for the opportunity to write about change with this specific example. If you have a story about your CFG helping you make an important change, we’d love to hear from you.

“I came to CFG coaches’ training for a set of organizational tools, and I’m leaving with a new set of lenses to see more clearly and listen more deeply. It reminds me of when I had my cataracts removed—now I can actually see the colors of flowers!” ~ Recent open training attendee

Will you make time for a clearer picture? See pgs. 6-7
TWO VARIATIONS ON THE TUNING PROTOCOL

In this issue, two of our NSRF National Facilitators worked with CFG coaches within their organizations to reimagine and adapt the Tuning Protocol for specific needs. In each case, these professionals found a way to “hybridize” the Tuning with another existing protocol, creating a new way to get the positive effects of the Tuning on multiple projects in one meeting. Although we have included the original Tuning link here, the new hybrids will both only be available to current coach-members of the NSRF, and we encourage CFG coaches to use the new version of the Tuning as well, for best results. (If you are not a certified CFG coach, we encourage you to consider signing up for training). Attempts to use “coach-level” protocols without training may result in a more complicated problem than you started with, so the Connections editors will not describe steps in detail within the newsletter. If you are an NSRF-certified CFG coach and you have a current coach membership to our website, you will be able to access these protocols using the links here. We appreciate your understanding.

Combining Tuning Protocol with Feedback Carousel in a non-profit setting

As a retired educator now in my second career working in a non-profit, Step Up For Students, I’ve been challenged to move from thinking “education-ese” to adapting a more businesslike mindset. My experience as an NSRF national facilitator helped me think about the new environment through the lens of CFG work, and by doing so, I saw that schools and businesses both recognize the value of relationship and respect. There you go: by refocusing my attention and my actions toward those values, I fit into this new organization better. In fact, I learned that our president has stated two core values for Step Up For Students: Each and every person is a valuable asset, and every challenge is an opportunity for improvement. Nice, right?

When I arrived, this organization had no awareness of CFG work or NSRF protocols, but I have had the wonderful opportunity to offer CFG coaches’ training within my Office of Student Learning as well as to executive team members from other departments. While working styles here are different than in my previous school environments, I’m happy to report that setting agreements, selecting and following protocols, and debriefing processes have all become accepted ways of working in many departments. Protocols and CFG work aren’t just for schools!

To reflect upon and review various projects and training curriculum in a framework of safety and synergy, we decided to select and modify the Tuning Protocol. Because we wanted to look at many details within a variety of sub-projects all at once, it made sense to combine the Tuning with a Feedback Carousel. My department and the marketing department are both led by vice presidents who are each certified CFG coaches. Together, we worked to make the new Tuning Carousel Protocol meet the needs of a variety of personnel and projects.

In the Office of Student Learning, the entire team was charged with reviewing and redesigning our Success Partners training modules. These modules are delivered each year to private school administrators and teacher leaders. Our task was to look at what is working well, what is missing, and what should be taken out and (possibly) used elsewhere in future modules.

In preparation for leading the group through the protocol, I made charts with the overview and objectives of each module and hung them around the room. Each team member had their own copies of each module to refer to, as well. We used sticky notes in a silent activity to give ideas and feedback. We also intentionally added a blank piece of chart paper midway through the protocol, marked ‘New Ideas.’ Our vice president and the entire team followed the modified Tuning Protocol and the end result was a subgroup taking all the information and beginning the revisions to the project, which will be formalized dur-
ing a team retreat in April.

In another test of this new protocol, the marketing department vice president needed all team members to understand and give feedback to the various initiatives that seem to be mushrooming as our non-profit expands. Since I would not be the coach in this test of what we now call the Tuning Carousel Protocol, I wrote up protocol instructions on a single sheet so that the vice president or one of her assistant directors that had been trained as a CFG coach could lead the protocol. Writing down the steps as clearly as possible gave me time to reflect on the flow of the original experience and we’re now happy to share it. In this second test run, the marketing vice president reported that this protocol gave structure to the team, while at the same time giving opportunity for clear feedback and action plans.

Having facilitated CFG Coaches’ Trainings and led Critical Friends Group meetings for so long, I was not surprised but still quite grateful that the processes translated so effectively into this non-school setting, and that my colleagues and executives accepted and appreciated the processes. Although the resulting Tuning Carousel Protocol takes considerably more time than the original Tuning Protocol, it’s still a very efficient, effective way to look at a very complex set of issues and give helpful feedback to many people at once working on a complex project. We encourage other CFG coaches to download and try the protocol, and let us know how it worked for you!

**Tuning Carousel Protocol**

**basic steps:**

- Setup
- Present
- Clarify
- Examine
- Clarify again
- Carousel review
- Warm and cool feedback
- Reflect
- Open discussion / action plan
- Debrief

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**Speed Consultancy + Tuning Protocol = Speed Tuning Protocol**

The purpose of the NSRF’s consultancy protocols is “to provide a structured process to help see new possibilities around a concrete problem.” As a principal, I love that our faculty can use not only the **Dilemma Consultancy Protocol**, but also the **Speed Consultancy Triads Protocol** to quickly produce countless ideas to solve the many dilemmas we are dealing with at our school. However, we have noticed that our teachers prefer to gather ideas around classroom lessons more often than they desire to work with their dilemmas. The problem is that the **Tuning Protocol** (which we use most frequently to improve lessons) takes around 45 minutes for one person to present and gather feedback around a lesson. Even if, during a given month, all five of our collaborative teams use a Tuning Protocol on a lesson only one teacher per team will leave with direct feedback on the lesson that is challenging them.

This past fall, a member of our faculty attended a CFG coaches’ training and came back with a great idea: the creation of a new “Speed Tuning Protocol” to parallel the Speed Consultancy Triads. As an NSRF National Facilitator, I worked with our coaches to generate a helpful hybrid of the Speed Consultancy and Tuning Protocols. Like the Speed Consultancy, participants should gather in triads and identify a facilitator and presenter for the first round.

Our success with this hybrid protocol has been powerful. Teachers have let us know that they love getting input on their lessons and lending their expertise to others in the same team meeting. Importantly, we stuck as closely as possible to the decades of expertise that went into developing the Speed Consultancy and Tuning Protocols. For instance, it remains very important for participants to recognize that it is impossible to understand everything about a person’s lesson before providing input (as is the case in the Tuning Protocol). Similarly, and especially in a small group, it is important to allow built-in time for reflection before jumping into conversation (as is the case with the traditional Speed Consultancy Protocol).

As you might expect, we still often choose to conduct a full Tuning Protocol on a specific lesson at our school. It is important for presenters to have times where the group focuses wholeheartedly on a single lesson in team meetings. However, I hope you will try our new Speed Tuning hybrid. If your team is anything like mine, they will be thankful for the great variety of conversations that happen in this change-of-pace!

**Speed Tuning Protocol**

**basic steps:**

- Setup
- Present
- Clarify
- Examine
- Clarify again
- Separate/Reflect
- Warm and cool feedback
- Reflect
- Repeat steps
- Large group debrief

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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 can be scheduled in three- and two-day segments.

These trainings use the brand-new Critical Friends Group Coaches’ Handbook! This book is only available by completing a coaches’ training with NSRF.
Rave reviews from participants about NSRF CFG coaches’ training:

“Best PD EVER!”
~ A new coach in North Carolina

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

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

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

Currently scheduled “open” trainings (where any individual may attend) include opportunities in Nashville, TN, the Los Angeles region, Greater Boston area, and at our “home base” in Bloomington, Indiana.

NEW opportunity just for administrators:

For the first time, NSRF is offering an open, three-day training for individual and small groups of school administrators who do not need to become CFG coaches but want to more fully understand CFG work and learn protocols that will improve their own practice.

June 27-29, 2016 in San Francisco, CA
Click here or read more about it on pg. 14 and click the ad for details

To enroll or learn more, click through to the NSRF Upcoming Events page or call 812-330-2702.
A reflection on CFG work and Growth Mindset  
By Jacquie Beaubien and Rachel Herter of the PERTS program, an applied research center at Stanford University

In early March, the Stanford University PERTS Lab teamed up with NSRF to lead a growth mindset-infused CFG training. The goal of the training was to provide educators with strategies and protocols to support and strengthen their own growth mindset professional development using the free online resources developed by PERTS (http://www.mindsetkit.org). The training started with a presentation on growth mindset research from the PERTS Team, and then followed with the traditional CFG protocol training. We were amazed to find that we didn’t have to do much work to incorporate the two, because growth mindset is in many ways at the heart of NSRF protocols and CFG work. This article is a reflection on that week.

What is a Growth Mindset?

A growth mindset is the belief that abilities can be developed. While the definition is simple, this belief can have a significant impact on how we approach learning. When people have a growth mindset, their goal is really to learn and grow. This means that they are more likely to:

› Put effort into their work
› Take on challenges
› Stay resilient in the face of the setbacks
› See mistakes as a valuable part of the learning process

A growth mindset is contrasted with a fixed mindset, the belief that abilities are fixed and innate. When people have a fixed mindset, their goal is to look smart. This means that they are often afraid to make mistakes, get critical feedback, and take on challenges. When people who have a fixed mindset fail, they often respond by putting in less effort, or even by giving up because they think, “What’s the point of trying if I can’t really get better?”

We’re all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, but we’re especially likely to have a fixed mindset in learning environments where we don’t feel safe to make mistakes or struggle. As Dr. Carol Dweck, a leading researcher on growth mindset, recently said, “There are so many things in the environment that trigger a fixed mindset, that make us feel judged.”

Mindsets are shaped by the messages, explicit or subtle, that we receive from our environment. These messages tell us what types of learning goals we should have, what beliefs are reinforced, and what is valued. For example, environments that value mistakes and allow revisions send the message that we can improve and grow over time, thus supporting a growth mindset. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we tend to do better in environments that support a growth mindset - but what does a growth mindset environment really look like?

The CFG training and protocols are about creating contexts where peers--students or adults--can feel safe giving each other honest, supportive feedback, with the ultimate goal of learning and growth. As the training progressed, we were amazed by how directly aligned many of the protocols were with growth mindset research. Every time our NSRF facilitator walked us through a new protocol, we were practically jumping out of our seats with excitement. And sure enough, even though we had only completed the first three days of the training, our group felt safe and excited to share out ideas, give feedback, and learn from each other.

CFG coaches’ training and Growth Mindset

In our own work, we encourage educators to focus on three main things when they are first learning about growth mindset classroom strategies.

› Praise the Process
› Teach students about the malleable brain
› Celebrate mistakes in the classroom

Below is a list of some of our favorite growth mindset protocols from the training we just completed that can be used to support the above growth mindset strategies either via professional learning communities or in the classroom.

**OM Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger**

This activity asks participants to reflect on various types of situations that put them into their comfort, risk, or danger zone.

**Growth Mindset Connection:** We learn the most when we are stretching ourselves--when we are a little uncomfortable. But to stretch ourselves, we must be willing to challenge ourselves, to make mistakes, and to maybe look like we aren’t very good at something while we learn. This protocol shows students that it is good to be in the risk zone and to make mistakes, because that is how we learn. It also helps students see that challenging yourself can feel a little risky at times, and that’s normal for many students.

Our facilitator also pointed out that being in your risk zone is a time when you might want to ask for help, seek out new strategies, and engage in deliberate practice to reach your goal. These are the same suggestions we recommend teachers convey when they are teaching students about developing a growth mindset.

**Tip:** When using this protocol in the classroom, help students make the connection between being in the risk
zone and neuroscience evidence that supports the idea that we learn the most when we challenge ourselves and make mistakes.

**Feedback Nightmares**

This activity helps a group set norms around giving helpful feedback. It starts by having participants reflect on a personal feedback nightmare, after which participants generate a list of do’s and don’ts for feedback.

**Growth Mindset Connection:** Getting feedback on work is one of the most helpful ways to learn and grow. But receiving feedback can feel very threatening, especially if it focuses on traits commonly thought of as stable (like talent or smartness), or if it’s insensitively delivered. Poorly delivered feedback can lead people to respond in fixed mindset ways. For example, they may become fearful of making mistakes or taking risks, and they may be less likely to take feedback to heart. This activity helps participants reflect on their own experiences with feedback, and it highlights the value of good feedback. Creating a group norm around the do’s and don’ts of feedback also serves to further create a safe space for giving and receiving feedback.

**Tip:** Connect good feedback to process focused praise, i.e. praise that focuses on the strategies that led to success (ex. You’ve been studying and I can see it’s really paying off), or on the specific work that has been done (ex. Your topic sentence here provides a great set-up for the rest of this paragraph). This protocol can also be used with students, and may be especially helpful with middle and high school students.

**Summary**

Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger and Feedback Nightmares are two activities that are explicitly linked to growth mindset. However, it was exciting to see that the CFG training as a whole works to promote a growth mindset by creating environments where participants feel safe to take risks and push themselves to grow. We’re so excited to finish the last two days of the training!

For more information about growth mindset and strategies that promote it, please visit the Mindset Kit (www.mindsetkit.org) – a set of free resources for educators and parents to learn how to help students develop adaptive learning mindsets.

**For more information**

**PerTS,** or the Project for Education Research That Scales, is an applied research center at Stanford University. They partner with educators and researchers to improve student motivation and achievement on a large scale. In the process, they develop, test, and disseminate learning mindset resources for educators and parents. Learn more at www.perts.net.

**About the authors of this article**

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Introducing NSRF protocols and CFG work within the RQI conference

Two years ago I was introduced to the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) while reading Warren Berger’s, A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas. At the time, the Right Question Institute (RQI) had just begun to widen its reach into education, openly providing their materials through their website to hundreds of inquiring teachers. I, too, took the invitation, predicting numerous uses of the QFT not only in my high school history classes, but also within our school’s CFG communities. After seeing the process work in both contexts, I knew that the Right Question Institute and its grassroots organization would find traction in schools around the world—especially in the USA where many teachers have become seemingly stuck in a system that demands only answers from students through high stakes testing, rather than offering possibilities through, or in, “a generation” of inquiry. Yes, the pun is intended!

Last summer, I sought out RQI’s first conference for educators, which took place over two days in Boston. I was eager to meet other educators who were discovering ways to apply the techniques in their classrooms and also to share how I’ve used the technique within the context of Critical Friends Group work and in my training workshops for new CFG Coaches. What I found at the event were Directors Luz Santana & Dan Rothstein, enthusiastic supporters, and dozens of early adopters, all professionals who share a very similar vibe with the communities of our CFG work: collaborative, reflective, generative, and committed to inquiry.

During the RQI Conference I had the opportunity to facilitate an “unconference” (similar to Open Space Technology) with a wide group educators who were also interested in finding ways to utilize the QFT process within their schools’ professional development initiatives. For those unfamiliar with the term, an ‘unconference’ is essentially a time for participants to propose and offer their own make-shift workshops. I teamed up with two other interested professionals, one administrator and one consultant, and we literally put together the process for the workshop in fifteen minutes, after quickly agreeing on the common focus for the break-out session: How might the Question Formulation Technique, as well as other collaborative processes, be applied in the realm of professional development in our schools?

Guiding the group of over thirty participants through three simultaneous Chalk Talks, we not only distilled the group’s ideas but also demonstrated the complimentary nature of NSRF protocols, CFG work, and the Question Formulation Technique. We followed the chalk talk with small group observations and analysis, after which time each group reported its conclusions from one of the group’s chalk talks. Ideas were shared of ways that schools have used or could use the QFT as well as the numerous processes offered by NSRF.

I came away with the feeling that these two organizations share many common goals, and that those attending the conference craved the discovery of new ways to encourage deeper collaboration and inquiry. I was inspired by the story of the Right Question Institute, which in many ways shares a history with NSRF; both are rooted in improving communication, promoting constructivism, empowering participants, increasing equity, and touching people by helping everyone to be heard.

Although the Right Question Institute is still finding its place in the field of education, based on what I witnessed, they are definitely focusing on “next steps” and looking to find more ways to work with educators. There’s little doubt in my mind that we as Critical Friends Group coaches and NSRF National Facilitators can draw a great deal from the practices of Right Question Institute, and that those who use the Question Formulation Technique will be thrilled with the ever-expanding and versatile protocols offered by NSRF and featured in our CFG trainings for new coaches.
Teaching students to ask their own questions creates a better democracy

Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana


As always, before beginning to discuss the details of a book, I’d like to introduce the authors, who represent a wonderful multicultural example at a time when our country seems desperately in need of such collaboration. Dan Rothstein has developed and implemented education programs in Israel, Massachusetts, and Kentucky as a community organizer and urban planner. He has a doctorate in education and social policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Luz Santana raised her family on welfare, working on the factory floor, and has been a housing services counselor and parent advocate who works with low-income communities around the country. She is a Community Fellow at MIT and holds a BA and master’s degree from the Springfield College of Human Services.

Over a twenty-year period they have worked together as the codirectors of The Right Question Institute, “a nonprofit organization that disseminates a strategy that makes it possible for all people, no matter their educational or literacy level, to learn to advocate for themselves and participate in decisions that affect them on all levels of democratic society.” (emphasis mine)

NSRF’s mission statement provides an obvious parallel: “to create meaningful learning experiences for all by collaborating effectively in reflective democratic communities that foster educational equity and social justice.”

With this alignment between our organizations in mind I want to direct readers to their concluding chapter, “Questions and Education, Questions and Democracy,” and their three concluding points:

• We can take action today to improve education in every classroom in every school by teaching all students how to ask their own questions.

• Teachers who teach their students how to ask their own questions will feel greater satisfaction and see better results.

• We will create a more well-informed citizenry and a stronger, more vibrant democratic society by teaching all students to ask their own questions. (emphasis mine)

Mini-protocol written by Dave Nelson and reprinted from the November 2014 issue of Connections

Mini-protocol around the Right Question Institute “Question Formulation Technique” (QFT)

1. Create groups of 5-6. (2 min.)

2. Present each group with a large sheet of butcher paper, markers, and space to work. (2 min.)

3. Write the Q-focus statement in the middle of their papers. (1 min.)

4. Review the QFT Rules: Ask questions, no discussions, write down all questions, and change all statements into questions. (2 min.)

5. Participants write as many questions as they can think of around the Q-Focus statement. (6 min.)

6. Invite participants to classify all questions as “open” or “closed,” and then invert closed questions. Instruct them to take note of the process for later reflection. (5 min.)

7. Each group ranks their most powerful questions according to the NSRF descriptions and models for creating effective probing questions. (5 min.)

8. Share out to the larger group. (5 min.)

9. Debrief: What surprised you? How did the results of this protocol differ from other means of brainstorming questions? How might this protocol be helpful to you in your work? (10 min.)
On the last page of their book, Rothstein and Santana refer the reader to their website, www.right-question.org, and the concept of “microdemocracy,” which they define as “A new idea that ordinary encounters with public agencies are opportunities for individual citizens to ‘act democratically’ and participate effectively in decisions that affect them.” I feel strongly about what they’ve written on this page and quote it in some length as I believe their perspective speaks volumes to our current context and our contentious presidential primaries:

“A democracy needs citizens who can ask questions, participate in decisions and hold decision-makers accountable on any level of democracy. Indeed, we encourage people to ‘act democratically’ by writing letters to the editor or to a representative, attending public hearings organizing, advocating and voting.

“But, what do we call it when people in low-income communities ask questions, participate in decisions and hold decision-makers accountable in their ordinary encounters with public and publicly funded institutions such as their children’s public school, the welfare office, job training program, Medicaid-funded health care service, and public housing? We have no ‘democratic’ name for actions at that level.... As people learn to focus on decisions and ask their own questions, they begin to participate more effectively in decisions, partner with public servants, and also hold decision-makers accountable. These are skills that the Right Question Strategy teaches as thinking and advocacy skills. But, they are also democratic skills and reflect democratic habits of mind. In a democracy, unlike in a dictatorship, citizens should be able to ask questions, participate in decisions that affect them, and hold decision-makers accountable.”

So what is the “Right Question Strategy?” More typically the authors refer to it as the “Question Formulation Technique” or simply “QFT.” It involves the following six steps:

1. Design a question focus, a resource that is not a question itself but which provokes and stimulates new lines of thinking (typically provided by the teacher).
2. Explain the “rules” to help students produce questions or brainstorm:
   - Ask as many questions as you can
   - Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions
   - Write down every question exactly as it was stated
   - Change any statements into questions
3. Improve the questions by first labeling each as closed-ended (answered with yes or no or with one word) or open-ended (require an explanation and cannot be answered with very short answers), and converting as many closed-questions to open ones as possible
4. Prioritize questions and select the top three that will be most useful to drive your planned actions
5. Teacher and student(s) plan next steps; how they will use the prioritized question(s)
6. Engage in a reflection activity for students to name what they learned using the process, how they learned it, and how they will use what they have learned in the future.

From here there are separate chapters on each of these six steps. Each has an extended description of the particular step of the QFT, several “case studies” of the use of each step, a trouble-shooting section, then a summary followed by conclusions and key points.

Chapter 6, “Students Prioritize the Questions” provides an excellent example of how RQI supplies protocol-like instructions to each of the key parts of the QFT. Working in small groups the students follow these steps:

1. Prioritize by choosing three questions from the list you just generated; choices should be based on criteria you have established, for example:
   - Choose the three most important questions
   - Choose the three questions that most interest you
   - Choose the three questions that will best help you design your research project
   - Choose the three questions that will move you toward the purpose of your original QFT
2. Choose three priority questions as follows:
   - First, review the list of questions and quickly discuss which ones to choose
   - Second, get to agreement; choose by consensus, voting, or any other strategy
3. In your small group, explain the reasons for choosing your three priority questions
4. Discuss the reasons in your small group and prepare to explain them to the large group
5. Small groups report their priority questions and their rationale for choosing them to the larger group

Rothstein and Santana point out, “because prioritization can be a
challenging task, pushing students to analyze, assess, compare, contrast and, most of all, reach some kind of agreement on three priority questions, will be the most challenging part of the QFT to facilitate.” After expanding their protocol for refining prioritized questions, the authors present three Case Studies:

- **a high school humanities class of seniors taught by Ling-Se Peet of the Urban and Sciences Academy (a Boston Public School)**
- **an advanced biology class of 12 students taught by Marcy Ostberg at Boston Day and Evening Academy (a public high school for students who have transferred from other schools or are over age or under-credited)**
- **a middle school geology class of 27 sixth graders in small groups of 4-5 taught by Hayley Dupuy at Stanford Middle School in Palo Alto, California.**

Each of these are presented in some detail based on the recorded conversations of the students in these classes, thus showing just how such prioritization can proceed.

The authors have researched, developed and tested the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) for effective teaching of the skill of question formation to a wide range of audiences including residents in homeless shelters, patients in community health centers, participants in adult literacy classes, Harvard graduate students, and public and private students in grades kindergarten through high school. Additionally, rigorous research by outside agencies and institutions has been done, such as that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This was a randomized control trial of patients’ ability to participate in their own health care and partner more productively with professionals when they used the QFT to ask better questions. Teachers who have used the technique in primary, middle, and high school classrooms across all subject areas in a wide range of communities, have reported the development of these questioning skills and behaviors, enabling learners to conceptualize and express their convergent and divergent thinking without having to depend primarily on teacher questioning. In their concluding chapter, Rothstein and Santana point out:

> “Even in our democratic society, we have not done a particularly good job of investing in developing our citizens’ ability to think independently and ask their own questions. We need to make a stronger more deliberate effort to build the capacity of all our citizens to think for themselves, weigh evidence, discern between fact and myth, discuss, debate, analyze, and prioritize. In twenty years of work with The Right Question Institute in a wide range of communities, we have seen how much can be accomplished when people who never before participated in decisions affecting them on any level begin to ask their own questions and acquire democratic habits of mind.”

I highly recommend **Make Just One Change**. There are tons of specifics, easy steps to follow, and clear examples of how teaching your students to ask questions can really work, both in their academic lives and beyond. I’m hopeful that this process will help lead the next generation to become truly active citizens of our democracy.
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