Learning to See with a Third Eye
(continued from page 3)
for active listening and regular real-
ity checks with “insider participants.”
We relied on their feedback and their families with whom I’m work-
ing. I need to “check-in” about my progress and conclusions in order for the inevitable bias I bring to the action-research and change processes. Basically, I hear Dr. Irvine’s words as a caution that I need to “know what I don’t want” before I can learn to co-
construct valid meaning and propose positive interventions in support of “other people’s children.”
While Dr. Irvine’s analysis has given me much to chew on as a doc-
toral student in training, it has also
moved my thinking about collaboration in the here and now. So I’m thinking about what I want to do differently in my work with new coaches of learning communities, and that has led me to revisit the reflective questions that Nancy Mohr penned a few years ago. Nancy wrote:
Reflections: Whatever activity you are engaged in reflection can be explicitly about equity. How does this promote equity? What does this have to do with equity? What does this mean in terms of equity? And I have added: Who’s at the table? Who’s miss-
ing? Why aren’t those voices included? How can we include those whose per-
spectives have been silenced histori-
cally? How does the work we’ve just
done to support our students? How does it serve those who have been marginalized in the past? I don’t think these questions are the legendary “silver bullet,” but I do think that regular reflection and debriefing that considers these as pos-
ible prompts for every activity is a step that will help me to better serve all our students. How does it serve those students who have been involved with the Coalition? The other question that I first addressed sporadically, as an “add-on.”
Yesterday, I facilitated a series of “Lunchtime Learning” sessions about learning of the protocol; and (4) if I take the role of the teacher, make her less confident and present the way defensive during the debriefing.
When David and I had debriefed both of our observations, giving each other feedback, we reflected on the process as a whole. We both found it very valuable and plan to engage it regularly. David also noted that the strength of
the protocol as we experi-
enced it was in our asking probing ques-
tions of one another during the debrief-
ings, yet the protocol itself makes no mention of probing questions as a debriefing
tool. We found that to be a weakness in the protocol and will make that revision when we use it in the future.
We see a number of implications for our peer observation work with a group of new CFG coaches. First, when the 18 students in our seminar begin to engage in peer observations in their schools, we hope that class-
room doors will begin to open wider throughout their schools. Second, in our roles as CFG coaches, as NSRF Coaches Seminar facilitators and as instructors in higher education, our own coaching, facilitation of peer
teaching will improve as a result of our peer observation practice. We look forward to our future learning together.

Introducing and Practicing Peer Observation...
(continued from page 5)
E dolorah Frazier is Program
Coordinator of the Addison/Rutland
M.Ed. in Educational Leadership at
the University of Vermont. She is
also a member of the NSRF Vermont
Center of Activity. She can be reached at Edolare@gmail.net

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
(continued on page 13)

Spring 2005
Katy Kelly, Indiana
Interview with Gene Thompson-Grove
May 2005
Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
7

The following interview with
Gene Thompson-Grove, Co-
director of NSRF, was con-
ducted on November 11th, 2004, by
Katy Kelly, National Coordinator of
the NSRF National Office.

Katy: Gene, you are one of the found-
ers of NSRF. How did that come about?
Gene: Faith Dunne, Paula Evans and I
were working for the Citibank Project at the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University.
K: Let’s back up a bit. How did you get
involved with the Coalition?
G: In 1987 I was working for the Boston chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility. I had announced my resignation effective the end of the school year. Joe McDonald, who was a Clinical Professor in Brown University’s Education Department was going on sabatical and invited me to apply for his position while he was on leave for two years. Ted Sizer was chair of the Education Department at that time and he hired me. At the time the Coalition was not a separate organization from Brown’s Education Department. As the Coalition grew, it moved across the street to a separate
place. It had some of its own staff, but the chair of the Coalition (Sizer) was also the chair of the Education Department at Brown.
K: Okay, now back to the Citibank project. Was the purpose of the Citibank project to offer support to teachers in Coalition schools?
G: Yes. What we did was to bring together a group of teachers from around the country that met for one week in the spring. They developed a curriculum that centered on a question of educational equity. Afterwards they really deepened their learning about teaching practices in Coalition schools. They then came to Brown for a month to
teach the course that they had developed at the Brown Summer High School for Teachers. They taught for four week in the morning and then spent the afternoon in a seminar to debrief the morning’s teaching, and to talk about how to support their col-
legues in other Coalition Schools.
K: So did the Coalition develop any groups come about?
G: We had managed to stretch our Citibank project money from a four-
year grant into five years, and we were at a point where we were thinking about what was next.
We knew that a large grant to pub-
lic education was going to be given by
Ambassador Walter Annenberg - but we didn’t know how much or when.
Then, one day, we walked into our offices at Brown and found out that the money had been given and that we now worked for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR). We didn’t have a director and we didn’t have a clear mission, and there was a fair amount of confusion about who exactly we were.
Paula Evans, the Director of Professional Development, was vision-
ary and action-oriented. So, we gath-
ered about twelve teachers and admin-
istrators from around the country with whom we had been working, and said to them, “We could apply to AISR for a large grant to do professional develop-
ment the way we think it ought to be
done, using what we have learned over the last five years. If you could do anything, what would you do?”
We used people’s own experience - what they said they needed and what they had learned about effective profes-
sional development - and we read the research. The beauty of the tool was that kind of professional development that we described as being most effective and most equitable was also being mirrored in the research.
People like Milbrey McLaughlin, Joan Talbert, Ann Lieberman and Judith Warren Little were writing about pro-
fessional development that was job-
embedded, and done within the context of one’s daily practice. We knew that summer institutes, where you go to be re-
ergized or maybe even trans-
formed, were in many cases ineffec-
tive. Practitioners said that even though they had a commitment to be different when they got back to school, by October they pretty much did things the way they always had, because they hadn’t made a commitment to do things differently, but because it was too hard to change one’s practice all on one’s own.
We knew the professional devel-
opment needed to be in the context of the classroom and counter to the way schools are set up in which teachers’ work in isolation, don’t make their practice public, and are not account-
able to each other and there are no
norms in place for giving or receiving feedback on their practice. So, in 1995, the National School Reform Faculty and its Critical Friends Groups became the first professional development initiative of AISR. Paula Evans, Faith Dunne and I were the first co-directors of the program. Financially, the program was well supported by Annenberg, but our focus was on developing work that would eventually be self-sufficient.
K: What are some differences between how you envisioned the work then and now?
(continued on page 13)
Interview with Gene Thompson-Grove

(continued from page 7)

Gene Thompson-Grove can be contacted at gthompsongrove@earthlink.net

In our continuous effort to improve our practice, the NSRF facilitators in the Vermont Center of Activity have begun a process of peer obser-
vation as we facilitate New Coaches Seminars. David Leo-Nyquist and I have been coaching a CFG for three years in the context of a graduate semin-
ar that focuses on building a leadership that we teach together. It is our intention that over the course of our three-year semi-
inar, we will have introduced all of the elements of a five-day New Coaches Seminar and practiced them in many ways. In this, the third year, David and I decided to introduce peer observation to the group, and it was during this peer observation “lesson” that David and I also engaged in peer observa-
tion between us for the first time. Our intentions were both to model good peer observation practices and to improve our teaching. In my own practice as a teacher, I have found peer observation to be the most transforma-
tive part of Critical Friends work. I was eager to share the power of peer observation with our students and with David, who had never engaged in it before.

In our first session on peer obser-
vation, David observed my facilita-
tion using the Observer as Coach protocol. My focus question was, “Am I giving the group members the skills they need to try the Observer as Coach protocol with a peer observa-
tion partner in their schools?” My approach to teaching this material was to start by asking everyone to read the protocol, “Peer Coaching: Observer as Coach.” (protocol available online at www.melharmon.org/ connections.html) Then I explained that I would be taking the role of a classroom teacher whose class they would observe on videotape, using this protocol. I asked the participants to form small groups and to plan the questions they would ask me during the pre-conference. Then, in character, I fielded questions from each group in a mock pre-conference. I paused and stopped out of character to debrief the pre-conference, then we watched a video of “my” class engaged in an inquiry science lesson. I chose a 20-minute video clip of an ambitious science lesson that presented some complex teaching challenges. Following the video, the small groups reconvened to plan the debriefing and again I fielded their questions in character and stopped out of character at the end to debrief the debriefing.

David observed and took notes throughout all of this without parti-
cipating or interrupting. In debriefing with me later, he first restated my focus question: “Am I giving the group members the skills they need to try the Observer as Coach protocol with a peer observation partner in their schools?” Then he offered his impression that the participants were very ready to engage in the protocol back in their schools, citing data from his observations. He noted that they had skillfully engaged in both the pre-
conference and the debriefing. He also mentioned that in the final debriefing of the process, the participants had asked many insightful questions.

During our debriefing, David asked me the following probing ques-
tions:

• What did you intend for them to be planning in the pre-conference triad? Do you have some stock pre-conference ques-
tion that you want them to know/arrive at?
• Why did you choose to show this particular video? What are its strengths and liabilities for this pur-
pose? How might this video be made more useful?
• You role-played an essentially con-
fident teacher who was very open to challenging feedback. How will you help these participants deal with embarrassment and defensiveness if they should encounter these in future peer observation partners?
• Does it serve your purposes to com-
bine your roles of role-player and facilitator, or would it be more effec-
tive to have your co-facilitator take one of those roles?
• I found these questions to be very
proven and useful. Over the course of a 45-minute debriefing, I struggled with them and concluded that when I introduce a group to peer observation in the future, I will: (1) provide some stock pre-conference questions upon which the group can build; (2) seek other classroom videos and/or edit the one I used to better suit this purpose; (3) ask my co-facilitator either to role-
play the teacher or to facilitate the

In the beginning, there was an appli-
cation process that we don’t have now. We had to pay for the initial seminar – as well as funds to provide ongoing support to the school. The principal and the school had to make a commitment to CFG work before they sent teachers to the new coaches seminar, and principals had to attend a three-day seminar as well. In the application, the school had to write about how CFGs would help them achieve their goals for improved student learning. During the first three years, we paid coaches a stipend of $2000 a year. Part of the commitment was to attend the Winter Meeting.

The application process also included the condition that CFG mem-
bers, coaches and principals would work toward completing professional portfolios in which they documented changes they made in their practice and student learning as a result of their participation in a CFG.

K: Two things you mentioned – princi-
pals being involved and taking part in a principals’ institute, and the portfolio component, are no longer required. What do you think about that?

G: What happened was that each year we had less and less money to sup-
port this work. It took huge financial resources to bring people together to instinctions, meetings and conferences. It was difficult to require portfolios when we didn’t have the funds to sup-
port either their development or ways to give each other feedback on them. We were just determining how we might use portfolios constructively in the context of changing practice when we left the Annenberg Institute and moved to the Harmony Education Center. Although schools and districts contributed a portion of the costs for preparing and supporting CFG coaches, in the last two years we were at AISR, since we left nearly all of our funding has come from fees for service from schools and districts.

K: Were principals integrated into CFGs in the first years?

G: Several of our CFGs had principals in them the first year. It was our belief that if we were going to change the culture of our schools, principals need-
ed to do the work with their teachers.

K: I know that question still comes up. Should a principal be part of a teacher’s CFG? Will their participation inhibit the CFG or will it enhance the whole?

G: That’s not the right question.

K: What is the question?

G: The question is: What does the fact that we are asking this question about principal participation tell us about the culture of our school, and is that the kind of culture we want?

K: What has surprised you about the evolution of this work?

G: What has really surprised me is that the concept of CFGs has continued. As we did our work in the late 1990s, we were always conscious that schools were becoming more and more stan-
dardized, with a great deal of pressure, along with sanctions, being exerted from the “top.” We were championing inter-
national accountability, as opposed to top-down accountability, and were interested in empowering ourselves to set our own high standards, and to take collective ownership and responsibility for the success and learning of all our students.

K: Why are you surprised that the work has continued?

G: It has surprised me that even though schools were wrestling with more and more mandates, including

No Child Left Behind, people continue to be willing to do work that runs coun-
ter to most of the profession’s norms – that they have been willing to do the hard work of making their practice public for the purpose of receiving feedback, of situating their learners, of believing that collaborating with their colleagues is time well spent.

I think this work taps into the reason many of us became educators, because ultimately it is about empowering our-

K: Gene, what are your hopes and fears for the future of the NSRF?

G: My hope is that we can assemble the kind of resources that will allow us to bring together the expertise and knowledge that’s in our network, as well as in our partner organizations.

I think collectively we have a lot of knowledge and experience that we don’t benefit in the whole of our lives and all of our centers of activity. I hope we can get to the point where that happens, and I believe that my contribution and the research and documentation ini-
tiative will be key. We need to all reach for brilliance in our work – we all need this each to do that.

My fear is that CFGs and Professional Learning Communities will go the way of Cooperative Learning and Multiple Intelligences, where people do the work at its most superficial level. We need to tell the story about the roots and the principles underlying this work. I am less interest-

ed in having our work described in the educational literature, just for the sake of having our name out there. What do I care about is that our work is cited in the literature in a substantive way. I want these to change the culture of our profession. I want our work to make a real difference for students.