Critical Friends Groups

Critical Friends Groups study their teaching practices, build a shared knowledge base, and talk in depth about student work, teacher tasks, or professional dilemmas.

By Stevi Quate

It has been a long day, but Louie really wants to be on time to his Critical Friends Group. For several years, he had met monthly with six high school colleagues. At first, Louie hadn't been sure it would be worth his time. He agreed because a colleague wanted to facilitate and wouldn't be accepted into coaching training unless she had a willing group.

The teachers work in different areas — three English teachers, one a science teacher, one a media specialist, and another a social studies teacher like Louie. Louie was too busy, he thought, to look at English assignments when that isn't his area of expertise. But he's always game to improve his teaching, and he knows the value of collaboration and discussing student work. Now after four years of collaborating, he appreciates how they had grown professionally and welcomes the new territory they are about to enter. During their first years together, they had not only learned more about collaboration, but had studied inquiry and assessment for learning. This year they had agreed to look seriously at equity, particularly in light of the achievement gap between their Latino and Anglo students.

Today is Louie's turn to bring his work to the group. He had wrestled with ways to get his 10th graders to develop inquiry questions, with few good results. After meeting with Jeannie, who was having her turn to facilitate the group, he chose the assignment protocol from among several protocols to guide the group's conversation. (See Handout 1 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

As he walks into the classroom where they are meeting, Louie notices someone has brought a snack, a great touch since it is 3:30 and all of them have put in a full day.

Jeannie begins promptly with time for personal comments. Lisa volunteers to open the discussion: "We have 10 minutes for connections. Just a reminder — you don't

have to talk unless you want to. However, the only way you can talk a second time is after everyone has spoken. Keep in mind that you're not to respond to anyone's comments. I'll give you a two-minute warning before connections ends."

The group is quiet at first, but no one seems uncomfortable. Juan writes in his journal. Louie stares into space. Jeannie quietly speaks: "I've been worried about my daughter. Last night we got into quite an argument, and I've been replaying it in my mind all day." Juan looks up from his journal. "One of my classes today was incredible. I've never seen them so animated — on a positive note."

Jeannie gives a two-minute warning, then says, "Connections is now closed." She shifts the conversation. "Let's talk about the article on higher-order thinking that we read." Each person rereads, ponders, and writes quietly for the next three to four minutes, and then Jeannie leads them through a structured conversation about the article.

The group is 45 minutes into its session. Keeping them on track in a friendly but firm way, Jeannie turns to Juan. "Juan, why don't you update us about what's happened since last month. At that time we talked about students needing models of good work. Did you provide models? Did that make a difference?"

The group created this check to hold members responsible for carrying through with their intentions. Juan explains how using models had boosted the quality of work his science students are doing, especially his Latino boys.

Jeannie directs the group's attention to Louie for his presentation. "Louie, you wanted to try the assignment protocol to discuss an upcoming assignment. So let's look over this protocol and begin." Since this is a new protocol for them, they open their protocol notebooks to review the steps with Jeannie.

Louie explains the assignment and his goals for it: "In my American history class, I'm not happy about what I'm seeing students do. Often their questions are superficial, and some of my Latino students resist going deep. I want to think about what I can do to get a better inquiry question out of all of them. Look at this opening activity for our upcoming Vietnam War unit. I'd like you to check this assignment, and see if I'm clear and if it makes them dig deep."

Jeannie asks the group for clarifying questions.

"What grade?"

"How many times have they done something similar in your class?"

"How long will they have to complete this task?"

The clarifying questions continue for five minutes, then Jeannie invites the group to begin the assignment as if they were Louie's students. Louie joins them. After 10 minutes, Jeannie nudges the group forward. "Let's talk about Louie's assignment. Louie, please step back from the group and just take notes." She turns to the group. "Remember that we want to look at what worked, as well as what he should work on. Let's begin with the strengths of the assignment."

"I appreciate the choice he offers students," Sami begins. "Remember that article we read a few months ago about student engagement and how choice seems to be an important variable? This task brings to life what we read about."

The group looks carefully at the assignment over the next few minutes, pointing out its strengths. At times one or another mutters, "Oh, I hadn't noticed that;" or "That's a great idea. I hadn't thought about it that way before."

Jeannie seeks closure, asking, "Think about when students are through with this assignment. Louie hopes they will have a meaningful inquiry question. What do you think? Will that happen?"

Juan, who had been quiet for some time, says, "I wonder how much background knowledge Louie's kids have about the Vietnam War. I wonder if they know enough about the war to pose an inquiry question at this point."

"I was thinking about that, too," says Lisa. "Last week my juniors were reading a Tim O'Brien short story, and I was surprised at how difficult it was for them to understand it."

"When we were thinking about student engagement last month," says Juan, "we talked about how background knowledge fuels curiosity. This could be one of the problems Louie is facing."

After a few minutes, Jeannie prompts them to think about ways to strengthen Louie's assignment.

Jo begins, "Louie wants to make sure his students are using higher-order thinking. Do you think the verb 'list' in the directions gets them into the kind of thinking or the level of inquiry that he wants?" The group looks closely at the verbs Louie had used in his instructions to students. Louie takes copious notes as the discussion continues.

Jeannie says, "Our 20 minutes for feedback are up. Let's invite Louie back in and hear his comments."

Louie thanks the group for the comments and holds up his notebook full of notes. "I hadn't thought about the verbs I selected," he says. "I knew what I wanted from the students, but I'm asking them to do one kind of thinking while I really want another kind." He continues, generally agreeing with the group's responses.

After Louie's feedback, Tim, their process observer, gives the group feedback about its work.

"Well, I have to say we're getting better at clarifying questions," Tim says, "but there was one question that seemed to be beyond clarifying. Jo, when you asked about his grading system, I think you were really getting at the missing rubric. Sounded a bit leading to me. What do you all think?"

Tim continues with his observations, wondering if a comment had bordered on harshness or if their discussion was deep enough for Louie to get important information. As he finishes, Jeannie asks the group, "Based on this discussion, what should we work on next month?"

The group decides they were cutting each other off. They examine the norms they created at their first meeting and decide to focus on letting each other finish their own sentences. They decide who will facilitate and who will present next.

It is almost 5:30. "I can't believe we've been at this for two hours," Juan says. "I'm both exhausted and energized. Here's to another good month!"

Overview

When educators first hear the term *critical friends*, they frequently snicker, "Who needs another critical friend? I have enough of those." After they've experienced a Critical Friends Group, most shift away from the negative connotation of the word *critical*. Teachers often say the adjective comes to mean "vital" or "necessary" for their professional growth.

Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) emerged from a simple idea: colleagues learning together over time. A CFG is a group of six to 10 educators who meet monthly for at least two hours to have structured professional conversations about their work and to deepen their knowledge of their craft. They study their teaching practices, build a shared knowledge base, and talk in depth about student work, teacher tasks, or professional dilemmas. CFGs reflect the

RESOURCES

ARTICLES

"The 'things' children make in school: Disposable or indispensable?" by Steve Seidel and Joe Walters. (1994). *Harvard Graduate School of Education Alumni Bulletin, 39*(1), 18-20.

BOOKS

"Learning from looking," by Steve Seidel. In Nona Lyons (Ed.), *With Portfolio in Hand: Validating the New Teacher Professionalism*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.

"Wondering to be done," by Steve Seidel. In David Allen (Ed.), *Assessing Student Learning: From Grading to Understanding*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.

WEB SITES

www.coloradocfg.org. Colorado Critical Friends Group. The Colorado CFG offers summer seminars for new coaches and administrators, as well as other events throughout the year.

www.lasw.org. Looking at Student Work. LASW includes individuals and education organizations focusing on collaboratively studying student work.

www.nsrfharmony.org. National School Reform Faculty. NSRF is the national center for Critical Friends Groups and other collaborative work. The web site is filled with valuable information, including protocols, research on learning communities, and seminars about CFG work offered across the country.

mission of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), a professional development initiative that supports the restructuring of schools. NSRF's mission is to "foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone" (www.nsrfharmony.org).

Members of CFGs play different roles that help the process work smoothly. Besides a coach or facilitator, CFGs have a presenter (the one who presents student or teacher work to be refined through a protocol). Another member acts as a process observer who keeps notes about how the CFG itself works. The process observer pays attention to aspects of group work such as focus, interruptions, domination, and depth of discussion and reports his or her observations at the end of the meeting. Other members act as responders, discussing the work the presenter has brought. (See Handout 1 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

Protocols guide these conversations, providing ways for educators to discuss texts, to examine professional practices and student work, and to discuss classroom observations. CFGs use protocols for a clear purpose: to build a productive community of learners who work respectfully and efficiently. The protocols are tools that keep the group on track and deepen the conversation with the goal of building the group's collective knowledge and skills to enhance student achievement. Protocols provide a safe way for colleagues to discuss what matters most to them — their own teaching — and find ways to improve it. One type of protocol CFGs use is described in Chapter 23, Tuning Protocols. (See Handout 2 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

Those new to CFGs frequently resist protocols, but as the agreed-upon way to discuss professional practice, these structures make the CFG a safe haven for deeper analysis.

A CFG is more than a protocol, however. CFGs are groups of the same people who meet regularly. CFGs can be found in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in a few higher education settings. In elementary schools, group members may teach the same or different grades, but CFG members from secondary schools often teach different subjects and work in various roles. It's common for a department chair, a special education instructor, an English teacher, a coach, and a counselor to be in the same CFG. In some schools, principals, and other administrators are active members of CFGs, while in other schools, administrators choose not to participate. At several universities across the nation, faculty meet in CFGs for the same reasons that other educators do: to improve their practices and to enhance student achievement. In Denver, Colo., a group of teacher educators from three different universities has been meeting for several years as a CFG. Together they have tuned policy documents from the different universities, studied the work of Sonia Nieto and others, and reflected on student work.

CFGs promote collegiality and provide a way for staff members to respond to outside readings and apply what they learn to their own environment. Moreover, CFGs are a way to focus on equity. Using protocols such as the Equity Protocol, teachers in CFGs raise questions about whether their assignments are accessible to all students, are culturally responsive, and reflect high expectations for all students.

What are the purposes of a Critical Friends Group?

Critical Friends Groups are designed to:

- Create a professional learning community;
- Make teaching practice explicit and public by talking about teaching;
- Help people involved in schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities;
- Establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on a spirit of inquiry;
- Provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning;
- Help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning;
- Improve teaching and learning.

Source: www.nsrfharmony.org.

Rationale

Anthony Alvarado, the former superintendent of District 2 in Manhattan, once remarked, "Isolation is the enemy of improvement." This is particularly true for educators. Teachers historically have worked alone. However, research on schools that beat the odds to improve learning reveals that collaboration improves both student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991) and teachers' energy to teach (Graves, 2001). Collaboration broadens teachers' perspectives, adds to their repertoire of teaching strategies, and nourishes reflective practice. Participating in a CFG helps educators improve their teaching by studying together and giving and receiving feedback on day-to-day practices.

Professional development days are scattered throughout the school year for teachers to learn about new ideas, but a frequent complaint is that learning ends when teachers walk out the door. Teachers often say the content of their professional development lacks relevance. However, even having relevant information does not ensure teachers will implement new ideas. Despite their best intentions, many drift back to familiar and comfortable ways of teaching. With support and coaching, however, new practices are more likely to take hold and become part of a teacher's repertoire. Teachers who participate say CFGs provide them more opportunities to learn new teaching practices and to get support needed to use those practices.

As a bonus, teachers who work in learning teams, such as CFGs, report that this effort feels less like work. Collaborating seems to restore them, nurturing the energy to teach (Graves, 2001).

Steps

Although any individual or small group of staff members can start a CFG, one member should be trained as a coach. Once a coach has been trained, this person invites others to an introductory meeting to explain CFGs and shares the rationale and steps of a protocol. Later, the coach establishes meeting times and places (about two hours for each meeting, in school or a participant's home), and models and facilitates protocols. Facilitators can gain additional expertise and access training online to become CFG coaches.

Once a group has been put together, the next step is to prepare to meet.

PREPARATION

The most successful CFG meetings are those in which everyone is well prepared.

1. The facilitator or coach arranges the meeting, including securing a location and disseminating the agenda, articles for discussion, reflection sheets, and other materials.

The facilitator or coach arranges for one member of the CFG to present either student or teacher work.

2. The facilitator or coach and presenter meet in advance to discuss the work to be presented.

a. Together they reflect on why the presenter wants to bring the particular work to the group.

b. They frame the question that will guide the discussion. As tempting as it is to skip this step, it's necessary for the two of them to be clear about the presenter's concern and develop a question that best reflects the dilemma.

c. The two then select the protocol that holds the best promise to produce the results the presenter seeks. Each of the many protocols meets a specific need. Some work best to probe the depth of student thinking, for instance, while others work well to define an imprecise problem. Some protocols yield advice, while others are intended to probe the presenter's thinking so the presenter can find his own solution. (See Handouts 2 and 3 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

3. Everyone closely reads the assigned texts.

THE CFG MEETING

Although the model has many variations, a CFG meeting often includes four steps.

1. Typically CFG meetings begin with some kind of a bridge activity, similar to team building. The bridge activity creates a transition between the hectic pace of a teaching day and the reflection required in the CFG's work. A common activity is connections, which takes about 10 minutes. (See Handout 4 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

It is important that this activity not bog the group down. The facilitator of a new CFG may be tempted to spend time on team building activities to develop the group's sense of

community. Experienced CFG members say structured conversations around matters important to the group *are* the team builders. They argue that the joint work, not the activity, builds community.

2. During the first meeting only, the CFG sets norms. (See Handout 5 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.) At the beginning of subsequent meetings, the facilitator or coach or group members should recall the norms, perhaps reviewing a list of individual and group behaviors they have agreed on.

3. The group next uses structured conversations, about a half-hour long, focusing on an agreed-upon text to build the group's common understanding. The text can be an article, a book, video, or even school data. The important aspect of the selection is that it addresses an issue important to the group. For example, the group at one high school decided to focus on higher-order thinking so they read articles by Fred Newmann and Grant Wiggins. Then, at one meeting, they watched a video of a group member facilitating a class discussion. They used the video as their text-based discussion and explored how students responded to his questions. At another school, the CFG spent one meeting looking carefully at data from their state assessments. Studying these data led group members to note serious gender gaps in literacy, so they set goals to address this gap throughout the year.

4. The group moves on to about an hour of structured conversation (using a protocol) about the presenter's work. (See Handout 3 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

a. The facilitator opens this discussion with an overview of the steps of the protocol and a brief introduction to the presenter's work. In most protocols, the next step is for the presenter to provide the context for the group and to pose the guiding question.

b. In most protocols, the next step is for group members to ask clarifying questions that help them understand the dilemma. The facilitator's job here is to make sure that only clarifying questions are asked and that responders (the rest of the group) avoid probing questions or suggestions disguised as questions. (See Handout 6 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

c. In most protocols, probing questions follow the clarifying questions. Probing questions are intended to challenge the presenter's thinking and to encourage her to think about the dilemma in a new way. The presenter may answer the probing questions or save them to think about later.

d. The participants discuss what the presenter has brought to them. At this point, the presenter retreats from the group to listen to the group discussion and may not respond to the group's comments. The group is discouraged from talking directly to the presenter.

The facilitator's role is to ensure the group follows the steps of the selected protocol and to remain vigilant about the direction the discussion takes so that the presenter's needs are met. (See Handout 1 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.) If members speak directly to the presenter, the facilitator nudges them to talk to the group only. If the group veers away from the presenter's concern, the facilitator redirects the group.

e. This step, debriefing, is one that many groups are tempted to overlook. It is important, though, that the group reflects on its work together. Group members discuss topics such as whether everyone's comments were valued and whether the conversation was meaningful. This is the time participants identify growth they've made over time and develop goals for their continuing evolution as an effective learning community. (See Handout 7 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

5. Finally, group members spend about 15 minutes planning for the next meeting. They focus on when and where they will meet, an article (or subject about which an article can be read) that they want to discuss, and who will present student work or teacher practice. The facilitator or coach notes these plans.

Variations

Traditionally, CFGs comprise the same educators from different subjects and grades and meet for two hours once a month. Variations include:

- **Temporary CFGs.** Educators with similar jobs meet to examine a specific issue. For example, one district was wrestling with a high school history assessment. Department chairs and lead teachers from the three high schools met to consult about the issue. (See Handout 3 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)
- **Meetings that use CFG processes.** A staff might discuss

an article during a faculty meeting, for example, using a CFG protocol such as save the last word for me. (See Handout 3 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.) In some schools, principals use CFG processes to study data, such as student attendance reports, then develop school improvement plans with the staff.

- **District-level CFGs.** Educators with similar jobs may meet to examine their work. In several Colorado districts, for instance, literacy coaches meet regularly in a CFG to discuss their work. In a small mountain district, the superintendent's cabinet meetings begin as CFGs. Principals present dilemmas to the group for feedback. After an hour, the business meeting begins.
- **Grade-level CFGs.** Teachers might use time during grade-level meetings to examine assessment data.
- **Groups of disparate educators with common interests.** In Denver, one CFG includes teacher educators from three universities who meet monthly to look at their own work and the work of their students, who are pre-service teachers. Although the university programs differ, group members have discovered that they have enough in common that their individual expertise is collectively strengthening each of their programs.
- **CFGs in the classroom.** Teachers across the nation have used CFG structures in their classes. They teach students protocols such as the tuning protocols and save the last word for me, and students use them to talk about text they've read and to give peers feedback on assignments. At the University of Colorado at Denver, pre-service teachers use CFG protocols regularly in labs.
- **CFGs as an action research project.** One group of educators met regularly to study what members called their disconnected students. Throughout the year, they studied the research on engagement and collected stories from their students. Those stories, often resulting from interviews, were the basis for structured conversations using protocols such as the collaborative assessment conference. (See Handout 3 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.)

Critical elements

Training. A well-trained coach makes it easier to implement a successful CFG. Although learning the steps of the protocols seems easy, coaching a group of colleagues as they learn to engage in deep conversations about their practice is not.

A collaborative school culture. CFGs work best when they are part of a school culture in which collaboration is the norm. Without such a culture, educators tend to resist working in a CFG or participate superficially.

Voluntary attendance. Although administrators may be tempted to mandate CFGs, inviting participants is more effective. Teachers who are required to attend when they don't want to can sabotage the group. In one group, for example, the presenting teacher brought in an assignment that she had found successful in the past. The assignment required no risk on her part. Her reason for presenting such safe work became apparent during the discussion. In the feedback part of the protocol, one social studies teacher made his resistance obvious through his body language. Tapping his pencil, watching the clock, and sighing loudly, he deflated the group's energy without saying a word. The group's discussion of the teacher's work was superficial.

In a more successful approach, the principal decided to model the CFG process, so he asked several teachers to join him in a fishbowl discussion about a schoolwide issue using one of the protocols. After staff discussed what they observed, he showed a video that illustrated a CFG at work. Then he invited staff to join the new CFG. That year, one group of eight teachers met regularly. Because of their enthusiasm, new CFGs formed each subsequent year.

Time. Creating time for a CFG can be challenging. In

ON THE CD-ROM

The handouts for this chapter are available on the CD-ROM that accompanies this book.

1. Roles in a Critical Friends Group
2. Matching the work to the protocol
3. A sampling of protocols for discussing text and teacher/student work
4. Connections
5. Microlab for setting norms
6. Questions — clarifying, probing, leading
7. Tips for debriefing

some schools with successful CFGs, administrators set aside time to meet during the school day. Several districts start schools later twice a month. The non-student hours on one of those days are used for collaborative work. At another school, teams have common planning periods and are expected to use that time at least once a month for professional learning community work, including CFGs.

Norms. At the outset, groups must create norms for working together. Often groups have implicit norms, but being explicit about how group members are expected to act enhances the group's ability to work successfully. One process for setting norms is the norm-setting microlab. (See Handout 5 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.) Throughout the year, the coach or facilitator checks in with the group to determine if the norms are still working or if they need revisions.

Rotating roles. Another successful practice is rotating roles. (See Handout 1 in the Chapter 9-Critical Friends Groups file on the CD-ROM.) In new groups, a facilitator or coach often runs the meeting, but this role can be shared so responsibility for the group's success is spread among the members. CFG members can take turns acting as the process observer, the person who helps the group reflect on how members worked together in a particular meeting. The process observer records interactions and shares the observations so the group can reflect on its own work, self-correct as needed, and celebrate successes.

Authentic work product. The work presented at a CFG meeting — often a professional dilemma, an upcoming assignment, or student work — must be authentic for the teacher. For instance, one teacher was surprised when a typically successful student struggled over what the teacher had thought was an easy task. Her CFG helped her unravel the unexpected challenges. Another teacher was uncertain if her assignments met the intent of the language arts standards. In another CFG, a teacher wanted her students to begin a community service project, but since this was a new undertaking for her, she needed feedback from more experienced peers.

Conclusion

When teachers learn together, they pool knowledge and expand their abilities to reach all students. They create a bank of knowledge that deepens their own and the group's understanding and changes practice. Because an important focus within a CFG is on what matters most to teachers — their students' work — they are likely to be invested in exploring new ideas. Furthermore, because the purpose for collaborating is to address issues of equity, students traditionally underserved by schools stand to gain.

In May, Louie's CFG convened for the last meeting of the year. Toward the end of the meeting, Louie summed up the year's work: "Because of the friendship of this group, this has been one of the most difficult years that I've had, but the difficulties have been good. You made me think harder about the work that I was asking students to do and consider its impact on their learning. I'm a better teacher now. It might take the summer to rest up, but I can hardly wait until we start again next year."

References

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