Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

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

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f we want to support each other’s inner lives we must remember a simple rule: 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 forward. One 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 the 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, where people truly listened and valued each other’s voice, that it felt like to work in an environment that would 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?

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 spending 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 have 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. A Thames. 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. (continued on page 16)

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Walking the Talk… (continued from page 6)

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 found it to be a great source 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 some 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 have inter- nalized 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 also cautioned us about which protocols we need to explore further before implementing, 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, so 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.

Balancing Again

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 want to see how to bring it to life for the participants of our CFG seminars.

You can contact Jill Hudson at jhudson@icwestnorth.org

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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 seminar facilitation, 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 could provide?

As we pondered 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 an observer observation CFG seminar 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 center observer CFG seminar. 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 process and the selection of the tools 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 our participants to address:

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?

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 participants 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 light of questions. The fourth column listed questions and feedback specifically related to her home school (CYCA). Not only that, Keisha traveled to the NSRF Executive 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, the facilitators and I were saving 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 experiment worked up to our expectations because the work keeps changing, and that my expectations of myself and others are 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 “transformational change” that is inspired 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 “chao” 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 of the values and benefits that await children and their families if we cross to the other side together.

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An Interview with Lois Butler...

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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 focused on building an understanding of how to ask questions and promote learning? 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 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 (continued on page 16)