Developing a Process for Purposefully Examining and Improving CFG Work

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The current body of research examining the efficacy of critical friends groups as agents of professional development and school reform supports claims that CFGs foster a culture of community and collaboration and enhance teacher professionalism, but evidence documenting teacher learning and any resulting improvements in student learning is sparse (Key, 2006). Developing a true professional learning community able to engage in challenging questions of teaching and learning can be a long and difficult process of “sloshing around” (Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004), “a journey, not a destination, a verb rather than a noun” (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001, p. 992). It requires true cultural transformation rooted in several significant transitions or shifts in perspective, towards a community orientation, a learning orientation, and a professional orientation (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 1999).

Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth (2001) and Dufour and Eaker (1998) have suggested a common developmental trajectory through which groups must navigate in order to become an effective professional learning community. Four stages summarize this trajectory: (1) a nominal stage, or pseudocommunity, characterized by both excitement and uncertainty; (2) a chaos stage in which the discomforts, disagreements, or conflicts avoided in the nominal stage come into the open; (3) an emptying stage in which the barriers to authentic communication crumble and the group emerges with a strong collective identity; and (4) a fully functioning stage in which a group’s collaborative learning and growth is truly enabled.

Though there is a wide degree of variability in the development of CFGs into highly functioning professional learning communities, Dunne and Honts (1998) suggested they might also follow three common stages of development that: a support stage, characterized as a professional oasis or support group; an improvement stage, focused on refining teaching tools and practices; and a stage in which participants question the fundamental practices and purposes of schools. Though the trusting relationships established in the first stage might help build a culture of collaboration and sharing among teachers, it seems unlikely that a group could engage in work focused enough to lead to changes in teaching practice and improvements in student learning without entering the second or third stage. Regardless of the exact stages or timing characterizing the development of a professional learning community, it is clear that this is a complex process through which to negotiate, and finding ways to foster this developmental process seems critical when considering the impact that CFGs might have on teaching and learning.
Researchers have identified several factors that might hold a group back from developing to their full potential: a school culture characterized by the pressures of standardized testing, top-down styles of school leadership, or the micropolitics of school reform initiatives (Curry, 2003; Murphy, 2001; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Nave, 2000; Dunne & Honts, 1998); a shaky implementation process characterized by insufficient training in asking questions or using protocols, coach “burn-out,” or trying to create too many CFGs too quickly (Armstrong, 2003; Murphy, 2001); the inability to establish a sense of community founded on trusting relationships among group members (Armstrong, 2003; Little, et. al, 2003; Murphy, 2001; Dunne & Honts, 1998); or a lack of rigor in the substance of monthly meetings characterized by a lack of goals or resources, too much focus on building community, or difficulties in identifying appropriate student and teacher work samples for the group to examine or questions for framing the protocols (Armstrong, 2003; Little, et. al, 2003; Murphy, 2001; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Dunne & Honts, 1998).

In some situations external circumstances may hinder a CFG’s development, but in other cases a group might be able to address obstacles if offered a process through which to analyze their group’s collective work, establish goals for improvement, and chart a clear course of action. Even if a group does not face significant barriers in their work, the very complexity of the developmental trajectory of a professional learning community suggests the potential benefits of such a process.

Developing such a process is theoretically linked to participatory inquiry and evaluation. Scholars have documented a number of benefits for both programs and participants through involvement in participatory evaluation. Conducting participatory evaluations helps participants to focus more clearly on program goals and to align activities to meet those goals (Johnson, Willeke & Steiner, 1998); promotes organizational learning through the social construction of knowledge (Cousins & Earl, 1992); builds an organization’s capacity for conducting its own future evaluations of work (Quintanilla & Packard, 2002); and empowers participants with voice and the ability to take action (Garaway, 1995; Fetterman, 1999). Since CFGs and participatory inquiry and evaluation share many of their underlying assumptions and values (collaboration, equality, honoring the expertise of all members, inquiry, reflective thinking, seeking evidence, and taking action), it is likely that using a collaborative self-assessment process as a CFG would yield similar benefits.

Therefore, the purpose of my current research is to explore the development and evaluation of a self-assessment process to support CFGs in stepping back to analyze their development as professional learning communities. Engaging in an intentional self-study process could help participants identify areas of strength and areas that hold their group back, establish goals and appropriate action steps for improvement, and ultimately develop into a more mature group able to engage in rigorous work leading to improvements in teaching and learning.

Five key research questions frame this study. How can the developmental framework be further developed through the input of a panel of experts? What is the level of ease of use for the self-assessment process? To what extent is this process useful for...
CFGs? How might the framework and process be further developed based on the experiences of groups that use the tool? What are the advantages or disadvantages of using this self-assessment process?

This research design involves two phases. In the first phase, I consulted with seven “experts” in order to validate and refine the developmental framework through the use of a questionnaire. Their feedback was both affirming of the importance of the study and constructive for revising the framework. The second phase involves a multiple case study approach to examine the self-study framework and process as actually used and experienced by three CFGs in their natural contexts. Data collection includes observations of self-study meetings, document analysis, a tape-recorded interview with the facilitator of the self-study process at each site, and a final survey of all participants in the process.

As this is a study in process, it is too early to report conclusive findings, particularly in writing. However, I hope that the attached documents outlining the self-assessment process (framework, narratives, and two protocols) may prove ample material for fruitful discussion during our session today.

**Please contact the author if you are interested in viewing these attachments.**

REFERENCES


Ellen Ballock, 2007


