What We Did Over Summer Vacation

Understanding "Our Work"

Chris Jones, Indiana

Part of the vocabulary that gets thrown around the national center, at the office or at national meetings is the term "Our Work." I have been confused by this term for a while. I know what my work is: building websites, answering phones and e-mail, helping to put together institute materials, but what is "Our Work?" I finally got to see "Our Work" recently.

I have been working at the NSRF National Center in Bloomington, Indiana, for over a year. It is never easy to integrate new people into an existing institution and there is not exactly a manual for working at NSRF. I was told a few things, had some questions answered, and was integrated into our NSRF staff CFG.

This arrangement worked well, but eventually the time came for my initiation: attending a coaches' institute. I never like to ask anyone to do things that I am not willing to do, so when a chance arose to go to a new coaches' institute in Indianapolis as part of the first Leadership Institute, I knew I needed to go. I had spent the last year making a website to try to encourage educators to become coaches and start CFGs, so I owed it to myself and the people I want to help to gain a better understanding of "Our Work."

> "Our Work" is as hard as changing the world, and as simple as asking other people what they think.

I saw educators with real concerns take the time - a full week - to try something new.

Many of them have been to several seminars, but what could make this one different? How could this one matter in a sea of seminars focused on improving schools? But it did. Over the week, you could see the change in everyone. I could see it in myself.

The "a-ha" factor is so high, it feels like it is something you always knew but forgot. At the same time it is one of the most difficult things I have done in my life. Distrust and competition are a part of my (and I suspect many others') culture. It is a hard thing to rewire your work to be more open and collaborative.

I am not sure if there is a standardized model of a New Coaches Institute, given the individual needs of different groups and talents of each facilitator, but this institute was pretty unique. It was designed to integrate teachers, community groups, students and parents at various points who were doing their own leadership development

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Challenging Assumptions

Camellia Cosgray, Indiana

When I was 6 years old, I began first grade at Harmony School. Harmony is a unique place. With 180 students from age 3 through age 18, all in the same building, there is a familial atmosphere, and collaboration is the rule rather than the exception. Though there have been many changes since that fateful first day of school 20 years ago, Harmony is still my second home and my extended family.

Last December, I completed the Art Education program at Indiana University (Bloomington), and I now hold an Indiana Teaching License. Though I am not teaching in the traditional sense, I am working with adolescents at Rhino's, the local all-ages club and youth center, which is also affiliated with Harmony School. I have also been working for the National School Reform Faculty (housed at the Harmony School Education Center) for about two and a half years, putting together binders for trainings, designing brochures, editing protocols, and generally trying to support coaches and facilitators in any way that I can. During this time I went from having no idea what protocols and even the organization itself were all about to feeling very comfortable with NSRF materials and having a good understanding of NSRF's mission and purpose. I knew what CFGs were all about. I understood the purpose of protocols and how to use them. I knew why we read the articles we read. Then I went to a CFG coaches institute in Indianapolis.

What I found was that I actually knew and understood very little. I'd read all the protocols countless times, I knew at least the titles of most of the articles (and the content of many), I'd even put together the binder we were using for this particular institute; all that "preparation," all that prior knowledge, didn't prepare me for the power of protocols and the importance of CFG work. What I found was that I had assumptions about what I knew, the work that I did, the work of coaches all over the country, and about myself. Although many of these assumptions were of a positive nature, they were still assumptions.

I used to believe that CFGs were easy, that they just "happened." It seemed so obvious to me: CFGs are an amazing tool, therefore most educators will buy in easily and quickly, and trust will follow. Since I had grown up in a place where collaboration was the norm, I assumed that

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parallel to ours. The overarching goal of the institute was to help with the transition of the five big Indianapolis High Schools into Small Learning Communities. It was a brave adventure, with high goals, but success was achieved in the very act of bringing all of these stakeholders together in a meaningful way for all of them, collaboration.

I am not sure if collaborative processes can be learned without collaborating. I can see now why our facilitators set straight to work in building us into a learning community. You have to model your goal. We were made responsible not only for our own learning, but also for the learning of everyone else. By sharing this responsibility, we were empowered to work together in ways that are meaningful and welcoming, but not necessarily easy. If collaboration were easy, it would be the norm. "Our work" of collaboration is hard and it does not help unless we make it public by sharing this work with others.

The labyrinth at the Fatima Retreat House, site of Chris and Camellia's Coaches Institute

I got a chance to share my work a few weeks after the institute. I recently attended a wedding where I ran into the mother of a college friend, who has been teaching for years. In the standard catching up, I told her what I do, and when I mentioned CFGs, she lit up. She had been to a seminar the previous week and had heard about them. We started to gush.

What resulted was a debriefing for both of us. It was done against the backdrop of the evergreen hills of Northern Idaho and after the contemplative silence of a Quaker wedding. It gave me a chance to reflect on what I had done and what "Our Work" really means. It is based on collaboration for student success, It is hard work because collaboration is not easy, but powerful in its ability to focus multiple resources on our practice, dilemmas and students. "Our Work" is driven on making this collaboration possible for every educator who cares about students. "Our Work" is as hard as changing the world and as simple as asking other people what they think.

The scary part is that I am sure that I am not done changing. It is a frightening prospect that one week can change your life, so I am not sure if we should add that to the brochures, but it would be honest. I still know what my work is, but I think I can add more of "Our Work" in my answer when people ask me, "So, what do you do?" ■

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most people wanted to collaborate. Now I know that it's not that simple – CFGs take time, commitment, energy, and above all, work. They are not "easy"; they don't just "happen". Buy-in is not instinctive for most people, and collaboration can be scary.

Another assumption that I held was that everyone involved in CFGs, including all trained coaches, know something about NSRF. During the course of this institute, it became clear that many of them do not, and some CFG members and even coaches may have never even heard of NSRF.

The personal assumptions I came face to face with are somewhat more difficult to articulate. I'd never really thought about what I assumed about other people and how that affects my interactions with them, let alone what other people may assume about me, and each other. The institute inspired me to reevaluate what we all bring to our relationships with other people, and to be more aware of my own assumptions about others. I try to really listen to people, to really hear what they are saying rather than thinking about what I am going to say in response, so that I may better understand where they are coming from. In this way, I hope to reduce the amount of miscommunication in my life.

Now that I am back in the "real world" (outside the CFG institute utopia), I am striving to apply the tools I gained. All staff at the Harmony School Education Center (including NSRF staff, of course) are members of a CFG, and there is also a Coaches CFG. I will be starting a CFG at Rhino's within the next month or so, and will be joining the Coaches CFG. I'm excited about this new stage in my professional development – I can't wait to begin coaching.

As I have heard so many times before without really believing it, this institute was life altering. It changed not only my approach to working with others, and my thoughts about teaching and learning, but also my approach to human interaction, and my idea of my self and my place in the world. ■

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