

Protocols in the classroom

Developing a “live” CFG community in a classroom of 7th graders

NSRF intern Carole Colburn used her new CFG Coaches' Training to develop a quarter-long curriculum for her seventh grade Communications Arts class at Highlander Way Middle School in Michigan

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

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

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

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

Right from the beginning, I had my students come into my newly redesigned room (a tech lab) and make a circle around the center of the room. I shared with them how Transitions works and we began. Oh my goodness! BINGO! I had no idea what a difference these five minutes would make. Students LOVE it! They love to lead it. They won't let me start class without doing



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it. They give me high fives when they enter my room and they are excited to come to class. I have learned so much more about my students that has allowed me to really see them and understand where they are coming from, both on good days and on not-so-good days. Transitions has truly reinvigorated my passion for teaching!

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

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

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

The Process It has been said that necessity is the mother of all invention. Because I teach what are called “Encore” classes, I get all new students every nine weeks, and therefore, my instructional time with students is brief (just 45 days.) Some quarters actually have fewer than 45 days and during the wintertime here in Michigan we

can pretty much count on having at least a few snow days where school is closed. That means that I have to be pretty flexible with lesson planning. As a result, I have always prepared lessons from a “backward design” type of philosophy. I typically look at the calendar to find the end of the quarter, then plot where I need students to be by that time, and then simply organize and plan backwards to the first day. I started my planning for this Communication Arts class in the same way.

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

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

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

The Setting Agreements Activity was a great way to build a class social contract; students liked that they were the ones deciding what the behavior expectations would be



Experiencing “turning out” within a Tuning Protocol.
(Images of students used with permission of their parents / caregivers.)

for class. I have a smartboard in my classroom and I improvised by having students write their ideas there instead of flip chart paper. Once they shared their first ideas out with the entire group, then they transferred them to the flip chart so we could keep it posted.

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

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

I followed the Compass Points activity with [Feedback Nightmares](#)  . Most students found this protocol to be valuable. Many of them had never really thought about feedback as being cool or warm. Through this activity, they began to see how it might be really helpful for someone to receive constructive feedback that may be cool even more so than just receiving warm feedback that has no meat to it.



7th graders learn to give and received feedback, building trust. (Images of students used with permission of their parents / caregivers.)

One of the student's favorite protocols was the [Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger Activity](#)  . I have a large rectangular rug in the middle of my classroom that worked great for marking the boundaries for each of the zones. Students really had a good time with this protocol to the extent that once I had run out of scenarios to ask their level of comfort, they began to add their own scenarios. One student wrote, "I learned that everyone has different levels of comfort when learning based on the Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger activity we did. ...This might help me in the future as we work on developing the critical friends group. As human beings, we are meant to be social and that helps us learn about ourselves each day. Not everyone can learn as quickly as another, or not everyone is comfortable with certain activities."

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

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

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

dilemmas and then hopefully, they will be able to relate to something in their own lives that they can use.

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

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

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

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

I am not truly certain whether (or not) these students feel closer to each other or whether they will actually turn to each other in their future, but I do feel confident that they know each other better and hopefully will remember the protocols as a helpful tool. It is also gratifying for me personally when students come back to visit me and see me in the halls and just want to say "hi" or share their news, good or even not-so-good. When this happens, it tells me that I was successful at building a better relationship with them.

