

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.

Our 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 would 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 and observe our CFG seminars in Seattle. To prepare for this event, each of the NW facilitators selected a peer observation protocol and a focus area or question for the NSRF peer observers. Just taking this first step got us thinking about our work in a different way. Instead of just focusing on the content of the seminar, we began to understand the necessity of focusing on the process that we planned to use as responsive facilitators.

I hoped that if we modeled the use of peer observation, our participants along with us, their facilitators, would see the value of a completely different

kind of feedback, 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 Laidley, came to Seattle. Here are some of the overarching questions that we wanted their feedback about:

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

3. Balance – Are we balancing our efforts between a focus on the beliefs, the functions, and the structures of our work?
4. How effectively are we introducing the ideas of inquiry and equity?

What the observers provided us

The observers did some amazing things. On the first day both John and

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

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that we used. One probing question for us was, "What would you gain or lose from engaging partici-

pants 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 did not 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 form of questions. The fourth column listed questions and feedback specifically

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An Interview with Lois Butler...

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her home school (CVCA). Not only that, Keisha traveled to the NSRF Equity 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 we have something called "the 84 Hour Principal's Program." I have seen principals enter our sessions looking to "do the time" and I've seen them leave as courageous leaders who are ready to take up the cause of their students and teachers. So yes, I'd say the work continually lives up to my expectations because the work keeps changing, and that my expectations of myself and others are also continually expanding.

As NSRF continues to evolve and grow, what are your greatest hopes and fears for our work?

I hope that our work (NSRF) will continue to be dynamic and that we will strategically take our work to our communities and parents. Too many pockets of parents, community members, community organizations and

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 leadership" that is informed by 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 'without,' 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 acknowledged because who you are, and will become, impacts on what you're doing to, for, and with, others. *How do you see your role in the next period of our work?*

I see myself moving toward greater community alliances in a time when life is blinking a "chaos" light. As a retired educator, I hope to move beyond the schools with our process for having "changed" conversations, both one-to-one and in the community as a whole.

Any closing comments?

I'm grateful for this journey and these experiences that have allowed me the courage to "wade into the water" of change, confident of the values and benefits that await children and their families if we cross to the other side together. ■

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Creating a Culture...

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First, what are the routines and structures of the day that provide opportunities for meaningful thoughtful conversation? Or, to break that question down further:

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

it avoid quick fixes and allow opportunities for teachers to construct their own meaning, their own new learnings? Because we value a culture of conversation, how do we purposefully include time for that conversation in the school day? Do teachers have time to learn together, plan together and reflect on their practice within the school day? Are activities that promote conversations, such as CFGs, embedded in the teacher's workday?

And secondly, what are the processes we will use to ensure thoughtful conversation whenever people are gathered together?

As we have worked towards 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 whenever 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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NSRF's Living History: a series of interviews with members about our past, our present and our hopes for the future...This month we're hearing from Lois Crim Butler of the Coalition Center in Chicago as she shares her story with Debbie Bambino of Connections.

Lois is a school change leader whose original change work began at Chicago Vocational Career Academy, where she was the leader of the Small School of Business and Finance. This school was later cited by the U.S. Department of Education as one of five schools in the nation that exemplified the characteristics of a small learning community.

When did you learn about NSRF and why were you drawn to this process as an educator/activist?

I was a Citi-Bank Faculty Member (Program for facilitative leaders of school change developed by CES National from a grant from Citi-Bank in New York) when I heard about a new program that was being designed to take the change work in schools to a deeper level. Applications for the new training were called for, and we had two Chicago teachers accepted into the first training back in 1995.

I was not one of the first trained. However, I did participate in the cohort's Winter Gathering in Chicago as the school coordinator for the Chicago Coalition Center and I remember being struck by the sense "that this CFG strategy was different" and "that it might be just what we needed to influence whole school design changes." After the meeting, I went back to the office and my director and I as leaders of the small schools change process, co-wrote a proposal to the Chicago Annenberg Challenge asking them to allow us to train CFG coaches locally. While we waited for the approval of our local training request, we proceeded with the solici-

tation of applications for the national training from potential coaches in our six Annenberg Challenge Schools. At this point, in the summer of 1996, six more Chicago teachers were trained as CFG coaches by the Annenberg Institute. I was part of that group. We also trained two principals as leaders of the change. Later, in the winter of 1997, after our proposal was funded, we trained 32 more National School Reform Faculty coaches locally. *What in particular stood out about this new approach?*

I had already begun to experience the power of looking at the work of teaching and learning in our schools as an observer. Citi-Bank Faculty had been working on peer coaching and the creation of collaborative cultures to help us look deeply at what was really going on in our buildings. But this new CFG process seemed to go further. I saw the possibility for "a new communication system with information flowing back and forth in all directions." I saw us being able to actually 'see' the mind at work through the protocols.

I realized that we needed to create "a safe way to talk" with each other. I wasn't expecting a panacea, but I did hope that CFG training would help create the conditions that would allow us to challenge the learning gap in schools all across the country.

I was also very interested in the focus on community building. I had seen situations where teachers had become marginalized and written off just because their views were different- they weren't really heard. Misunderstandings and mistaken

assumptions often had the effect of delaying or blocking our ability to make the transformative changes that were needed. I thought this new approach would help us clarify our collective values and set the norms needed to constructively and collaboratively wrestle with the inevitable controversies that we needed to face in order to teach our own and other peoples' children successfully.

How has your longtime involvement in NSRF supported your efforts on behalf of students? Has the process lived up to your early expectations?

While the process has been sustained, I think that early on, folks in Chicago were somewhat locked into competition for the same pot of limited funds and weren't always working together. But for the last few years I think we've forged alliances to effectively help kids. We currently do much of our work through a collaborative design with NSRF, CES, the Small Schools Workshop and others, freely sharing the information and resources needed to really effect school change.

One especially strong example I can point to is the experience of Keisha Williams. Keisha was one of my students, who experienced the power of having

teachers who were engaged in reflective, collaborative practice on behalf of students. Keisha went on to earn a scholarship to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Keisha was also identified as a "Golden Apple" student. (Golden Apple is a prestigious, competitive award given by the Kohl Foundation annually and renewable for 4 years.) She was the first member of her family to receive a college degree, and she is now a third-year teacher at

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The NSRF – New York Center of Activity is delighted and grateful to be the recipient of a grant from the Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation for its startup activities. What this has allowed us to do is to get started on several fronts:

- we have designed and distributed NSRF NY Standards for Facilitators along with a Facilitation Endorsement Process and have begun working with NYU to assist us in this process to ensure reliability and validity
- we are now able to offer financial

support to locally endorsed facilitators who want to attend the Winter Meeting

- we had a Colloquium in the spring—it was the first time that coaches/facilitators in the New York region had an opportunity to meet and share work. At that Colloquium two previously endorsed facilitators presented their updated portfolios in fishbowl settings, using a structured protocol, and became endorsed "Lead Facilitators," which enabled them to train facilitators and be eligible for work as National Facilitators

- we are now planning a Roundtable for portfolio presentations this January 10 at New York University and would love any and all "critical friends" to join us
- we have held regular advisory board meetings

And the way you can find out more is by visiting our BRAND-NEW website which should be up and running by the time you read this at: nsrfnewyork.org. Check out the Equity Resources section!

Contact Alan Dichter at adichte@nycboe.net

NSRF Vermont Margaret MacLean, Vermont

We are pleased to announce that in order to strategically move forward the work of the National School Reform Faculty in Vermont the Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation has awarded a one year grant to the Vermont NSRF Center of Activity.

It is the goal of the Vermont Center to transform school climate and culture in at least 36 Vermont schools through the use of Learning Community Seminar methods and materials. This is in addition to the current 12 schools practicing this work.

We will focus our work in five areas:

1. Coaching in Vermont – we will support current coaches by offering an annual colloquium, 2-day conferences, materials and resources and continue to train new coaches
2. Communication – we will create a system of communication and support for coaches
3. Organizational Structure – we will, among other things, maintain a Vermont database, convene meetings, and publish a leadership development model for Vermont
4. Vermont/National Relationship – we will keep lines of communication open between NSRF National and Vermont, share information

- and maintain a Vermont presence nationally
- 5. Research – we will create an ongoing research base for our work to chart our progress and highlight findings

In addition we intend to have an effect on practice in at least three institutions of higher education, and gain the support of the State Department of Education.

We hope to make a significant impact on education in Vermont, on the way schools do business and the resulting achievement of students.

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