Creating a Culture of Conversation
Dave Schmid and Cindy Gay, Colorado

If we want to support each other’s inner lives we must remember a simple axiom: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. Sometimes advice is offered in order to be helpful, and sometimes it is given to make the advisor feel superior. But the motivation does not matter, for the outcome is almost always the same: quick fixes make the person who shared the problem feel unheard and dismissed. We need ground rules for dialogue that allow us to be present to another person’s problems in a quiet, receptive way that encourages the soul to come forth in a way that does not presume to know what is right for the other but allows the other’s soul to find its own answers at its own level and pace.

— Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach

How do you create a learning community in a school that helps teachers make sense of new ideas, challenges, and complexities about their work? How do we help them incorporate them into their own practice? At Steamboat Springs High School we actively address the need to create a culture where meaningful, thoughtful conversations are embedded into the rituals of the day.

The vision for our school is a community where people feel respected, honored, valued, and that their voice is heard. A place where thoughtful conversations enable teachers to learn from each other and grapple with complicated ideas. We want our school to be a place where conversations inspire people and create passion for making a difference in the lives of students, reminding us why we entered into our profession in the first place.

Our work with CFGs has provided us tools and structures to help this vision become a reality. CFGs gave us a glimpse of what a learning community could look like on a larger, schoolwide scale. Working in environments that promoted reflection, we not only learned about the tools and structures of CFGs, but also experienced what it felt like to work in an environment where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions, it felt like to work in an environment where people truly listened and valued our opinions.

We have since changed our structure so that we each facilitate smaller groups of participants. Instead of 4 people to hear and only a few people could share ideas in the allotted time. The sessions for debriefing included a group of facilitators that some of the participants would not think a protocol was ineffective just because it was difficult to facilitate. We have already begun to make changes in the way we structure our sessions. By experiencing and modeling multiple activities, we will be able to see how to bring it to life for the participants of our CFG seminars.

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goals in mind. We have committed a great deal of time to this effort. For us, it has meant a shift from thinking about not only the purpose of the gathering, but also the processes to be used. It has meant a shift from a passive staff being addressed by the principal, to meetings that encourage conversation and participation by all present. Purposeful planning involves grappling with many ideas, the first of which is being clear about the purpose of everything we do. The questions: Why are we doing this? What is the purpose? If the purpose is to create thoughtful and meaningful conversations, do we have structures that allow flow conversation in which people feel respected, trusted, and have chances for their voices to be heard?

We have recently discovered the power of meeting together in a circle. It involves sitting together in a circle without anything in the middle – including a table – that would interfere with the flow of conversation. A circle enables us to be totally self-conscious and aware of what we are saying and how we present ourselves to others in the group. A circle promotes community with the power distributed among all participants. It supports the norms of listening, respect, and trust. No one can hide in the back of a circle. Christina Baldwin, in her book Calling The Circle describes it this way: “A circle is not just a meeting with the chairs rearranged. A circle is a way of doing things differently than we have become accustomed to. A circle is a return to our original form of community as well as a leap forward to create a new form of community.” The use of the circle in our faculty meetings promotes thoughtful conversation. In parent meetings, it helps us resolve conflicts. In our decision-making committees, we use the circle to honor the voice of staff, students and parents. The most rewarding feedback that we have received after trainings we have done with other schools is learning that other school faculties are beginning to meet in a circle and the positive difference it has made in promoting conversations.

Other processes we have used effectively to promote conversation are the structures and tools we have learned from our Critical Friends experiences. Protocols provide agreed-upon guidelines for a conversation and it is the existence of this structure – which everyone has agreed to – that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur, often the kind that people are not in the habit of having.

In your school setting, what are the ways that you could use protocols beyond critical friends meetings to begin to develop a culture of conversation?

A Sense of Power

Dave Schmidl and Cindy Gay both work at Steamboat Springs High School in Colorado. Dave is the principal and Cindy is a science teacher and the coordinator of staff development and curriculum development. Together they have been training school staffs and administrators across the state on how to use CFGs to promote conversations.

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Margaret J. Wheatley, Turning To One Another (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2002)

CFG Snapshot (continued from page 4)

- What is it (the item)?
- What inspired it (What made you come up with the idea)?
- Why do you think it works?
- What are the next steps (revisions or adding on to it)?

This provided a forum for everyone to share a success and to reflect on common traits of teaching that seems to work. Though we didn’t get through everyone’s presentations we all got a lot of food for thought. At the end of the meeting we agreed that we would all try to bring something in as a focus point for a full protocol in the course of the school year. All in all the group is doing well and seems to be developing a sense of mutual trust and reflection.

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I n all of my years of experience as a high school and middle school teacher and as a school improvement activist there has always been a disconnect between the educational mantra, i.e., “all kids can learn,” “No Child Left Behind.” “Students at the center,” “Kids First” and what students in urban schools and classrooms across the country actually experience. In a videoconference (Ohio, October 22, 2002), Joe McDonald spoke about the University Neighborhood School located in the Lower East Side of New York City. Joe said that the teachers in this small school wanted to provide the economically poor students at the school with five keys. These five keys would enable all students, regardless of their ethnicity or economic standing, to be successful in college. The five keys are:

1. A sense of power
2. A sense of purpose
3. A sense of quality
4. A sense of progress
5. A sense of community.

These keys were to be understood and used by students and adults in this school in their relationships, their work, and in their writing. The first key, in particular, has captured my thinking about our children and our work.

Ted Sizer talks about the fault line between theory and practice. For me the fault line is between issues of power and control and how those issues are played out in urban schools. For many years I have been wondering how educators, particularly those in urban areas want to instill a sense of power in their students? With all of the resistance training I am doing, I wonder how many participants have the will to share power with the poor children, the children of color, and the children who do not reside in the hearts and minds of the mainstream.

My experiences in urban schools all over the country lead me to believe that not enough teachers want to empower students. Kids instilled with a sense of power buy in to challenging, academic work. Kids instilled with a sense of power identify their own issues, read to learn how to address those issues in nonviolent ways, and act to make their immediate environments places where all can thrive. Kids instilled with a sense of power act in kind ways toward each other. Kids instilled with a sense of power help each other succeed. Kids instilled with a sense of power respect adults and engage in open and honest dialogue with them. They have begun to examine our own equity issues. And we are thoughtfully pursuing an aggressive program to confront issues whenever we encounter them. But our work with equity cannot stop short of addressing issues of power and control.

I am well aware of the hard work we have been doing to more clearly and intentionally address and act on issues of equity. Most of us have, in one fashion or another, incorporated discussions of equity into our CFG seminars. We as a group have begun to examine our own equity issues. And we are thoughtfully pursuing an aggressive program to confront issues whenever we encounter them. But our work with equity cannot stop short of addressing issues of power and control.

I have been facilitating CFG seminars in a variety of urban settings for many years. Currently I am a school coach and coordinator of CFG training at the Center for Effective School Practices at Rutgers University in New Jersey. In the year that I have been...