Eddying Out: Helping Your CFG Share Ownership of Planning and Leadership

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I
n whitewater paddling and rafting, eddies are marvelous places. Calm spots of water just below rocks or bends in the river, they offer blessed relief from the often chaotic and turbulent currents and waves to the paddler who “eddies out.” More importantly, they provide the essential opportunity to take stock, check equipment, scan the churning water ahead, and plan the “best line” accordingly. An eddy is never a final destination, but often a crucial step to reaching that destination.

Neither are CFGs ever really our destination (as all of our work is ultimately focused on improving student achievement). Yet, they are not just an occasional stop along the way, but instead an essential, and at times delightful, means towards reaching that end. Most CFG participants have experienced that wonder of finding calmer water together, removed from the schedule/paperwork/maddening crowd of the school day. Indeed, this time out is more than a respite from the routine; it is the opportunity to re-enter the daily chaos of our professional lives with new purpose, skill and support.

But CFG time, too, can develop its own sense of turbulence and chaos. Particularly for coaches, stress can build as agendas need to be developed, group members might not be on schedule for their meetings, and the coach becomes the default—planner. The coach feels the pressure to meet the deadlines productive, and the group loses the powerful advantage of the collaborative process. A need emerges to create an eddy within an eddy, to find time where individuals and the group as a whole can take a broader perspective and put their CFG work, too, to use some time to eddy out.

With our own group, we decided to address this need this past fall. After some consideration of what exactly it was that we wanted as a group, we clustered together our desired outcome: 1) some overall picture of what we hoped to accomplish as a group this year, 2) a shared sense of ownership/responsibility for future meetings, and 3) an opportunity to collaboratively identify our own individual goals for the year.

To meet these three goals, I developed the following structure. At the beginning of the meeting, I made three columns on the whiteboard: “individual work we want to bring to the group,” “topics we would like the group to read about and discuss,” and “school-wide issues for the group to discuss.” We wrote in our individual notebooks for ten minutes, brainstorming in each category. Then, in triads, people shared their lists with others; while in the process winnowing out our most important items in each category.

For the next step, we brought our individual lists to the whiteboard and wrote in one item under each category. After looking at the final list of goals on the board, we each used a marker to put a dot next to our two preferred choices. For those choosing from the non-individual categories, selections invariably reflect the group’s preferences as shown by the dots.

Five slots were intentionally left open for different times of the year, and we also decided that anyone with a pressing need (a student whose work has plummeted, an upcoming assessment that suddenly needed adaptation, a school-board decision with unexpected ramifications) could ask to be scheduled for the next meeting as necessary.

In the months since that meeting—months of exhilarating and draining negotiating of our school’s and students’ various currents and waves—the benefits of periodic eddying out as a group are clear. As coach I feel less on the spot for needing to plan month to month. Far more importantly, though, the group shares an authentic ownership for what we are doing, and also knows that the topics being addressed are the ones that need to be. We have taken the time to slip out of the current for a bit of perspective—the chance to sit in the eddy and look at where we need to go, individually and collectively as a group. Such perspective is well worth the time.

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Ridge Arts Actors… (continued from page 11)

Small Schools… (continued from page 15)

Spring 2005

Connections: A Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

17

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Connections: A Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
Returning to Cutler Ridge Middle School after a CFG coaches training in Boston, I became obsessed with creating a collaborative culture with my colleagues. As members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and avid students of Senge, we were primed for this next step: an actual structure for doing and sustaining our inquiry into our practice and its effect on our students. And, though the process has gone through more phases than the moon, it flourishes still with a new principal, Dr. Elizabeth Alves. To me, there is a direct link between classes and auditions where outstanding work is being produced by students and teachers, and the teachers’ active participation in a collaborative group. Some teachers begin the day with Connections. Chalk Talks abound in all disciplines. Working on scenes in theatre, students work in companies, where they present their work to each other for feedback along the path to making it public. Reflections on the work (what we were trying to do, what we actually did, why did we do it that way, and what we would do differently next time) are the norm.

These habits have greatly enhanced the work I do in theatre, especially with my Ridge Arts Acting Company. We rarely do published works. I feel middle school kids have so much to say, and have so few forums to give voice to their thoughts, feelings, concerns, delights, fears, and dreams. We build our performance pieces around these very personal issues, and doing so increases our sense of community. These pieces are truly unique to the group that produces them, because no other group is like them.

Earlier this year we were invited by Gene Thompson-Grove to take part in the closing ceremonies for the ATLAS Communities Principals’ Institute. The principals would be spending a week in March looking at data surrounding the “No Child Left Behind” legislation and the question of equity in its implementation. Working with national facilitators (including Gene and Daniel Baron), superintendents, principals, and teachers, they would struggle with all aspects of NCLB – Gene thought that perhaps a fitting close would be to hear from students on the issue. What effect does this have on students in the classroom? For their friends? For those students sitting in the back of their classes who seem totally disengaged? And how would we know when all children were succeeding? This sort of stumped them — in ALL the classrooms, with teachers who remember what it’s like to be a kid, and who listen to them. I suggested that maybe the people who created the law weren’t quite sure what it would look like, either. They think maybe a test might tell them how children are doing. Well! Florida has this “little thing” called the FCAT, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. “Is that why we have the FCAT? My students immediately pounced on that with very vocal protests. The overwhelming view was, if THAT’s what NCLB was about, maybe it was a trick? (Their words, not mine.) At that point, I offered the information that they would have the opportunity to speak to some principals who were good thinkers about teaching and learning, who would love to hear students’ views on this very volatile subject. Did they think they would have something to offer? They were more than willing to seize the challenge.

First they wrote poems about themselves and how they see the world... Megan writes, “Life is like broccoli — you love it or you hate it!” and extols us to “don’t set limits, boundaries... be cake!” Jenny proclaims, “I may be black, white, green, purple, orange, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Haitian, Chinese... but ain’t I somebody?” ... Jacinth’s words cry out: “Nobody knows, nobody sees, nobody hears me... My shell is cracking, you’ll soon know the truth...” Christina’s words sing, “I am the sweetest lemon you will ever taste, the saddest person you will ever see smile...” And sweet Kevin shocks with the words: “Middle school is a dangerous, brutal world in which everyone is alone.” I wept. These kids are so willing to offer their souls up for all the world to see. (Talk about going public with one’s work!) Clearly, the ATLAS principals would get an honest insight into these kids’ world. We had the opening to our presentation.

Now what? How could we create a group performance piece about the impact of NCLB on their school lives, that would be both theatrical and deliver a message we believed? As fate so often works, Pete Bermudez returned from one of his Cleveland NSRF work sessions with an article titled, “The Woodcrafters’ City.” Written by Rick Traw, and appearing in the January, 2002, edition of Language Arts Magazine, this is a cautionary tale of assessments passed from generation to generation, the story of the Children of Woodcrafter City. As fate so often works, Pete Bermudez returned from one of his Cleveland NSRF work sessions with an article titled, “The Woodcrafters’ City.” Written by Rick Traw, and appearing in the January, 2002, edition of Language Arts Magazine, this is a cautionary tale of assessments passed from generation to generation, the story of the Children of Woodcrafter City.