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## From the Director

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF® Director, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG® Coach in Indiana, [michele@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:michele@nsrfharmony.org)

Welcome to fall and the beginning of most school years! Summers now are the busiest time of the year for NSRF and we are just beginning to catch our breath after the whirlwind of the last three months. During that time Luci and I answered the question, “Why take the training when you can get the protocols for free?” more often than we could count.

Why indeed, since budgets are tight and time is precious. (“Really?” we hear. “Five whole days?”) The answer most people seem to understand best is an analogy. Imagine you have friends coming to dinner who’ve been having a hard time lately, and so you want to treat them to something special. You go to your computer and look up gourmet recipes. You select one that looks impressive—beautiful and delicious. You eagerly print it out, carry it to the kitchen, and begin to cook. About halfway through the process, you realize that something is going horribly wrong. Is it really supposed to smell like that? And, why are the edges so crispy and black and the middle so soupy? And then it occurs to you—maybe you should have taken a gourmet cooking class before attempting something so ambitious. Needless to say, your end result looks nothing like the picture.

Using our protocols and activities without training can be very much like the above scenario. Many people recognize the potential of having structure to deepen their understanding of issues, to allow all voices to be heard and honored, to improve work, or understand better ways to reach students. Unfortunately, without the understanding of why you are doing what you’re doing, how to make sure that what you are doing will achieve the maximum result, when to employ essential scaffolding activities such as trust-building, and learning to give and receive feedback, your finished product may well fall short of your expectations. In fact, you may actually wind up giving the people participating in the protocol the equivalence of a mild form of “food poisoning”—giving them such a bad experience that they never want to try another protocol again!

We have seen, over and over, that facilitating conversations around improving work, seeking solutions to professional dilemmas, and planning the implementation of new programs take an understanding of how to build safety and trust, the skillful phrasing of feedback and practiced facilitation skills to achieve optimal results. So, “give yourself a treat” as one of the participants from our last training here in Bloomington put it, and book your spot to a NSRF 5 Day New Coaches CFG open or on-site training.

Happy Fall,



Michele Mattoon  
Director, NSRF



Connections

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# A REPORT FROM THE FIELD: Two Damaging Myths in Public Educational Discourse

By Dr. Jesse Goodman, Connections Senior Contributor, CFG Coach in Indiana, [goodmanj@indiana.edu](mailto:goodmanj@indiana.edu)

Public education has been a hot political topic for over two decades in the U.S. Unfortunately, within this discourse, several myths have been perpetuated upon our citizenry, and in particular, upon our teachers. One of the most counter-productive efforts to improve the education of our children is the idea that teachers are responsible for the learning of their students. This idea began back in the early 1980s with the government report, *A Nation at Risk*, and has increased in popularity over the years so that now several states have passed laws tying student test scores to teachers' pay and employment. These laws are misguided for many reasons, but certainly not least of all, because there are many factors that go into a child's success at mastering basic skills beyond the pedagogy of a particular instructor. First, the tests are invalid because they fail to actually measure any given child's progress on these tests. In no state that I'm aware of do children get tested at the beginning and end of the school year. Instead, children of one teacher are tested one year, and then a completely different group of this teachers' students are tested the following year. If the second group doesn't test as well as the first, then the teacher is blamed. Anyone who has taken basic statistics can easily see that this type of testing is invalid.

Ironically, teachers are asked to be responsible for children's learning but are discouraged from having the responsibility for making substantive decisions regarding curriculum, assessment, and even pedagogy in these days of "scripted curriculum," in which teachers are expected to follow a pre-determined way of teaching preordained curriculum content to their pupils. Rather than encouraging teachers to be thoughtful decision makers, many of today's politicians seem to want teachers to be little more than classroom managers who are expected to follow a pre-set curriculum, administer pre-fabricated lessons, give standardized, pre-determined tests, and make sure the student "gets through" the curriculum on time and in an orderly fashion. The result is often an education filled with boredom and that lacks authenticity.

However, what is even more problematic is that teachers are misled by pressuring them to assume responsibility for a child's learning. Great teachers assume responsibility for many aspects of children's education including: creating an intellectually engaging curriculum, establishing a safe and comfortable atmosphere in their classrooms, learning what individual students know and ways they learn best, communicating with the students' significant others, making relevant connections between what they are learning and their students' lives, helping students make meaning from their education, and perhaps most importantly, helping students take responsibility for their own learning. The idea that a teacher can be responsible for their student's learning is impossible. It's similar to the old saying, "You can lead a horse to water, but cannot force it to drink." One can do many things (e.g., make sure the water is clear and sweet, make sure it is accessible, make sure the path to it is free of obstacles, exercise the horse) to encourage a horse to drink, but only the horse can make the final decision. The same is true for educating children. Teachers have the responsibility to encourage their students,

but if they try and “force” their students to learn, as implied in many of these state laws, the result will often be student resistance rather than a desire to learn. Teachers need to understand what exactly they should and should not be responsible for when teaching, and today’s public discourse only makes these important distinctions more difficult to ascertain. As previously mentioned, the most beneficial gift a teacher can give his/her students is helping them take responsibility for their own learning. Once a child takes on this responsibility, their success and joy is life is greatly increased.

A second myth that is taken for granted by many both in and outside of education is that the purpose of schooling should be to prepare children for their future adult employment. We live only in the present, and teaching only for the future ignores a fundamental responsibility of education, namely, to help children live meaningful lives. As John Dewey stated long ago when addressing this issue:

The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.

Dewey noted, the best preparation for a child’s future is to provide them with opportunities to live meaningful lives in the present. This rather existential purpose for schooling is crucial in a society that claims to be democratic, and yet, it is almost completely ignored in our public discourse on education today. It seems that more and more, children are being viewed merely as future employees rather than complex beings that must negotiate their way through what is often difficult life experiences. How ironic, that living a purposeful and rich life isn’t a topic of conversation when discussing the education of our children.

Want to help your students live more meaningful lives? Use the curriculum (in the humanities, sciences, and social studies in particular) as a catalyst for asking students to speculate on what the curriculum says about the “human condition” rather than just having them memorize information. 

Want to clarify your understanding of NSRF's Critical Friends Groups? Want some support explaining CFGs to your friends, colleagues, and administrators? Click these links to check out our new promotional materials, or email us to request copies and links:

[A Self-Guided Tour to NSRF Critical Friends Groups \(pdf\)](#)

and

[Video Glimpse of NSRF New CFG Coaches Training](#)



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Author's note: Nathan would like to thank Ms. Kam Magor for her feedback on this paper.

## PROTOCOLS: The Missing Puzzle Piece for Teacher Leaders in PLCs

By Nathan Bond, NSRF CFG Coach in Texas, [nathanbond@txstate.edu](mailto:nathanbond@txstate.edu)

For the past six summers, I have taught a graduate course on teacher leadership to a group of practicing K-12 teachers from a high-performing school district in Austin, Texas. The course is part of a specialized master's degree program that was co-developed by the school district and the university where I teach. The goal of the degree and, in particular, the course, is to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to serve as teacher leaders on their campuses. The district's forward-thinking superintendent hopes that the teacher leaders will return to their campuses after completing the degree and facilitate ongoing, high-quality professional development among colleagues. To this end, teachers in my course study the basics of teacher leadership; the teacher leadership standards; adult learning theory; and several models of professional development, including action research, peer coaching, and professional learning communities (PLC). The teachers' culminating project is to develop a plan for implementing a PLC when they return to their schools in the fall.

Over the years, I have noticed that the teachers easily grasp the big ideas associated with PLCs. For example, they pick topics relevant to their school context, such as teaching the whole child and integrating iPads into the curriculum. They select well-researched electronic and print materials to use in the PLCs; and, more importantly, they maintain an intense, laser-like focus on increasing the already high student achievement that occurs on their campuses. Despite these successes, though, the teachers struggle to develop the individual steps of the PLC meetings. They are experts at planning powerful lessons for their K-12 students, but they are uncertain about designing and facilitating meetings to foster professional development for themselves and their colleagues. This feeling is understandable because the teachers at this point are still novices at leading professional development activities. As I've observed these teachers in action, I have realized specifically that they don't know how to talk about their own teaching or how to offer feedback to their colleagues. To give them more opportunities to cultivate these leadership and facilitation skills, I place them in mock PLC meetings during my course.

As their professor, I sought information that would hopefully address this need and provide them with more specifics on how to talk about teaching. During my search I discovered the website for the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) ([www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org)) and its training opportunities. The idea of protocols intrigued me, and I wondered if they might be the missing puzzle piece to my challenge. This past spring, I attended the five-day workshop on protocols in Bloomington, Indiana. At the conclusion of this incredible workshop, I felt energized and excited about integrating protocols into my teacher leadership course.

### Protocol: Forming Ground Rules

This past summer, I taught the protocol-infused version of my teacher leadership course for the first time. After I introduced the idea of protocols to the teachers during the first lesson, we jumped right in and used the protocol entitled "Forming Ground Rules," which Marylyn Wentworth developed and pub-

lished. To prepare the teachers for the protocol, I asked them to recall previous meetings they had attended. We discussed why the meetings were successful or unsuccessful. To engage them more deeply, I encouraged them to think about the ways that they, as practicing teachers, implement and manage cooperative learning activities with their K-12 students. The protocol for forming ground rules relates closely to these two scenarios.

Next, I used a Power Point slide show to guide them through the steps of the protocol; and, as we talked, I recorded the teachers' ideas on a dry-erase board. The teachers generated the following ground rules:

1. Exhibit a positive and constructive attitude; be encouraging and motivating; celebrate success
2. Respect others' opinions; act respectfully to others
3. Listen when colleagues are speaking; monitor side conversations
4. Don't be afraid to disagree respectfully
5. Monitor your air time; don't talk too much, and don't be too quiet; stay on topic
6. Try to help others
7. Be prepared with your work; contribute; be responsible; be cognitively present
8. Be flexible; dare to leave your comfort zone
9. Monitor your technology use; refrain from texting

When the teachers later reflected on the protocol for forming ground rules, they concluded that using it had been helpful. A teacher wrote, "Everyone who was participating knew what was expected of them and what would not be tolerated. The rules reduced some of the stress that can come from a group meeting. I also liked that the ground rules were established by the people participating in the group and not from an administrator telling them how to act." Another teacher added, "This was a good way for a group to agree on rules for a meeting. The protocol helped us to feel that we were important and that we would all be taken seriously and treated with respect. It helped to set boundaries." A third teacher stated, "This protocol encourages everyone within the group to share his/her needs in an open and honest atmosphere. I like that everyone has a voice."

### **Protocol: Success Analysis**

Later in the semester, we tried another protocol. Since the teachers had expressed an interest in developing a PLC that focused on sharing effective teaching strategies, we employed the protocol entitled "Success Analysis Protocol," which the field educators affiliated with NSRF developed. The purpose of this protocol is for the presenter and supporting group of colleagues to analyze a success and determine why it differs from routine work. For homework preceding the class, the teachers created a one-page overview of a favorite lesson. At the start of the class, I introduced the protocol to the teachers by modeling each step and providing a handout for reference. After randomly placing

As I've observed these teachers in action, I have realized specifically that they don't know how to talk about their own teaching or how to offer feedback to their colleagues.

teachers in groups of three, I guided them through the process step by step. I monitored the time and projected the correct step on an overhead screen. This approach freed the teachers to focus on the protocol and allowed me to support any who might struggle.

The success analysis protocol was successful, pun intended. A teacher reflected, “I liked the opportunity to talk about my lesson and just talk without being interrupted. The listeners were simply listening and then talking about what they heard me say. Sometimes things come across differently when people tell you what they heard. This is a good way to hear constructive criticism.” Another teacher explained, “This protocol allowed us to share ideas in a manner that was easy and fun. I like this protocol because we had to decide what information was vital to the lesson.”

Two problems arose while implementing the protocol. First, I erred in reducing the amount of time for each step, and, as a result, the teachers felt rushed and were unable to explore the lessons in depth. As the protocol directions recommend, group members need at least 20 to 30 minutes to share and analyze each lesson. I gave each teacher only 15 minutes, and this amount of time was too short. Second, different personality types responded differently to the protocol. When the teachers reflected at the end of the lesson, they stated that the protocol altered their normal communication style and caused discomfort. An extroverted teacher wrote, “It was very difficult to control my mouth and not ask questions during the presentation!” During the same debriefing a quiet teacher wrote, “For me, it was hard to just keep talking about my lesson. I’m not one to just keep talking. When I’m done saying what I have to say, that’s it.” The teachers concluded that the protocols provide structure to the conversations and, at times, force speakers and listeners out of their comfort zones and typical patterns of behavior. As the professor, I see that when introducing the protocol in the future I need to emphasize that it may affect their typical communication style and cause mild frustration.

In closing, the summer course has ended, and these aspiring teacher leaders have now settled comfortably into a new school year. As they sched-

ule their upcoming PLCs, they begin with a solid understanding of the big ideas of teacher leadership, adult learning theory, and professional development. The teachers know the procedures for implementing PLCs in their schools as well as the reasons for implementing them, which include focusing on student achievement, talking about teaching, sharing successful strategies, and developing camaraderie with colleagues in an intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive environment. I am optimistic that this year will be more successful than previous ones because this group is now equipped with specific steps they can take in their learning groups. Their newly acquired knowledge of protocols will hopefully be the missing puzzle piece for teacher leaders of PLCs.

The teachers concluded that the protocols provide structure to the conversations and, at times, force speakers and listeners out of their comfort zones and typical patterns of behavior.



## STUDENT WORK, STUDENT WORK, WHAT DO WE REALLY SEE? By Kaethe Perez, NSRF National Facilitator, CFG Coach in Florida, [kaethe\\_p@msn.com](mailto:kaethe_p@msn.com)

In my role as National School Reform Faculty facilitator, I work with a number of elementary schools in the University of Florida Lastinger Center project. School Leadership teams participate in a three day summer institute intended to build capacity and sustain Communities of Practice. During the school year we offer two follow-up sessions where conversations around felt dilemmas are addressed and action plans generated. At the invitation of the building principals, I am available to work at specific school sites with groups of educators that are studying their practice.

The principal of a particular elementary school and I had a conversation concerning some comments made in a state visit of her school. The state official wondered aloud what percentage of the staff gave independent work to students that could be considered 'meaningful,' with rigor and relevance to their learning. The principal agreed that during her daily walk-throughs, she and her assistant principals also observed that much of the student work lacked rigor and relevance.

At the same time, this school was poised to begin lesson study with some of the grade level teams. In our conversation, the principal and I discussed developing a series of PLC sessions focused on Looking at Student Work (LSW), as a passageway to lesson study. We agreed that looking at common definitions, using protocols to allow for equity of voice at the table, and experiencing student work protocols might give the staff a space of moderate risk to reflect both individually and collectively on the choices of student work made on a daily basis. Rather than undertaking lesson study due to a requirement, could this series 'soften' the stance of staff members, allowing them to design a cycle of inquiry springing from curiosity about their current and future student work? Could "Looking at Student Work" be a vestibule, or a passage, into the structure of formal "Lesson Study?"

Relevant questions to explore might be:

*What are the majority of students doing when teachers work in small groups?*

*How do teachers select independent work?*

*What can we learn from the work assigned to students throughout the day?*

*On balance, what percentage of daily work informs instruction, and what percentage of daily work might be considered 'busy' work?*

I wondered if a series of PLC meetings centered around "Looking at Student Work" might sharpen our professional lens when selecting student work.

*What impact will a series of PD sessions focused on looking at student work have on teacher attitudes towards and selection of student work?*

*As a facilitator, can I develop a replicable professional development series that engages participants, allowing for reflective thinking, dialog, and ultimately action while at the same time adding strategies to their professional repertoire?*

After our meeting, I drafted a framework of meetings with the staff, about 40



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For a complete packet of the protocols referenced in this article send an email request to [nsrf@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org).

minutes per session over a period of six weeks. The first few meetings would be with the total group. The final meetings would be in their own grade level location, with smaller groups working with selected student samples brought from their colleagues.

I relied upon documents and protocols developed by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) in building these agendas. One of my main objectives was to gain the trust of the group, help them realize the answers lie amongst them, not in my presentation. The framework I introduce and the staff experiences need to be internalized and transfer in some fashion to their regular planning and work time together. I felt the importance of remembering my responsibility as a facilitator: that less is more. Don't over-plan the agenda, or people will not remember anything!

I worked with one of the Assistant Principals to develop an exit slip we used at the three group sessions: *What do I want to remember about "Looking at Student Work?" What questions do I have about LSW?*

## Agenda 1

**Engagement activity – Dyad listening** (link) – two rounds: 1) something positive that occurred today, 2) something that I might have changed in my lessons today

### Review School Norms / Frame the LSW sessions

**Text Rendering Protocol** (link) using the NSRF document **Guide for Bringing Student Work** (link)

**Debrief the session:** *Why would we begin our time together with this article? What type of student work is currently being used, what would be good for our professional learning? How might you use the text rendering protocol in your classroom work?*

## Agenda 2

**Engagement activity – Continuum Dialogue** (link) Staff members line up along the media cen-

ter wall to respond to various prompts:

1) Think about your classroom desk, put yourself on the continuum from tidy, moderately cluttered, or big mess! (humor in the first prompt is essential)

2) Since we met last Monday, I noticed something about the work my students are doing. (continuum from I did not think about it, I noticed something, I really got excited/upset at the work I was giving)

Then I split the line in the middle and had dyad listening, where the side that had done some of the work spoke first to their partner, to prime the pump and recall what we had done last week.

### Review School Norms/ Frame the session

#### Experiential activity:

The total group worked on a third grade math non-routine problem individually, then discussed as a table their strategies and possible answers. I passed out three samples of actual student responses to this problem and the tables compared their thinking to what they thought the students were thinking in the problem. I used a variation on the **Making Mean-**

**ing Protocol** (link), leading the group through four prompts: *What do you notice? What questions does this raise for you? What is significant about this work and the objective of the mathematics thinking? What implications for the teaching and learning of this class of students?*

## Agenda 3

(This meeting took place in grade level areas, due to the Book Fair using the media center.)

The Assistant Principal and instructional coaches looked on the Florida PALMS website and gave each team a math assessment set of problems, and the specialist team used art samples. This was their first solo attempt using the Making Meaning Protocol from last week.

One of my main objectives was to gain the trust of the group, help them realize the answers lie amongst them, not in my presentation.

The Principal and I sat in on two grade levels. One issue was there were too many samples, everyone brought everything and the focus kept shifting – however, there was wonderful conversation. Possible this overload led to the need for a more structured protocol with one person’s samples in the following weeks.

#### Agenda 4

(This meeting took place the Monday after Thanksgiving break, at the end of the day of a state visit – whole staff session. Determined this is a time for professional connections and conversation – explicitly connect LSW to the work already happening – this is not something ELSE, it IS THE work!)

##### Review Norms/ Frame the session

[Microlabs Protocol](#) (link to [protocol](#), [guidelines](#), and [suggestions](#)) Moved the grade level teams into triads. Triad listening used to return the focus to “Looking at Student Work” with three prompts:

- 1) *How has/can LSW inform my teaching practice and student learning in my class this school year?*
- 2) *What specific content area and/or students can I focus on to inform teaching and learning in my class this school year?*
- 3) *What connections can I make between LWS, my IPDP, or my inquiry this year? How could LSW be data or evidence of an intentional study of my practice?*

**Quick Write:** Something significant you heard or said in the microlabs, that you want to remember.

Push the grade level team back together and each member shares/ paraphrases what they wrote.

**Debrief questions:** *As a team, what did you hear this afternoon to focus your time together?*

*How did the Microlabs Protocol ensure a risk-free, yet accountable process?*

*Can you see a use for this protocol in your classroom or in your PLC work?*

**Final Task:** Huddle as a team, team leader make a four square graphic organizer. Mark one row 12/5 and the next row 12/12. Decide on two volunteers to bring student work samples, and two volunteers to facilitate the LSW protocol.

#### Agenda 5 & 6

Grade level teams met in their areas, using the [Making Meaning](#) (link) or [Collaborative Assessment Protocol](#). (link)

#### Findings

I reviewed the exit slips from the three group meetings. I interviewed the assistant principal about spill-over effects either individual teachers or in the grade level teams that moved into lesson study.

After the first session, there were comments like the following:

I felt the importance of remembering my responsibility as a facilitator: that less is more. Don't over-plan the agenda or people will not remember anything!

When do we  
get time—  
not before  
or after  
school—  
to discuss  
student  
work with  
teammates?

- *I want to remember to bring work that challenges the way I teach. Work that confuses me & how to approach different skills.*

- *Student work is the way you get your evidence for what you are doing. Bring work you'd like to forget or keeps you up at night.*

- *How will this help beyond what I already do when reflecting? The lesson is already over. When do you have time for do overs?*

- *When do we get time - not before or after school - to discuss student work with teammates?*

While there was interest and agreement, the question of time to reflect, and how can this help were evident.

After the second session, the comments began to morph – they had experienced the mathematics problem then looked at the student work:

- *I will remember to pay attention to my students' work and how does it reflect my teaching.*

- *Going through the process of looking at the text and not just jumping to speculation. Put yourself on the line of activity.*

- *I would like to remember about today's PLC is that the way I teach my class falls along my own teaching MISTAKES or error if 80% or better is not successful!*

- *I want to know that I am not being biased when reviewing my students work.*

- *What to do when you get student work that needs to be re-taught or the student needs further instruction?*

After the third group session – week 4, where we had professional conversations using the Micro Lab protocol, the comments were about informing practice, using colleagues as sounding boards and mentors, looking carefully at choices for student work, and how the resulting work can inform our day-to-day instruction:

- *To look at how students connect what they are asked to perform to what they actually provide (answers).*

- *Did I miss something that would allow me to better reteach?*

- *Looking at student's work I want to remember to try to see where my students are, what they're thinking, and how they came up with their answer.*

I believe that week 4 was a real turning point in the group beginning to 'see' the value of this work, understanding the importance of connecting student work to the intended instruction outcomes. Giving the staff time for conversation around their beliefs and actions build a sense of camaraderie which I think began to move the team members towards more collegial conversations. This is still not collaborative since the teams were not constructing common lessons (yet).

In a late spring interview with the Assistant Principal, she stated that this col-

laborative work impacted each grade level team, although in different ways. Every team became more intentional about the work selected and reviewed. Two grade levels began the formal lesson study process with instructional coaches. Another grade level came to the realization that in order to get the most out of the student work review they might develop a common lesson so they all are working within the same context – a desired outcome that was a bottom-up decision owned by the grade level team. In another state visit, the principal brought the team leaders together to share the impact of this work on the team collaboration. The Assistant Principal stated the series planted seeds that will continue to blossom into the next school year.

### Reflection and Future Practice

This series of professional development reaffirms my decision this year NOT to develop and implement one-shot PD events. Over six weeks' time, this staff had some movement in their thinking about the work their students do and what it shows about THEIR instruction. A major objective of mine was met: to establish an environment of moderate risk, participant engagement, and respond to the feedback. This occurred by using intentionally chosen engagement strategies involving the participants emotionally at each session, determining appropriate NSRF protocols to give equity of voice to the groups, and offering time for reflection both orally and in writing after each session.

As David Sousa states in his article on Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers:

*Professional development leaders should ask themselves the following questions to determine whether the format and content of their programs connect to positive emotions in most teachers and avoid triggering negative ones:*

- *Does the program offer learning experiences associated with moderate challenge, excitement, creativity, and joy so teachers will be more likely to remember what they learn and implement it in the classroom?*
- *Does the program speak to a problem that teachers identified rather than some outside entity? If not, can we connect this content to teachers' concerns?*
- *Are teachers excited about this initiative?*
- *Have we included opportunities for hands-on participation and activities that address a variety of learning styles?*
- *Will participants give leaders feedback on the program—and receive regular feedback?*

### Resources

National School Reform Faculty [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org) “Looking At Student Work”

Dana, N., Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2008). *The Reflective Educator's guide to Professional Development: Coaching Inquiry-Oriented Learning Communities*. Corwin Press.

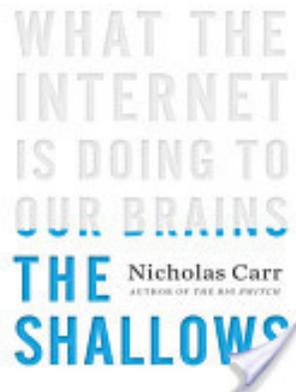
Sousa, D. ( Online June 2009, Vol. 66) *Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers*. Educational Leadership [On-line], ASCD.org. 

I believe that week 4 was a real turning point in the group beginning to 'see' the value of this work, understanding the importance of connecting student work to the intended instruction outcomes.

## The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing To Your Brain

By Nicholas Carr  
W.W. Norton and  
Company,  
2011 Paperback Edi-  
tion

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*tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory... I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do."*

I first learned of this poignant book during a recent visit to my former school back in Ithaca, New York. I dropped by a group of juniors and seniors in a "Human Ecology" class where the teacher was discussing a reading from *The Shallows*. The students were deeply engaged in the author's analysis of the impact of all the devices that are so much a part of their lives; curious to learn is there is a cause for concern. For example:

"Dave, stop. Stop, will you? Stop, Dave. Will you stop? Dave, my mind is going, I can feel it. I can feel it." Who can forget this poignant closing scene of Stanley Kubrick's famous film "2001: A Space Odyssey," in which the astronaut Dave Bowman barely escapes death in deep space due a malfunction of the spaceship's artificial brain, HAL, by shutting down its memory. Thus Nicholas Carr begins the initial chapter – appropriately entitled "HAL and Me" – in this most provocative book. Carr goes on:

*"I can feel it too. Over the last few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been*

Sound familiar? Then you'll be interested to read this thoroughly researched account of what seems to be happening to our brains given all the media with which we are bombarded these days. Carr reminds us of the now famous quote from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* in 1964 (when "media" only meant the telephone, radio, movies, and television!) - "The medium is the message." It is a particularly important book for us educators who are seeing the rapid expansion of technology in our classrooms.

But wait, before you stop reading further - this is not an extremist Luddite indictment of the Internet, iPads, iPhones, Kindles and the like. Carr recognizes, and uses extensively all of the current technology which he states is clearly here to stay. Rather he is making the case for maintaining a healthy balance in our relationship with all of these devices. Carr urges that readers consider the balance between the Internet's ability to efficiently and rapidly provide information, and our own intellectual ability to read and think deeply, to

do our own analytical, critical, reflective, and contemplative thinking.

Carr points out as well that these new technological devices are not the first “technology,” the first tools to alter our lives, our culture, and our brains. He traces the impact of map-making on our world view, clocks and watches on our relationship to time, and particularly the written word. There has been a series of profound evolutionary impacts--the progression from clay tablets to papyrus scrolls to parchment scrolls to wax tablets to bound books (codices) to the printing press and its impact on literacy, and now to the evolution of electronics and electronic communication devices. All these shifts in transmission of the written word have produced profound changes to human culture. He sees us caught between two technologies:

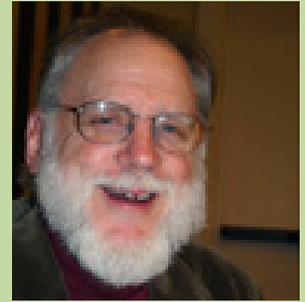
“Like our forebears during the later years of the Middle Ages, we find ourselves today between two technological worlds. After 550 years, the printing press and its products are being pushed from the center of our intellectual life to its edges... now the mainstream is being diverted, quickly and decisively into a new channel. The electronic revolution is approaching its cultural culmination as the computer – desktop, laptop, handheld – becomes our constant companion and the Internet becomes our medium of choice for storing, processing, and sharing information in all forms, including text... We cannot go back to the lost oral world, any more than we can turn the clock back to a time before the clock existed .... But the world of the screen, as we’re already coming to understand, is a very different place from the world of the page. A new intellectual ethic is taking hold. The pathways in our brains are once

again being rerouted.”

Carr also sites extensive current research showing such phenomena as the changes in how we spend our time. For example, the Ball State University’s Center for Media Design study of 2009 indicating most Americans spend at least eight and a half hours a day looking at a television, a computer monitor, or the screen of their mobile phone, and sometimes more than one at a time. And there is this analysis of neurological research in the chapter entitled “The Juggler’s Brain”:

*“While acknowledging that it’s now hard to imagine living without the Internet and online tools like the Google search engine... their heavy use has neurological consequences. What we’re not doing when we’re online also has neurological consequences. Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don’t fire together don’t wire together. As the time we spend scanning Web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives but lose old ones.”*

Although this sounds encouraging, Carr reminds us that whereas our brains are amazingly flexible and able to adapt to new demands, adjusting circuitry to new situations, “plastic does not mean elastic.” One of the most dramatic examples is when individuals with intensive, almost continuous seizures, have one whole hemi-



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“Our neural loops don't snap back to their former state the way a rubber band does; they hold onto their changed state. And nothing says the new state has to be a desirable one.”

sphere of their brains removed to relieve this debilitating condition. Amazingly the remaining hemisphere is typically able to respond and take on the functions of what previously were being carried out by the damaged hemisphere. Coming back to our concerns about the impact of the excessive use of electronic media on our brains, such as the Internet, Carr cautions:

*“Our neural loops don't snap back to their former state the way a rubber band does; they hold onto their changed state. And nothing says the new state has to be a desirable one. Bad habits can be ingrained in our neurons as easily as good ones.”*

Lastly, what I believe is of particular concern to those of us involved with schools, those of us entrusted with the education of our youth, those of us who devote our lives to teaching, is this caution:

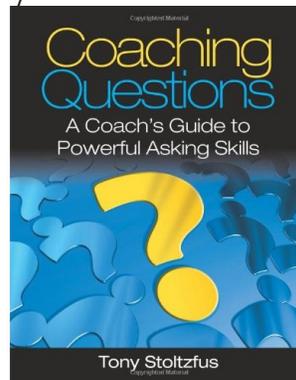
*“The great danger we face as we become more intimately involved with our computers – as we come to experience more of our lives through the disembodied symbols flickering across our screens – is that we'll begin to lose our humanness, to sacrifice the very qualities that separate us from machines. The only way to avoid that fate ... is to have the self-awareness and the courage to refuse to delegate to computers the most human of our mental activities and intellectual pursuits, particularly tasks that demand wisdom.”*



## Coaching Questions A Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills

By Tony Stoltzhus  
Self-published,  
www.Coach22.com, 2008

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NSRF Special Projects Manager and  
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As a relatively new CFG Coach, one of my first concerns has been training my brain (and my mouth, which sometimes engages before my brain) in the proper creation of probing questions. My mentor and other experienced coaches assured me that with more practice, I'd develop more facility. But I didn't want to lead my new CFG group astray by not modeling good (or at least acceptable) probing questions.

I thought there must be more guidance available somewhere in developing good probing questions. As I Googled, I learned that “probing questions” have vastly different meanings and desired outcomes in different occupations than I'd expected. Human resources people may “probe” for information a job candidate might want to keep hidden; salespeople “probe” for details that manipulate a customer toward a purchase. Neither of these perspectives are necessarily helpful to CFGs.

Then I lucked out by finding *Coaching Questions* by Tony Stoltzhus. Although the book isn't written specifically for educators, quite a lot of its content is very relevant

to CFG coaching.

One chapter outlines the “Top Ten Asking Mistakes” (see sidebar). Stoltzfus not only describes the reasons he considers each a mistake, but he includes specific solutions and exercises to teach yourself how to avoid each one. (His blog includes two posts [here](#) and [here](#) with similar content to that chapter, much more information than we could add in this sidebar.)

To learn to avoid these common missteps, Stoltzfus suggests recording a coaching session (a specific protocol or complete CFG meeting, in our case), then listening to the recording later with a scorecard so you can catch how many times you fell into these traps. He warns that it’s challenging to catch everything at once, so he suggests you focus on only two or three of the problem areas for ten minutes or so, then spend the next ten minutes listening for the next three, and so on. Afterward, you can pick one or two problem areas and practice using the corrective strategies until you’ve trained yourself out of those habits.

Another chapter is devoted specifically to Probing Questions (using a similar definition as we use with NSRF protocols). Here, Stoltzfus offers specific exercises in opening and broadening questions, “playing the angles” (see a list of these on the next page of Connections), and asking “short and sweet” questions, including an “observation and question” exercise.

Essentially, by having Stoltzfus’s “cheat sheet” of different angles available to review or memorize before a session, you have a readymade template of potential probing questions.

And lest anyone take offense, Stoltzfus himself refers to his “cheat

sheets” throughout the book. But he’s also careful to urge coaches to practice the exercises, and to simply review the lists so they’re in short-term memory before a coaching session. “What we’re doing is loading up your memory with some question fragments and a sense of what might work, so in the moment the right question will come to you. In essence, we’re duplicating how your long-term memory would work if you’d used this technique many times,” he says.

This book, as I said, isn’t directed specifically at CFG coaches or even educators. Indeed, there are sections for a variety of life coaches, small business and organizational coaches, career coaches, and beyond. Stoltzfus is a Christian life coach, and so, for this review, I watched carefully for language that I felt could be triggering to those sensitive to that content. Although there are a smattering of mentions, I found only one major assumption about the importance or centrality of one’s spirituality, and that was in a section that doesn’t really relate to CFG training anyway. (In his Life Wheel Assessment, he presumes that God/your spiritual life is one-eighth of the “life areas” one would want to assess and work on.) Still, I found the entirety of the book to be quite helpful, not only in terms of my CFG work with questions, but also as a sort of self-help book in thinking about life goals and priorities.

Please review the sidebar on this page and the “playing the angles” questions on the next page.

For additional information or if you’d like to purchase a copy of your own, see the author’s [website, http://www.Coach22.com](http://www.Coach22.com).



### “Top 10 Asking Mistakes”

1. **Closed Questions**  
can be answered “Yes” or “No”
2. **Solution-Oriented Questions**  
are “pieces of advice marked with a ’?”
3. **Seeking the ‘One True Question’**  
are typically preceded by a long, awkward pause
4. **Rambling Questions**  
One question asked multiple ways
5. **Interpretive Questions**  
Our assumption based on our bias and what we heard
6. **Rhetorical Questions**  
Statements of the questioner’s opinion
7. **Leading Questions**  
Blatantly biased toward a certain answer
8. **Neglecting to Interrupt**  
Don’t let your group “bunny-trail” off-point
9. **Interrupting**  
But don’t interrupt too much!
10. **‘Why’ Questions**  
put people on the defensive

## “Playing the Angles” from *Coaching Questions*

One way to develop new probing questions is to consider different perspectives on the issue. Some examples listed in Stoltzfus's book include:

### The Past

*“What led up to this?”*

*“Give me some background: how did you arrive at this place?”*

### The Future

*“Where do you see this going?”*

*“How do you want things to turn out?”*

*“What's the best possible outcome?”*

### Patterns

*“Have you been in a place like this before? Describe what happened.”*

*“Do you see any patterns here in your experience or your responses?”*

### Emotions

*“What is going on inside you during this event?”*

### Others' viewpoints

*“How do you think your [boss, spouse, peers, etc.] sees this?”*

### The Concrete

*“Give me a specific example of that.”*

*“What exactly did you say? What did they say?”*

### Values and Principles

*“What values do you hold that will influence your responses to this?”*

### The Heart of the Matter

*“What are the real issues here?”*

*“What makes this significant to you?”*

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## How'd we do?

How did you like this issue? Do you have ideas for future articles, book reviews, or topics you'd like to explore (or you'd like us to explore)? We'd love to hear your experiences being part of or leading CFGs. [Email us](mailto:nsrf@nsrfharmony.org), or call 812-330-2702.

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