

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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Walking the Talk...Peer Observation of Our Facilitation

Center of Activity Report – Jill Hudson, Washington

The NSRF Washington Center of Activity is housed at CES NW in Tacoma, Washington.

Our story: CFG seminar facilitators from the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest invite peer observers from NSRF. After five years of successful CFG seminars, the facilitators and I were puzzled with our participants' lack of interest in peer observation. Was it too threatening? Was it too difficult to find time to observe each other? What exactly was keeping people from utilizing the unique data that only peer observation would provide? As we wondered about these questions we realized that very few of us were practicing what we preached. As facilitators, we often talked about the benefits of peer observation, but we hadn't tried it ourselves. We hadn't walked the talk.

We decided to dive in to find out just how valuable peer observation could be. I invited two people from the NSRF to attend and observe our CFG seminars in Seattle. To prepare for this event, each of the NW facilitators selected a peer observation protocol and a focus area or question for the NSRF peer observers. Just taking this first step got us thinking about our work in a different way. Instead of just focusing on the content of the seminar, we began to understand the necessity of focusing on the process that we planned to use as responsive facilitators.

I hoped that if we modeled the use of peer observation, our participants along with us, their facilitators, would see the value of a completely different

kind of feedback, feedback that goes beyond the lessons learned from looking at student and teacher work with protocols.

What we asked of the observers

The peer observers, John D'Anieri and Debbi Laidley, came to Seattle. Here are some of the overarching questions that we wanted their feedback about:

1. How do we meet the needs of the different levels of learners in our seminar? (We were holding seminars for new or "beginning" coaches and for "continuing" coaches.)
2. Timing and pace – How do we know if we rush through things? Should we spend more time on one exercise versus another?

"As facilitators, we often talked about the benefits of peer observation, but we hadn't tried it ourselves. We hadn't walked the talk."

3. Balance – Are we balancing our efforts between a focus on the beliefs, the functions, and the structures of our work?
4. How effectively are we introducing the ideas of inquiry and equity?

What the observers provided us

The observers did some amazing things. On the first day both John and

Debbi observed the Beginning seminar and provided some overall warm feedback and probing questions during the facilitators' debrief at the end of the day. John and Debbi were both amazed at how far we had taken the group in one day and we needed to hear that warm feedback. They saw the value and efficacy with each of the activities

that we used. One probing question for us was, "What would you gain or lose from engaging partici-

pants in a protocol on student work on the first day?" From this question we realized that we were building up the background knowledge and skills to look at student work but really did not allow the participants an opportunity to look at work from their practice on the first day; we were saving that for later in the seminar. The obvious became clear because John and Debbi brought a fresh perspective on our seminar. I could already tell that this was going to be a provocative and worthwhile learning experience.

After the first day, John continued to observe the beginning CFG seminar experience and Debbi moved to be with the continuing group. Debbi scripted the seminar using a four-column format. The first column contained descriptions of the events of the day including quotes from the facilitators so that we could look at what we actually said. The second column included warm feedback and the third column included cool feedback in the form of questions. The fourth column listed questions and feedback specifically

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An Interview with Lois Butler...

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her home school (CVCA). Not only that, Keisha traveled to the NSRF Equity meeting with me last Fall. She has come full circle and is now modeling collaborative coaching practices with her own students and their families!

Another example can be found in my work with aspiring principals. In Chicago we have something called "the 84 Hour Principal's Program." I have seen principals enter our sessions looking to "do the time" and I've seen them leave as courageous leaders who are ready to take up the cause of their students and teachers. So yes, I'd say the work continually lives up to my expectations because the work keeps changing, and that my expectations of myself and others are also continually expanding.

As NSRF continues to evolve and grow, what are your greatest hopes and fears for our work?

I hope that our work (NSRF) will continue to be dynamic and that we will strategically take our work to our communities and parents. Too many pockets of parents, community members, community organizations and

religious groups are disconnected and working in isolation. I think that the practices we use around issues of equitable teaching and learning, knowing the self and others intimately, can play a valuable role in restoring a sense of hope and empowerment to our neighborhoods. I believe we can help our communities become united in proactive responses to the problems that are affecting all of our lives.

My greatest fear is that we might become content with "tinkering around the edges" of reform and fall short of our need to continually build and stretch our base. The need for "transformative leadership" that is informed by the voices of parents, teachers, administrators, communities and students continues to grow. We won't be able to keep pace with the need for transformed leadership unless we continue to attend to our own growth and transformation, both as individuals and as a movement for change. I guess I'm saying that we will only be effective working from 'without,' if we are continuing to work on what we value and believe from 'within' our hearts. I believe that this internal work needs to

be intentional and that it needs to be acknowledged because who you are, and will become, impacts on what you're doing to, for, and with, others. *How do you see your role in the next period of our work?*

I see myself moving toward greater community alliances in a time when life is blinking a "chaos" light. As a retired educator, I hope to move beyond the schools with our process for having "changed" conversations, both one-to-one and in the community as a whole.

Any closing comments?

I'm grateful for this journey and these experiences that have allowed me the courage to "wade into the water" of change, confident of the values and benefits that await children and their families if we cross to the other side together. ■

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Creating a Culture...

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First, what are the routines and structures of the day that provide opportunities for meaningful thoughtful conversation? Or, to break that question down further:

Do our underlying beliefs that support the way our school functions embrace a culture in which all members feel encouraged to engage in meaningful conversation? Do we make decisions based on democratic principles that allow all stakeholders a voice and promote conversations about things that are important to the entire school community? Is our staff development program designed to honor and utilize the expertise that lies within the staff of our school? Does

it avoid quick fixes and allow opportunities for teachers to construct their own meaning, their own new learnings? Because we value a culture of conversation, how do we purposefully include time for that conversation in the school day? Do teachers have time to learn together, plan together and reflect on their practice within the school day? Are activities that promote conversations, such as CFGs, embedded in the teacher's workday?

And secondly, what are the processes we will use to ensure thoughtful conversation whenever people are gathered together?

As we have worked towards affirmative answers to these questions, our

CFG program has grown. At Steamboat Springs High School, we now have four voluntary Critical Friends Groups that involve over three quarters of our staff. These groups meet during the regular school day and have become part of the culture of learning at our school.

What are the processes we will use to ensure thoughtful conversation whenever people are gathered together?

To create a ritual of conversation in the culture of our school, we have had to replace the old ways of doing business with new and more thoughtful processes. This requires planning for each and every gathering with specific

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