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Let's Talk! Facilitating a Faculty Learning Community Using a Critical Friends Group Approach

Julie A. Moore
Kennesaw State University, julamoor@kennesaw.edu

Joya Carter-Hicks
Kennesaw State University, jcarterh@kennesaw.edu

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Abstract

This article focuses on the complex process of facilitating a *Critical Friends Group* as a form of a professional learning community by teacher education faculty. During a three-year initiative, seven faculty members created a forum for collegial conversations regarding pedagogical dilemmas in efforts of improving teaching practice and student achievement. Critical Friends Groups use protocol guides to actively engage its members in learning, thinking, reading and discussing dilemmas from interdisciplinary perspectives. This article reviews the literature of Critical Friends Groups, the work of this particular Critical Friends Group and concludes by providing a rationale for sustainability of Critical Friends Groups in Institutions of Higher Education.

Keywords

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Introduction

Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) have been a form of professional learning community in PreK-12 schools for a number of years (Bambino, 2002; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Langer, 2000; Phillips, 2003). CFGs have been recognized as a critical feature in school reform (Bambino, 2002), improving teaching practice (Curry, 2008), developing teacher identity of student teachers (Franzak, 2002), supporting the work of principals (Fahey, 2011) and improving student achievement (Langer, 2000). While concentrated primarily in PreK-12 schools, Critical Friends Groups are now finding their way as a form of professional learning community in higher education both as a structure for faculty learning communities (Andreu, Canos, de Juana, Manresa, Rienda & Tari, 2003; Barnaccho Ross, Washburn, Whitney & Wood, 2007) and as mechanism for developing student learning communities (Constantino, 2010).

In this paper, we describe the establishment and lessons learned from a Critical Friends Group of higher education faculty situated in a college of education. Now in our third year, we have taken time to reflect on our process to date, identify our successes and challenges, and highlight lessons learned from participating in this form of professional learning community.

Literature Review

Our review of literature indicates that there is a major transformation in how university campuses are engaging in faculty development in effort to improve university teaching and student learning. Traditionally, faculty development is implemented through campus-wide trainings and orientations, however there is noticeably a paradigmatic shift towards more informal and collaborative learning to support continual improvement in university pedagogy. To this point, faculty members are participating in Professional Learning Communities and making meaningful connections and expanding knowledge, skills and ideas across disciplines in effort to develop their scholarship of teaching.

By definition, Faculty (or Professional) Learning (FLC) community is a multi-disciplinary group of 6-15 faculty members engaging in active, collaborative, long-term projects that focus on enhancing teaching and learning through frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, cross-disciplinary principles, scholarship of teaching and learning, and community building (Cox, 2003). Beach & Cox (2009), go on to purport that evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning and provide safety and support for faculty to explore, attempt, test, and adopt authentic methods.

Learning Communities were originally inspired by Meiklejohn (1932) in his quest for cohesive interdisciplinary groups of study and Dewey's (1933) active and inquiry-based approach to education. It has taken nearly forty-years for Learning Communities to evolve into the context of Higher Education. Palmer (2012) suggests that this is due in part to the delay in higher education institutions embracing the interconnections of learning, teaching, and knowing. Concomitantly, public schools have designed Professional Learning Communities as vehicles of improving practice and school-wide reform for some time. In fact, literature has made connections between student success and faculty involvement in Learning Communities.

Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) are a form of Professional Learning Community and originated in PreK-12 schools. Moreover, most of the literature concerning Critical Friends Groups comes out of the PreK-12 context. In her review of research around Critical Friends Groups, Key (2006) found there were four claims about the efficacy of Critical Friends Groups:

1. CFGs foster a culture of community and collaboration.
2. CFGs enhance teacher professionalism.
3. CFGs have the potential to change teachers' thinking and practice.
4. CFGs have the potential to impact student learning.

Of these four, Key found that the first two claims are substantiated in the research literature, but the second two claims are less so.

Vo and Nguyen (2010) conducted a research study with a group of four beginning K-12 teachers using CFG and peer-observation. They found that participants liked the CFG format because it offered an opportunity to "exchange their professional ideas, learn from each other and help each other to professionally develop" (p. 212). Participants also believed that it helped them improve their teaching performance and adjust instructional techniques. Lastly, they became more motivated and had greater reflection on their teaching practice.

In his study of a principals' CFG, Fahey (2011) found that participation in the CFG impacted the practice of the principals involved. The principals found that the CFG was a valuable learning experience. Specifically, "every principal felt that the structure of the CFG, the use of protocols, and the presence of a facilitator were essential factors in supporting and sustaining their learning about their own leadership practice" (p. 29). By participating in a CFG, the principals were then better able to support and develop a culture of building professional learning communities in their own buildings. Additionally, participants used the tools of the CFG, the processes and protocols, in their own work. Finally, participation in the CFG influenced the work of district administrative teams, helping them "become more collaborative and reflective."

Few studies or descriptions of CFGs in higher education can be found in the literature. Constantino (2010) studies her use of a Critical Friends protocol in her graduate art education classes over the course of three summers in an effort to create an intellectual community amongst her students. She found that use of the CFG protocols "was essential in creating the framework that allowed for critical feedback in a supportive environment" (p. 7). Moreover, students indicated that they learned from other projects presented to the group both in terms of new resources but also in different ways of thinking. Furthermore, the collegiality that developed helped with student isolation and established a professional network of support for their studies.

Andreu et al. (2003) describe the work of a CFG amongst business education faculty at a Spanish University. In this instance, the CFG was seen as part of the evaluation system of the participants, something that is not usually found in CFG instantiations in the U.S. or in K-12 environments. Their CFG met approximately one hour once a week for the purpose of planning the assessment process and discussing the results.

Bernaccio et al. (2007) participated in a CFG that looked specifically at understanding and applying the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Iterative Phase Theory (IPT) into their classes. To do this, they formed a CFG and used a modified Tuning protocol to examine and reflect on syllabi. Not only did they improve their understanding of UDL and IPT over time, but they also refined their classes and their professional identity as a teacher. Several faculty members incorporated the use of protocols in their teaching.

Critical Friends Group Background

Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) emerged out of the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. A CFG is typically a group of 8-12 educators who meet regularly to discuss issues of practice and improve student learning. Their discussion is guided by the use of facilitated conversation protocols to examine student work, conduct peer observations, drill into dilemmas or analyze text.

The "critical" in "Critical Friends Group" is often misunderstood. In this case "critical" does not refer to critique of work, but rather how others are critical or vital in our own learning (Quate, 2004). Learning from authentic work in community is the foundation of Critical Friends Groups. There are two things that set a CFG apart from other forms of professional learning communities. First, CFGs use various protocols to look at adult work, dilemmas, student work, and texts. Second, they are led by a trained facilitator whose role is to ensure that the protocol is followed and all voices are heard.

The session is planned by the facilitator who meets in advance with the person presenting their work to the group. In this meeting they discuss why the presenter wants to bring that

work to the group, develop a framing question that will guide the discussion, and select a protocol that best matches the presenters' goals for the session (Quate, 2004).

During the session, there is typically an opening activity that helps the group focus on the work at hand, a review of norms that the group created, one or two sessions of using protocols to look at different work presented, and a closing activity. The majority of the session is committed to looking at work brought to the group using the protocol selected by the facilitator and presenter. The facilitator's role is to ensure that the protocols are being followed and that the group is attending to the question brought forth by the presenter.

A typical protocol is outlined below:
Tuning Protocol

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
2. Presentation (15 minutes)
3. Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)
4. Examination of Student Work Sample (15 minutes)
5. Pause to reflect on warm and cool feedback (2-3 minutes)
6. Warm and cool feedback (without the presenter) (15 minutes)
7. Reflection by presenter (5 minutes)
8. Debrief (5 minutes)

Using protocols has several purposes. First, it removes the work from the presenter of the work allowing the presenter to hear the feedback without being defensive about the work. In many sessions, the group takes the work on as their own, referring to "we" and "us" instead of "you" or "he/she." Second, it allows for equity of voice, ensuring that everyone participates and the session is not dominated by a single voice. Third, protocols honor members' time. Members of a CFG know that their conversation will stay within a specific time frame. Lastly, protocols keep the conversation focused and on track. You know that you will accomplish and learn something by the end of the session because the protocol eliminates the ability to digress on tangential topics. There exists a wide-variety of protocols that

address adult work, student work, dilemmas, learning from observations and learning from texts. Fahley (2011), in his study of the use of the Consultancy protocol with school principals, found that the use of the protocol constituted a professional learning community in that it allowed for collaboration, deprivatization of practice, reflection, shared norms and values and a focus on teaching and learning.

Successful CFGs are those in which members become invested in the learning of others. Quate (2004) identifies the following critical elements of a successful CFG: a well-trained coach, voluntary attendance, time in the day to meet, norms that guide the group's work, and rotating roles so that a variety of members have the opportunity to present work and to facilitate protocols, and focus on authentic work products.

Our Critical Friends Group

We launched our Critical Friends Group (CFG) in the fall of 2010. The first author had been a part of a CFG at a previous institution and was a trained CFG Coach. Wanting to find the same type of professional connection and network at her new university, she set out to establish a CFG at her current institution. Upon advice from a colleague, she applied for and received an internal grant dedicated to Faculty Learning Communities from a university center dedicated to teaching and learning. This grant allowed for purchase of resources and travel money for members. An invitation to participate was sent out to the entire college, with 12 faculty responding they would like to join. Because of grant limitations, however, the initial group could be no larger than seven faculty members. In order to have as broad of a perspective as possible, the first author selected seven faculty members from multiple disciplines and ranks to form the first CFG. The second author participated in a CFG at a previous institution but was not a trained CFG coach. Other than the authors, no initial members had training in CFG work, although a few had used protocols in their teaching.

Over the last two years, membership has changed due to faculty leaving the university and time commitments causing one

to withdraw. In year two, we continued with five remaining members. At the beginning of year three, we offered another college-wide invitation for faculty to the college to join the CFG. Four new people joined the group, one of which had prior CFG experience at a previous institution. Similar to the first author, she completed a week-long Coaches Institute training experience. None of the other new group members had prior CFG experience. The group membership now consists of four original members plus four new members. The eight members represent all ranks and four out of five departments in the college.

While we talked about norms early on in our formation, we formally established norms during our third year. We used the first meeting with our newest composition of colleagues as an opportunity to create a set of norms. By doing this, voice was given to the new people joining the group in collaboratively developing of the norms , thus providing a baseline of security and trust in the group and our process. The norms provide a common understanding of how we interact and work together. The norms established for our group are the following:

- What happens in CFG stays in CFG
- Presume good intent
- Be present

Our CFG tries to meet monthly, although that is difficult to consistently accomplish due to multiple scheduling conflicts. We generally meet for two hours and a typical CFG session includes:

1. Connections (a protocol to help transition from where we've been to the work we are about to do)
2. Agenda Review
3. Norms Review
4. Looking at Work #1
5. Looking at Work #2
6. Setting up next meeting time/day
7. Reflection (done post-meeting, online through a Google Form)

Addressing issues of authentic work is one of the hallmarks of a CFG. Thus, the types of work that members bring to the table are reflective of the various roles we play in higher education. To date, members have brought the following issues to the group for feedback:

Table 1

CFG Session Synopsis

Focus of CFG Session	Protocol Used
Developing a research agenda	Issaquah
Deepening partnerships with PDS schools	Peeling the Onion
Measuring TPACK in pre-and in-service teachers	Peeling the Onion
Developing an IRB for a study	Charrette
Establishing summer field placement	Consultancy
Developing topics for a new research class	Consultancy
Dealing with interpersonal issues within department	Consultancy
Creating a work/life balance	Consultancy
Writing from research	Charrette
Developing a conference presentation	Tuning
Designing inservice teacher professional development	Charrette

As you can see with the list above, the group has tackled topics relating to all of our major areas of endeavor: teaching, scholarship and service.

Lessons from Our CFG

Participating in our teacher education CFG has taught us a great deal about the CFG process and the challenges of running a higher education CFG. We have also had our fair share of successes as well. In this section, we highlight the lessons learned from participating in a CFG, the challenges associated

with our CFG and the successes gained from taking part in a teacher education CFG.

Lessons from the CFG Process

One of the most important lessons about the CFG process is that of the importance of using the protocols. Protocols put the focus on work, not the presenter, separates process from work presented, and respects members' time by keeping the conversation on the task at hand. One member noted, "Following a format is effective and keeps the group more focused." Another positive aspect of using protocols is that they promote equity of voice. Due to the use of protocols the voices that might normally dominate a conversation are leveled a bit, and those that tend to be lost are strengthened and heard. As one member stated,

> I need to spend more time listening and reflecting before I speak. This has always been a challenge - engaging brain before mouth. I come from a culture of "overtalk" - we all talk at once. It is difficult to remember to wait my turn - but this protocol allowed me to reflect on my response before sharing.

A common aspect of many protocols is time for reflection and process. This has proven especially beneficial for one of the members to whom English is a second language. He has stated that the time to reflect and the turn-taking built into many protocols allows him the opportunity to process the conversation better and enables him to contribute in a more meaningful way than many conversations in the college.

Another lesson learned about the CFG process is that even though we may only look at the work brought by one or two members in any given CFG meeting, we all learn and gain from the activity. This is due, in part, to the expectations and experiences that are common to everyone in teacher education – teaching students, the need to research and publish, and service to the institution. In taking the time to delve deeply into a dilemma or question, we not only bring it that dilemma to light, we also engage and challenge our own perspective and

experiences in the process. Even when the dilemma brought to the group appears to have nothing to do with our own work, we find that the process of listening, questioning, reflecting, and discussing almost always brings out ideas and takeaways that can be aligned with our own experience. This echoes the Constantino's (2010) findings in which her doctoral students "emphasized how much they learned from other projects—not only resources and information but also different ways of thinking" (p.8).

One last lesson learned in engaging in this CFG process is that we have each learned more about our colleagues and our college, giving us a greater sense of connection to each other and our college. We have a better sense of some of the struggles in other departments and centers and have gained a wider perspective about the work of the college as a whole. We each have a better understanding of the work that we do and the challenges associated with that work.

Challenges

Running a higher education Critical Friends Group is not without its challenges, however. Turnover of membership, introducing novices to CFG concepts and process and scheduling have been difficult as the group moved forward.

As mentioned earlier, we have had a substantial turnover of members with only half of the original group still involved three years later. Each CFG meeting needs a minimum number of 4-5 members in order to function effectively. The entire CFG needs to be larger than that in order to accommodate missing members due to conflicts in schedule. In year two, it became difficult to have the 4-5 minimum number of members as there were a total of five in the group. We needed everyone to attend in order to conduct the work of the CFG. After struggling through this in year two, we decided that we needed to recruit more members for year three, which we did.

Another challenge has been that of introducing novices to CFG concepts and processes. In year one, we used the money from the Faculty Learning Communities grant to purchase several books on using protocols and looking at student work (see Resource section below). As part of our CFG work, we read

and discussed these books as a way to introduce those new to CFGs to the use of protocols for looking at work. Additionally, for the very first meeting, we read and used a text-based protocol on an article about Critical Friends Groups (Bambino, 2002) as a way of introducing the concept both through the text and through the process of examining the text. When new members joined in year three, they were given the article in advance to help prepare them for what would happen in the CFG meeting. In our first meeting as a new group in year three, we looked at work from one of the members using a protocol, then developed norms for the group as a group. By doing this, we hoped to not only provide new-to-CFG members with a real CFG experience, but also to give them the opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the group in such a way that it would quickly become a safe space for them. Each meeting contains a norms review, where we read the norms out loud and offer an opportunity to modify or add to the norms. One new, year three member noted after her first CFG session,

> At first, I had a curious, worrisome anticipation as I had never experienced CFG activities. I think it is a nice collaboration activity that we normally do not have in our daily lives at this university. It's a good opportunity to make deeper friends with colleagues.

Our last and most pervasive challenge is that of scheduling. As we are all from different departments, we all have different teaching and departmental rhythms. Finding a regular, common time for the group to meet has proven to be nearly impossible. We had hoped to establish a regular time (first Monday of the month as an example) to meet but soon realized that was impossible. Our general pattern is for the first author to send out a Doodle link (Doodle is a web-based scheduler) to the group to identify the best time for the most people in the group.

Successes
Interdisciplinary perspectives.
Members of the Critical Friends Group are teacher educators and represent various fields within education. This interdisciplinary

design successfully fostered critical thinking skills necessary to integrate concepts and ideas from a variety of disciplines into a broader conceptual framework of analysis. It was also noted that this interdisciplinary approach uncovers perspective and in some instances recognizes preconceptions and biases. One member noted the following after our first CFG meeting, "Its a good opportunity to practice communication skills. Some of the members appear to have very different perspectives and theoretical backgrounds --- a good learning experience!"

In essence, the interdisciplinary Critical Friends Group allows us to advance our individual capacity to engage multiple viewpoints from a range of disciplines that contribute to an understanding of the dilemma under consideration. Thus, members acquire a better understanding of the complexity of problem(s) of interest and the associated components of solving them.

Improved university teaching.
Members of the CFG find participation in this group to be beneficial in improving university teaching. There are several activities that influence gains in professional development. Primarily, the dilemmas discussed during the CFG meetings concern tools, strategies or ideas to enhance teaching. Faculty examine new teaching and learning in effort to help their teacher candidates become more effective in working with PreK-12 pupils. Moreover, several CFG members have described using protocol products within their university classroom as a result of being introduced to them during CFG sessions. The benefits of professional development through CFG involvement has been described as intensive and collaborative by another member:

I need to spread my wings and be sure that I am considering all protocols in my classes and not just relying on those that I have the most experience with. I could use "tuning" more than I do. A goal for me.

Shared roles of facilitation.
Members of the CFG volunteer to rotate in bringing dilemma to discuss. The dilemmas are generally related to pedagogy but also include such topics as professional conflicts, research

interests and scholarship. Each member participates in the presenting, discussing and often facilitating the session, by using a variety protocols selected based on the nature of the dilemma. One CFG member describes the operation of the CFG as a benefit to all members:

> I always think it's interesting that I'm not sure if it would be useful to bring a situation to the group for feedback. Not that I would not find it useful, but that they might not find it so. This experience proved to me that I need to get over it and bring more situations to the group.

Platform of trust.

The design of the CFG demands a platform of trust in which members bring academic and professional dilemmas. Members of the CFG are free to discuss sensitive matters of their academic departments, college level administration, collegial discord, internal politics, and student conduct and performance. Being able to bring our work in progress, open it up to a group of peers and be open to feedback and other perspectives requires a great deal of trust. Andreu et. al. (2003) recognizes that "some teachers are reluctant to examine each other in a critical way, and therefore it is necessary to build an atmosphere of trust and that every member should understand how the process works" (p. 33). This trust is developed amongst the group each session as we interact, support and learn from one another. The protocols keep conversations on track and focused, allowing us to interact and provide feedback in a reflective, professional and supportive manner. One member stated simply stated, "Getting input from others is always helpful, especially in a safe environment."

Implications for Teacher Education

Critical Friends Groups can be a powerful form of professional learning community in teacher education. At its very core, CFGs are about improving work brought to the group. This work can vary widely from session to session, but all of it is authentic and important to the presenter bringing it to the group. Improving

our practice, be it teaching, research or service, is the primary reason to begin a CFG.

One way in which CFGs can impact practice is by transferring some of the CFG processes and protocols into the classroom. Several members have reported using protocols with their students to closely examine text, student work drafts and papers. By introducing teacher education candidates to these practices within their program, not only are they improving on current practice, but they are also engaging in professional activities that can impact their practice for years to come. Even if they do not engage in a full-on CFG as a teacher education candidate, by using protocols to look at work, they are developing strategies to become a more reflective, active practitioner. They may well take these strategies into their professional setting and encourage the development of CFGs in their own schools.

One last implication for teacher education is that CFGs can help develop deeper relationships amongst the participants and to the college itself. We all feel much more strongly connected to one another and to the college as a result of participating in our CFG. Because we represent a wide range of departments and ranks, we not only learn about other entities in the college, but we feel a bit of ownership over the work that is brought to the group. Recently, an inservice session was promoted to the college. Our CFG has a stake in that enterprise because for a brief moment in time, our group held the initial idea as our own and worked to move it forward. These connections, to each other and to the college, strengthen our identities as faculty members and as teacher educators.

Closing

In our CFG experience, we have found that we learn best when we open our work to a trusted group of colleagues. Their energy, insights and perspectives inevitably shapes our work and deepens our thinking. Bambino (2002) states,

> The Critical Friends Group process acknowledges the complexity of teaching and provides structures for teachers

to improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback. Working together to improve the day-to-day learning of all students is crucial to the success of Critical Friends Groups. (p. 25)

We have certainly found this to be true, whether a newcomer to or veteran of the CFG process. One of our newer members with previous CFG experience, when asked after her first CFG meeting "What did you walk away with?" responded, "That CFG can work regardless of location. It's about establishing a community, respecting norms and each other." She continued, saying,

I've missed CFG - I don't think I realized how much until I was back in the groove with this meeting. As busy as we get, it's a rare moment to take time to be present - to intentionally seek "flow" of ideas and energy from each other. The relationship building that happens as a result is pretty phenomenal, and I look forward to building relationships with this group.

Our CFG has become an important means by which to improve practice and build relationships within our college of education. We feel strongly that CFGs have a place in teacher education as a means to improve what we do and impact our students in a meaningful and real way.

Resources

School Reform Initiative – www.schoolreformintiative.org
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