

Critical Friends Groups

A Day in the Life of Schoolwide CFGs

by Peggy Silva

On a snowy winter morning in Amherst, New Hampshire, faculty and staff members of Souhegan High School gather to help their colleagues with their work. Phil Estabrook wants a new way to look at the assessment criteria for his Vietnam unit; Lisa Kent needs help in setting up a research project for her wellness classes; Melissa Chapman wants to examine a new method of teaching students how to analyze spatial data. A math teacher will ask for help in revising a test; a special education teacher will ask for help in evaluating a site-review plan; an English teacher will request help in fine-tuning a writing assessment. Others want to discuss an article, and some plan to debrief peer observations. While students enjoy a two-hour delay to the start of their school day, more than 125 faculty and staff members participate in this monthly meeting of our Critical Friends Groups (CFGs).

Intrigued by recent research on gender roles in the classroom, wellness teacher Lisa Kent wants to set up gender-specific classes and track her findings. She is also interested in assessing students' fitness before and after their participation in wellness courses. She confessed to her group that although she wants to learn more about both topics, she lacked a sense of how to proceed. Through questions and discussion, Lisa's CFG identified several promising starting points. They suggested that Lisa raise awareness of gender-specific studies by disseminating articles for teachers to read and then discuss. Because her plan to teach gender-specific classes would involve many other people to arrange her schedule, the CFG thought that she needed a more comprehensive research strategy before beginning the work. The group then helped Lisa develop a survey to assemble the data she needed to begin the assessment of her students' fitness. Ten colleagues invested two hours helping Lisa get what she needed to improve her practice.

Lisa appreciates the sense of connection the CFG provides:

I like knowing that there is a group of people who will help me figure things out in my work. I spend my day in a gym, pretty far removed from classroom life. I love listening to colleagues present lessons from their subject areas. I like visiting my colleagues' classrooms, and I always come away from those visits with some new management idea or a new perspective on some of the kids I teach. Between our monthly meetings, some members of our CFG meet to discuss articles.

As Phil Estabrook's students study the Vietnam War, they focus on the question of what is worth fighting for. Their final exhibition requires them to create a scrapbook with artifacts from a list that includes poetry, letters, movies, art, literature, photography, music, speeches, interviews, and protest writings. The scrapbook must also contain pieces responding to the Vietnam Wall memorial and examining the war's aftermath.

Phil's dilemma is that although he has samples of exemplary work from some students, overall student performance is inconsistent. No matter how he alters the unit or increases points of instruction, some students perform poorly.



“This unit has such potential, and parts of it are absolutely solid,” says Phil. “It occurs in May, just before the end of our year. Students have acquired many tools of studying history; now I want them to tell one American story from a particular time period, using primary sources to examine history. I have worked on this unit for years, but I know right now that some kids will not succeed in this assignment. I want to figure out what I can do to increase student success without lowering performance standards. I have done so many things to ensure that kids get traction early in this work, but even at the end of their sophomore year, some of them lack the abstract-thinking skills that this work demands.”

Phil’s CFG spent time examining his project sheet, assignments, and examples of student work. Using a structured protocol, the group then discussed Phil’s quandary while he sat silent, taking notes. Participants commented on Phil’s exhaustive preparation. The unit was carefully layered to build on the students’ growing knowledge of that era and the central issues behind the Vietnam War. Several noticed the richness of primary sources available to students; someone else commented on the strength of asking students to adopt personas from various perspectives.

The conversation soon turned to the abstract thinking the project requires. Participants wondered what specific lessons Phil teaches to build skills in abstract thinking. Some asked if Phil thought that gender played a role in student success. One individual wondered if Phil had considered a menu of choices for the required exhibition. Another wondered if Phil could use his current events teaching on the war in Iraq to pre-teach some of the skills students would need for this later unit.

Eventually, Phil reentered the conversation. He sighed at the work ahead of him, although he was grateful for questions that pushed his thinking: “The biggest ‘Aha!’ for me was recognizing that I already could predict the exact students who will not succeed. I can see that I need to create assignments that build abstract-thinking skills.”

In debriefing the discussion, Phil noted that every time he requested help with this particular project, colleagues were always complimentary about his work—the project sheet, the activities, all the discrete pieces that culminated in the scrapbook. However, when he asked people to study the student work samples, gaps between teacher work and student performance were evident. “That’s what keeps me coming back to my CFG with this work,” said Phil. “I always see it differently when I examine it through my colleagues’ lenses.”

Melissa Chapman, a conservation-biology teacher, frequently brings her work to her CFG:

Our group has been together for a long time. We know each other's work and each other's style of working. That provides such a shortcut for me. I bring work because I want other perspectives on how to make it more accessible to students. When English teachers and art teachers and math teachers examine work that I do, they see ways to improve it that I could never see.

I was excited to show my CFG the new thinking I was doing about helping students in their preparation for working with very sophisticated geographical information system [GIS] software. I had been concerned that students lacked the analytical skills they needed to draw conclusions from spatial data represented on maps. I tried a low-tech approach to building their skills, requiring them to symbolize their field data using color blocks based on a range of values for their data. I then asked them to display the data in a way that represented our field site. I guided them through a series of questions about their maps, then studied their responses to a written exam. I think that I am on to something by taking them through a very methodical, step-by-step process to build their skills in spatial analysis, but I go back and forth between that and simply letting them learn from using the software alone, so I asked my CFG to help me think through three questions: Am I asking the right questions? Does it matter whether students have this layer of understanding? How will this activity influence student understanding of technology?

When I took my CFG through the sequence of instruction and activities that I provide for my students, I gained a better awareness of what I was doing. Their questions helped me to answer many of my own questions about the activity. My CFG identified ways of making this work more transparent to students, and affirmed both my intentions and my results. The opportunity to think out loud in front of trusted colleagues is invaluable to my work.

Lisa, Melissa, and Phil are only three of a dozen faculty members who presented their work that morning in January. Each left with some answers, some new questions, and some new ways of approaching their work. Each received help that will improve student learning.

We are often asked how we can demonstrate improved student learning. The answers are as complex as the question implies. First, when teachers present their lesson plans, unit ideas, or assessment

tools, their colleagues' questions help them to forge tighter links between goals for student learning and the work demonstrating students' increased knowledge and skills. When teachers focus on student work to improve student learning, their questions and their multiple perspectives point out subtleties that might have been missed during the unit design. Finally, when colleagues ask a series of whys—why someone chose a particular text or essay question, why a teacher expected that all students could demonstrate a particular skill or process, or why this assessment tool will document student learning—we are forced to reflect on our strategies, deepening our understanding of how to help students.

There are also tangible ways of tracking improved student learning. Aimee Gibbons has noted her students' deeper understanding of both the literary text and the historical period from the help she received in revising the students' performance assessments of *The Great Gatsby*. Although Aimee once relied heavily on chapter quizzes and essay questions, she now asks her students to depict some aspect of the text or the times in an art piece and requires them to delve into the text for their artwork. As a result, students have demonstrated a far more thorough understanding of literary symbolism. In addition, more students are completing their final assignments and reporting a greater level of appreciation for the unit and their learning.

Aimee also relied on her CFG colleagues to help her think through a successful children's literature unit. Their suggestion that Aimee invite young children into her classroom to listen to the children's books and offer feedback to her students ramped up the standards significantly. Once her students knew that they would have a "real" audience for their work, they worked diligently to write stories and create illustrations of high interest to the young readers. Looking at the various incarnations of that exhibition of student performance, even a casual observer can see strong evidence of improved student learning. Each time Aimee has requested help from her peers, her expectations for student learning have become more sophisticated—and therefore both more demanding and more rewarding for the student than they were before.

Scott Prescott, one of Souhegan's deans of faculty, oversees the CFG initiative:

CFGs are our most significant professional development experience, so we support it with a variety of resources, time, money, training. We monitor this work carefully, and we don't "mess" with this valuable time. CFGs are essential to us, and we show that through our actions as well as our words.

We meet with our CFG coaches three times each year for a full-day, off-site retreat. We engage in new learning through texts and protocols; we discuss dilemmas occurring in our particular CFGs; and we develop and support teacher leadership. These meetings provide an essential link to the work of each individual CFG.

What I am currently working on is making each individual's participation in his CFG more meaningful. How can we connect each other's work to our own practice—how can we ensure personal growth through a focus on another's work? Those are the questions driving our collective focus right now. At our most recent off-site retreat, we developed an essential question to help us deepen the conversation: "How can our collective practice help each adult learner continuously improve student learning?"

To push this thinking, we are asking people to think about what they will take away from each CFG meeting—what the impact of this new learning can teach them about their own work. We want to be more transparent about our desire for them to forge those connections in a more direct way.

We survey our staff every year to determine our progress in CFG work, and we use those data in our meetings with coaches. We put a lot of emphasis on personalized learning at Souhegan, and that concept applies to every learner in our building. In our CFG work, we all make mutual investments in each other's practice with the goal of helping students learn. We hold each other accountable for continuous improvement on behalf of our students. That is the direct impact of the sustained focus our Critical Friends Groups provide.

Each of Souhegan's thirteen CFGs meets nine times each year; that means that there are at least 117 teachers who have the opportunity to present their work for feedback. Each of those teachers represents ninety students who benefit from this professional development. We find it to be our most worthy investment of time and energy.

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