

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 truth: 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, 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 how people learn, and then 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



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, school-wide 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, we regularly challenge each other to think about our practice at a higher level. We began to ask ourselves how we could continue these conversations outside of the structure of CFGs so that the work could become embedded in our daily culture.

There is no model, no quick fix for creating a culture of conversation, only hard, probing questions that can call forth answers from the heart of our own practice. In working to make the vision of this culture a reality in our school, we endeavor to be purposeful and thoughtful in our planning and, in everything that we do, to always ask ourselves, how can we promote a culture of conversation? The questions we continue to ask ourselves fall into two main categories: What are the routines and structures of the day that provide opportunities for meaningful, thoughtful conversation? And what are the processes we will use to ensure thoughtful conversation whenever people are gathered together?

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Walking the Talk...

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related to the focus questions that we had given to Debbi at the beginning of the seminar. The document that Debbi created has been extremely valuable to us. We used it immediately after the seminar in preparation for our next seminar and as a collection of data to help guide our work during the upcoming year.

Some of the thought-provoking questions that Debbi provided for us were:

- What helps you determine your 'stance,' as a person with the questions or as a person with some definite answers?
- How can debriefs intentionally capitalize on those 'nuggets of gold' that come from the separate small group conversations?

Each of the facilitators has internalized these questions and reflected on them individually, and as a group we have discussed how this feedback will change our practice, especially how we handle the debrief sessions; more time will be allowed and more focused debrief questions will be used.

John collected similar evidence and presented it to the group at the end of each day. Here are some of the questions John asked the entire group of facilitators:

- How do you decide when to move on or go deeper with the debrief?
- Are we training participants to be CFG coaches? Reflective Practitioners? Facilitators? Leaders? Change agents?
- Is it more important for participants to see a protocol that is facilitated well or to let the participants experience the process and learn from their mistakes? What is the role of facilitators/trainers in correcting mistakes?

What we learned
We learned the value of peer observation and know that we cannot continue without it. We learned many things about our individual styles of facilitation as well as how we worked together

and in some cases how we either complemented each other or got in each other's way. Some of the questions that Debbi and John gave us were questions that they were struggling with as well; questions like, What is the balance between content and process?

Debbi showed us new ways of looking at the exercises and protocols, ways that we had not thought of. She showed us the connections to inquiry and equity that we were not capitalizing upon. For example, in "Traffic Jam", an exercise used primarily for team building and collaboration, there's actually a great example of the inquiry cycle in the ways that groups problem solve. She pointed out another example when we used a text-based protocol on equity. She showed us that it would have been more useful to spend time unpacking some of the assumptions that were raised by the participants to really get at the question of equity. Debbi also reminded us to give ourselves permission to do less and end up with more.

In our rush to cover ground we'd lost sight that by allowing more time for the deep processing of a single activity we could actually gain more than by trying to complete multiple activities.

John shared with the beginning group of facilitators that some of the sessions for debriefing included too many people. It was difficult for people to hear and only a few people could share ideas in the allotted time. We have since changed our structure so that we each facilitate smaller groups of participants. Instead of 4 facilitators with 60 participants we have broken it down into two groups of 25-30 with two facilitators each.

John also cautioned us about which protocols needed more preparation before implementation, so that the participants would not think a protocol was ineffective just because it was difficult to facilitate. There is always a need for balance between wanting to help people prepare and allowing them to jump in. Sometimes we spend so much time on the preparation that we don't have enough time to allow them to jump in. However, we found that more often, we allow people to jump in without preparing them fully. By adding the eyes of a peer observer, we got a clearer picture of our practice in this area.

Balance comes into play again when we try to decide how much to tell someone before allowing them to construct their own understanding. Dancing this balance point is a unique "pas de deux" with each individual. Each pas de deux is different depending upon the two dancers and the music and message they wish to tell. Each CFG seminar will have to be different with respect to content and process to meet the needs of the participants. This peer observation process has driven home the need for the individualized attention to process with each new seminar.

Finally, did we accomplish our goal of helping people see and understand that peer observation feedback can be unique and valuable-time will tell. I believe that our facilitators in the Northwest now understand the value and will use it to improve their practice. We've already begun to make changes in the way we structure our sessions. By experiencing and modeling peer observation we/they will begin to see how to bring it to life for the participants of our CFG seminars. ■

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CFG Snapshot

Marty Lamansky teaches Speech, Social Studies and an alternative credit recovery program class at Steamboat Springs HS in Colorado where CFG groups have been active for the past five years. He was trained in July of 1998 in Dedham, MA. This year the school has four active groups with 10-12 members in each group. They meet once a month during a 95 minute planning time. Marty has this to report about his group:

"This is a completely new group for me. This is partly due to the fact that we now have four groups instead of three but more significantly we made a conscious effort to mix new staff members with veteran staff, mix departments, and mix teaching personnel with non-teaching personnel (administrators, counselors, and aides)."

"We started our first meeting with *Connections* then a grounding activity of Two Lies and a Truth. Both of these went a long way to help the group relax, breathe, laugh and get to know each other. We then spent time talking about the purpose of Critical Friends. Here there was heavy emphasis on the essential part of Critical Friends. We concluded with a *Chalk Talk* around the question: What should the group do to help you in your teaching practice and how should we operate? We debriefed about what direction we wanted to go as a group. The group felt safety was a big issue since we are still getting to know each other. As a result we decided to start with our successes and everyone agreed to bring something to the next meeting that works for them in their teaching practice - an assignment, a classroom management strategy, student work, etc."

"At our next meeting everyone brought something in to talk about. Four questions were posed to everyone for reflection and presentation.

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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 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?

At Steamboat Springs, we are beginning to see progress in how we work together, learn together, and work with students. Meaningful conversations are at the heart of our continuous efforts to improve our school. Are conversations enough to improve schools? Margaret J. Wheatley, in her book *Turning to One Another*, answers it best: “To advocate human conversation as the means to restore hope to the future is as simple as I can get. But I’ve seen that there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation. When a community of people discovers that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”

Dave Schmid 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. You can reach Dave at dschmid@sssd.k12.co.us and Cindy at cgay@sssd.k12.co.us.

Christina Baldwin, *Calling The Circle, The First And Future Culture* (New York: Bantam Books 1998)

Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage To Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1998)

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

CFG Snapshot

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- 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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In 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 mantras, 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 CFG 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

not raised the bar in our CFG work to include awareness of, understanding of, and actions to address the issues of power and control as they impact millions of students and teachers in urban, rural and poor areas.

I am well aware of the hard work we have been doing to

*“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”
-Mahatma Gandhi*

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.

Assuming that most teachers are unaware of the dynamics of power and control in their educational settings, how can we raise the issue of power and control without alienating educators and limiting chances for change to occur? I am wondering why we in the National School Reform Faculty have

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 inequities wherever 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

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