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

I f we want to support each other’s inner lives we must remember a simple thing: 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.

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Four questions were posed to everyone for reflection and presentation:

1. How do you create a learning community in a school that helps teachers make sense of new ideas, challenges, and complexities about our work? People learn, and then incorporate them into our 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.

2. 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.

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Our work with CFGs has provided tools and structures to help a 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 our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment so safe, where people truly listened and valued our opinions. An environment...
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.

O ur 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 could 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 our observation protocols and a focus group with peer observers. The observers did some amazing things. On the first day we learned that we planned to use as responsive 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 Ladley, came to Seattle. Here are some of the overarching questions that we wanted them to consider:

1. How do we meet the needs of the different levels of learners in our seminar? (Were we 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?

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 by losing 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 didn’t 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 probing questions. The fourth column listed questions and feedback specifically targeted to the home school (CVCA). 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 closing of schools caused me to question the role that would be played by the Just and Fair School and how the climate of the school and community would affect it.

The need for “transformative conversations” in our work arises from 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 “within,” 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 accomplished because who you are, and what becomes of our work, is what you’re doing to, for, and with, others. How do you see your role in the next period of our work?

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An Interview with Lois Butler... (continued from page 12)

“Creating a Culture...” (continued from page 4)

First, what are the routines and structures of the day that provide opportunities for meaningful thought?

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 which allow all stakeholders a voice and promote conversations about things that are important to the entire school community? Is our staff development designed to honor and utilize the expertise that lies within the staff of our school?

As we have worked toward 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 when 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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As we have worked toward affirmative answers to these questions, our 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 conversations” in our work arises from 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 “within,” 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 accomplished because who you are, and what becomes of our work, is what you’re doing to, for, and with, others. How do you see your role in the next period of our work?

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