



# Inquiry Circles

## A Protocol for Professional Inquiry

*Developed by Betty Bisplinghoff.*

Overall Purpose: To generate robust inquiry questions that can lead our work in support of teachers and students as powerful learners.

### Supporting Goals:

- To place inquiry at the heart of our work.
- To support reflective practice.
- To encourage the development of an evidence-based, positive narrative culture.
- To build on the good.
- To develop a vision-based professional voice.

The title of the protocol, *Inquiry Circles*, was chosen for several reasons:

1. To highlight the cyclical nature of inquiry – questions lead to more questions
2. To denote the continuous connections of understanding that inquiry can support
3. To present a method for supporting inquiry that asks people to circle-up and share their stories of hope and promise

\* The protocol may be used as an agenda for a day in the design of a CFG Institute.

### Phase 1 – Storytelling

**Approximately 1 hour**  
**Individually**

#### **1. Written Rememberings (15 minutes)**

*In beginning this phase, it may be helpful to remember the wisdom of Madeline Grumet (1978),*

*So if telling a story requires giving oneself away, then we are obligated to devise a method of receiving stories that mediates between the self that tells, the self that is told, and the self that listens: A method that returns a story to the teller that is both hers and not hers, that contains her self in good company. (p.323)*

Participants have time to write in their journals – to be alone with their thoughts and memories. It may be helpful to advise participants to begin by listing recollections about good things in their work and then to choose one item on that list to explore in more detail through drawing or writing. The following prompts are offered as ways to nudge this kind of thinking:

*Think about times in your work life when you felt strong, when you felt your work was honored and you were living your true promise as an educator. List some of your most successful moments in your work. Select one of those moments to write or draw about. Where is the story for you in this successful experience?*

- When participants complete their reflective writing in preparation for this protocol, they move to fill an empty seat in the Circle of Inquiry (a circular grouping of chairs such that each participant has a chair in the inside or outside circle. Partner pairs are created with each participant sitting knee-to-knee with their partner.

## **2. Storytelling (Inside – Outside Circles) (30 minutes – 15 minutes each person)** **Whole Group**

Participants initiate the collaborative inquiry process by telling stories of best practice based on their written reflections. Partners will take turns telling and documenting stories.

- **The teller tells for 15 minutes.**
- **The listener records notes capturing important features of the story being shared.**
- **The partner pairs switch roles for the next 15 minutes.**

*It may be helpful for the listener to consider their role as listening “for” a story as much as “to” a story (Welty, 1983, p. 14). What can prove to be most helpful to the storyteller and the group are the “choice” words and phrases that emerge during the telling as well as key concepts, themes, and ideas.*

## **3. Re-viewing your partner’s story (10 minutes)** **Individually**

*There is time now for each participant to re-view notes based on the story told to them. This is time to prepare for the responsibility of retelling the partner’s story in Phase 2 of the protocol.*

### **Phase 2 – Retelling** **Approximately 1 hour** **Small Groups**

Partner pairs regroup in circles of 4

*Reconfigure inside/outside circle pairings into 2 sets of partner pairs = 4*

*(Adjustments to number may need to occur. This number seemed most feasible as a way to help participants expand their thinking based on the stories of others while still not becoming overwhelmed by too much information).*

*THE FOLLOWING 3 STEPS ARE REPEATED FOR EACH PERSON IN THE GROUP*

*10 minutes for each person = 40 minutes total time for this section*

1. The partner (the one who listened to the story) introduces the storyteller to the group and retells the story that they heard. (4 minutes)

This process is often considered an especially meaningful aspect of the protocol experience. Participants feel supported and affirmed when they hear their stories told through someone else’s voice. There is a quick sense of linking story to story that begins to demonstrate giving life to quality work.

2. The owner of the original story has time to add to and/or clarify what their partner has shared. (2 minutes)

*The original storyteller uses this time to confirm the highlights shared and/or add any other necessary details.*

3. The group members now have time to ask clarifying questions. (4 minutes)

*It is helpful to keep these questions focused on eliciting more information about what was “good.” This is not a time to make suggestions.*

### **Phase 3 - Crafting and Claiming a Positive Inquiry Question Flexible timing – group agrees to the amount of time needed Individual Reflection and Whole Group Dialogue**

**1. Partners complete “Storytelling Summary Sheets” for one another based on the storytelling process and the questions that emerged from the group. Once the summary sheet is completed, it is given to the partner.**

*Each person reviews their notes from the storytelling experience and records responses on the summary sheet. The summary sheet is helpful in creating a shared data set based on the storytelling process and provides written documentation for the storyteller to use as a resource in crafting positive inquiry questions.*

Partners give one another the gift of data: completed Storytelling Summary Sheets. Each participant receives this summary of the story as interpreted by their partner.

There is now time to pause and personally reflect on what has been shared as well as what is recorded on your summary sheets.

*As an individual*

This is space/time to reconsider how your personal story can serve as a beginning point for crafting an inquiry question that builds on some aspect of your work that is good and strong. What really matters? What do you want to remember to hold dear in your work? What do you want to be more involved with? When you have crafted a question for yourself, write it in the center of a sheet of chart paper. Each chart paper will now be treated as an individual “chalk talk” (see protocol for Chalk Talk process). Participants move from chart to chart and silently participate in a written conversation around each proposed question. The chalk talk provides an opportunity to “talk” around the proposed questions – exploring and expanding the possibilities of the inquiry. The intent is not to answer or propose ways to resolve questions but rather explore related assumptions and ideas.

At the conclusion of the “chalk talk,” each person has time to revise their question and the protocol closes with a go-round in which each person simply states their question for *beginning* an inquiry. It is understood that this question may go through several revisions once the inquiry is in process.

*For a group inquiry*

The facilitator reconvenes everyone in one whole group Inquiry Circle.

**Each person adds the themes that were identified in their story and recorded on their summary sheet to chart paper that is posted for the group to see.**

The facilitator encourages the group to review the posted themes and discussion is encouraged using the following prompts:

- Are there any additional themes/core values that need to be posted?
- Are any of these themes/core values related?
- Do any speak more loudly than another? Less than another?
- Will any have greater or lesser impact on our work together?
- How can we carry forward what we value most?
- How can powerful work of the past inspire and support present needs to inquire?

Review the posted themes, the data on your summary sheet, and build on the questions that have been generated by your colleagues in order to identify a question that you could use to guide your learning as a participant in this CFG or as a member of some other learning community.

## **Debrief**

## STORYTELLING SUMMARY SHEET

- What were the most compelling features of the story?

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- What was the most quotable quote that came out of this storytelling?

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- What was the most significant moment in the storytelling for you as a listener?

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- Did a particularly intriguing innovative idea emerge during the telling of this story? If so, describe what you learned about it.

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- What three themes/core values stood out for you in the story you heard?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

- What possible inquiry questions did you hear in the story? Use positive language as you attempt to craft possible inquiry questions in support of your partner's work.

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