Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Using a Blog to Intensify Reflections
Donna Reid, Texas

“I want to teach like Tiger Woods plays golf.” I heard this declaration at a textbook presentation several years ago and it has really stuck with me. The speaker explained that Tiger Woods is truly a reflective practitioner when it comes to teaching golf. The public just sees him out on the fairways, but Tiger spends a lot of time behind the scenes studying the game, observing others, analyzing film, and reflecting on his own performance. The result is excellence.

Isn’t this what CFGs can help us achieve as teachers? My hope is that setting aside time for study and reflection about our teaching practice will help us achieve excellence in our classrooms.

[Donna’s Reflections, 12-20-2003]

T h e above excerpt, from my blog Donna’s Reflections (http://donna.robreid.com/weblog/), sums up why regular reflection is so important—careful consideration and analytical deliberation of our experiences can help guide us to excellence whether our profession is teaching, coaching, or even playing golf. Writing reflections leads to powerful, personalized learning that sticks with us.

Another entry puts it this way: Conclusio said best: “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection; second, by imitation; third by experience, which is the bitterest.” [Donna’s Reflections, 8-16-2004]

So how do we make time and space to engage in this “noblist” method of learning wisdom? I recognized the power of regular reflection when I served as a CFG coach and chair of the school-wide portfolio committee at Johnston Middle School in Houston, Texas. Simply encouraging the habit of regular professional reflection kept the faculty focused on the mission of developing a safe, caring, respectful learning environment where both faculty and students could challenge themselves to be life-long learners.

My own reflections blossomed two years ago when I became the lead coach for CFG support for the Houston A+ Challenge. At the time, I wondered how I could best encourage myself to continuously reflect, make my work public, and document my thinking. To model these essential habits, I started authoring the blog Donna’s Reflections.

Blogs, or web logs, are journals that are posted on the World Wide Web. Besides text, the entries may include photographs, document files, and links to other websites. Because they allow readers to add their own comments to an entry, blogs are more interactive than a typical communication tool. They are also far more public since blogs are accessible anytime, anywhere, from any computer connected to the web.

Of course, anybody can keep a journal with pen and paper, but the blog ramps journaling up a notch by making it public and making the reflections interactive. For example, after every meeting of my current CFG, I post a summary of our activities and every member’s written reflections. Each member finds the opportunity to express their own thinking and learning, and these comments enliven the blog by turning the reflections into a conversation instead of a monologue. This is my first time responding in this medium, and I’m amazed by the different modes of sharing technology provides us. I find great value in having a “voice,” but more value in being able to share it in this way and get feedback.

HURRAH for CFG work! [Marcela, 3-24-2004]

I love the quick posting of everyone’s thoughts. It makes my own reflection of the meeting more intense and deep. [Michaela, 4-13-2003]

Interestingly, the blog has strengthened our CFG in several ways. First, through regular postings and comments, our work is public. This is how we maintain a way to sustain conversation in between meetings. Second, it produces an ongoing record of our work together, and importantly, that record is public. Most importantly, writing the blog has intensified my own reflections by helping me discover that reflecting is not just something to do during the final ten minutes of a meeting—it is truly a part of my work. Earlier this year, I admitted: I’ve once again been struck by how central the act of reflecting is to my work and how my work unravels when I do not deliberately reflect. I’m embarrassed that I have posted so few entries over the last few months. I slacked off when a colleague wondered out loud if anybody was really reading the blog. The implication was that I spent writing entries wasn’t “worth it.” As a result, I feel like I’ve been moving from deadline to deadline in my work without much inspiration. I’ve learned that my blog is as much a tool for motivating curricular planning and action (continued on page 16) as it is for reflecting on my work.

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Participants resisted our structure. The resistance was directed mainly toward the limitations of our categories. It seemed difficult for the participants to talk about what it meant to be male, female, black, white. We found that this protocol pushed participants into talking about comfort zones.

The discomfort was not limited to race. A faction of men broke off from the white group and became a men’s group. Some black men joined the men’s group and defined themselves as males. There was a black woman’s and a white woman’s group. There were no mixed-race women’s groups and only one biracial group (which was mixed race).

Once the participants had moved beyond their discomfort, however, which was mostly caused by the act of being honest and coming from their heart, they became immersed in the dialogue. They were so involved in their discussions, in fact, that they resisted again when we began to reconvene the groups.

This experience forced the participants to deal with their good, bad, and ugly assumptions and stereotypes. Their learning was revealed as we debriefed the protocol. A connection had been made. The realization that what we had just put through them was what many educators put our students through every day in our classrooms. We harbor assumptions, and we form relationships and create expectations based on those assumptions. Furthermore, our students rise to those expectations both positive and negative. This is how we make our first success or failure with students. It was an eye opener for just about everyone who participated.

We learned that using CFG practices can help facilitate transformation. In developing safe spaces that allow for discussing difficult issues, if we are grounded, we can make an honest and productive approach to relationship building resulting in reflective practice. Who we are, and what we bring to our work-matters. Sometimes in the process, we experience discomfort, sometimes resistance. The process of improving learning experiences for children and adults requires that we look at our motivation, the assumptions that shape our expectations, and finally at our practice.

Searching for Answers... (continued from page 4)

Coaching for Educational Equity... (continued from page 8)

Endnotes
1 See Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, Chapter I, 1998. In this chapter, Palmer addresses the issue of identity and integrity when it comes to teaching in the classroom. The ideas he puts forward are just as relevant and challenging when thinking about coaching for educational equity.

2 See Julian WerginL, Bipedal Bridges of Hope: Building Relationships for Educational Change, 1998. My thinking and understanding of the many forms that oppression takes and what can be done to interrupt that deal from it has been deeply influenced by this book and my association with the author.

See also Stephen D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 1995. This book gave me new insight into the connection of critical reflection and the recognition of hegemonic assumptions. Brookfield writes, “The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes completely imbedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify any particular group or groups of people actively conspiring to keep others silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony are part and parcel of everyday life—the taken-for-granted, commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that many of us take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here, it is the conspiracy of the normal.”


4 Myles Horton and Puerto Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 222.

5 Myles Horton and Puerto Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 220.


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principals are now engaged in central office work that it was inevitable that our work would eventually flourish at the district level. These administrators have experienced the power of making their authentic work public to their peers for the purpose of receiving feedback to improve the effectiveness of their work. We now know that whole districts can be transformed when the practice of professional learning communities becomes embedded into the culture of teachers, principals, and central office administrators.

Much has been written recently about the essential role of professional learning communities in improving student achievement. It seems as though every educational journal I read has a reference to learning communities. However, not enough has been written about NSRF practice and effectiveness in improving the quality of the educational experience for students and teachers. Until now. This fall, the educational honor society Phi Lambda Theta’s journal “Educational Horizons” will be entirely devoted to NSRF practice in schools and universities across the country. Each Center of Activity will receive ten copies to share with their colleagues.

In celebration of NSRF’s tenth anniversary, the Lastinger Center, an NSRF Center of Activity in Southern Florida, has received funding from the Vachos Foundation to document our learning over the last ten years. This publication will be an invaluable resource to coaches and facilitators across the country working at any level of schooling.

It is absolutely necessary to document our learning so that others may see what we have done. We are committed to generating the resources to support and document research that will provide the evidence necessary to deepen and sustain our work through our second decade of Critical Friends Groups and facilitative leadership.

At this year’s Winter Meeting, my colleague Gene Thompson-Cone boldly stated that our work “goes against the tide of current educational reforms.” I take great pride in that statement. I am also aware that we are contributing to a very powerful undertow, pulling us back to our core beliefs of equity and social justice for every child. Although the tide is easier to see, it is the undertow that disrupts the status quo that can cause the sands to shift. NSRF is committed to continuing our tradition to build on the talents and strengths of every student and to interrupt those practices that do not serve our students well.

I wish you all a school year guided by inquiry and curiosity, supported by colleagues and community, and focused on the success of each child.

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Visit our web site at www.nsrfharmony.org for our online archive of Connections, Upcoming Event listings, Winter Meeting registration, Protocol library and more!

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Intelligences at the Table
Christina Landini, Connecticut

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Why don’t we use a Data Analysis Protocol for the kids they talk at the funeral speeches?” he said. I was floored—offended—utterly resistant. The mere suggestion of looking at any part of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar as “data” was alienating! A decade waiting to happen—and in my classroom, no less. In all seriousness, Peterson Toscano, close colleague and esteemed fellow CFG coach, and I had been doing this kind of thing for years, using Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory to add depth and texture to my teaching of English to ninth graders, albeit on a much less radical scale.

This plan of his would be, in fact, the ultimate test of MI theory in practice: employing a protocol designed to analyze data (numbers, charts, timelines and the like) to look closely, rather, at language, thereby providing a way for students who are naturally alienated by Shakespeare to understand why Mark Antony’s speech is dramatically more provocative and, in the end, successful, than Brutus.

During the ensuing class, we actually made good Peterson’s idea: we asked the students to count words through many times each orator mentions Caesar, how many times he mentions Rome, how many times he refers to himself; how many total lines in each speech; how many different verbs each man uses, and how many times each is used; how many pauses, how much interaction with the Plebeians, etc.). Then they charted and/or graphed their findings, checking data as to why the Plebeians respond the way they do in that scene and what the eventual outcomes of these speeches might be, using evidence from the collected data. Without prompting, students who had been almost entirely passive that year—most prominently, the math/logical and naturalist kids—eagerly pulled out their analysis tools to confirm the power of leveraging multiple intelligences in the classroom, I learned another important thing: enlist other intelligences when possible, but don’t go too far in the opposite direction from the majority’s comfort zone. As in thoughtful CFGs, let the group and the individual, be creative, push beyond the routine but maintain circumstance and overall balance.

This winter, I found myself at dinner on the North End of Boston after a gueling day of being Critical Friend to Ros Peterson-Veatch’s coaching at Winter Meeting, discussing with my Watkinson colleagues something that had been nagging me for months. Why, if I have for years now so deliberately studied and implemented MI theory to great, lasting effect, I believed with new resolve that I have not being doing the same in my work with adults in my CFG coaching? Although I felt like an idiot, this conversation served as a major “Aha!” moment, and I tripped over my own tongue trying to ask all the questions that arose: What if the coach’s attentiveness to multiple intelligences really could have something to do with engagement in CFG work? Might we invite more people to the table—or people back to the table who have “tried” CFGs and determined that it’s not for them—by being more inclusive of all of the intelligences? What if we more intimately applied the same concepts and methodologies to working with adults that we do with kids? What if we pushed ourselves to broaden our practice, make it more inclusive, more diverse?

Let me speak plainly here: NSRF protocols do work for the people at the table and, no matter what, the context is the content—examining student work, pushing our thinking and practice as teachers and educators of all kinds. Further, there are many, many coaches and facilitators who already do what I am suggesting, because they’re smart and versatile, and because they intuitively know how to stretch and reach out to those who would otherwise be alienated by the highly cerebral, heavily verbal/linguistic, intrapsychic, interpersonal work that we generally do in CFGs.

But what about the people mentioned above—those who have never come to the CFG table or, worse, those who have left the table? When I look around at my school, the vast majority of these people (in both contexts) are my colleagues who tend heavily towards the body/kinesthetic,

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