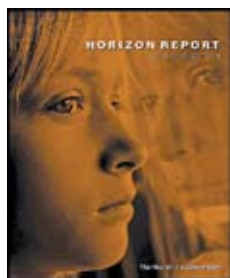


# Critical Friends Groups: Learning Experiences for Teachers

by Ernie Cox

As summer vacations and ice cream, as well as many other relaxing activities are left behind, we have returned to fall with anticipation of professional learning opportunities for the upcoming year. Many educators have various opportunities for summer professional development. For school librarians, the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) are the premier annual conferences of the season. Each offers hundreds of formal sessions and networking events. Classroom teachers also have conferences related to their agendas that reach across the curriculum.

How can school librarians know about other teachers' professional development experiences? In lieu of attending one of the conferences, librarians can read reports and papers such as *The 2010 Horizon Report K-12 Edition* published earlier this year. This report showcases six technology trends by plotting them on a timeline for potential adoption by schools. It is an exciting prospect to consider wider use of



mobile devices, game-based learning, collaborative online spaces, and cloud computing.

*The Horizon Report* is visionary in its scope but also realistic in noting the challenges that could prevent wide adoption of these tools. Challenges such as outdated learning materials and teaching practices, inadequate teacher training, too little value placed on out-of-school learning, disputes about reform, or lack of significant structural changes in education become blockades to change. To further complicate the issue, even if the present challenges to educational reform are addressed, new ones will likely replace them.

This ever-changing dynamic is what makes education a profession of practice. As teachers, we are constantly assessing the local circumstances with broad based theory and research—ideally. Access to these new ideas is not a big issue anymore because barriers to well-researched writing are crumbling. This information is now delivered outside the stream of peer-reviewed publications, often to the Web and at no cost. It is rare that a week passes without distribution of another position paper, research finding, or proposal for our consideration. At times it seems we are adrift in a flood of ideas; there is plenty to talk about in education. The biggest problem is finding systematic ways for educators to transform this information into local knowledge for practice.

## Time for Change

If it is challenging to bring new ideas to the school campus, it may be time

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to create new forms of communication among teaching colleagues. School librarians need time to talk with fellow teachers about the wide range of issues and challenges present in schools. A collaborative mission gives precious time to create learning opportunities for students; but does it give enough time for reflective practice by the school librarian and content area teachers? School librarians can lead the way to creating more time for the adult learners in K-12 buildings—the teachers. Launching this effort will require a format of professional learning that can work within the current system. A Critical Friends Group (CFG) is an ideal way to shift the paradigm to teacher as learner. These groups contain all the attributes of great professional development.

## Great! Professional Development

In a recent editorial, Ellen Eisenberg explains that the best professional development (PD) is when it is job-embedded, ongoing, and personalized (2010). Embedding these experiences means meeting teacher to teacher during the school day. This embedded time should include “reflective, nonevaluative support and regular contact” (Eisenberg

2010, 30). This doesn't describe the usual kind of continuing education that often defines PD. Discrete one-time workshops have their place, but do they support true professional learning in the larger sense? What teacher doesn't want more personalized professional learning experiences?

It has taken decades, but educators are finally realizing that teachers learn best under the same conditions that are advocated for students. It might be difficult to schedule this embedded time in the beginning, but the remaining components are all within grasp. Learning for teachers should speak to the needs of classrooms, libraries, and schools. These learning experiences should not be high pressure environments that impact performance assessments and job status—no punitive measure attached to feedback. They should, instead, be focused on teaching that is aimed at impacting student achievement.

## Establishing a Critical Friends Group

One such learning experience for teachers is the establishment of a Critical Friends Group (CFG) through the auspices of the Coalition for Essential Schools. The CFG is usually comprised of six to ten educators who commit to meeting for two years to “help each other look seriously at their own classroom practice and make changes in it” (<http://www.cesnorthwest.org/cfg.php>).

outcomes, and protocols to establish and sustain these reflective teacher groups. Some teachers will be obvious choices for this group because they like to experiment and discuss future possibilities. They also must realize, however, that a CFG involves risk taking, trust, and thoughtful responses. These are colleagues who:

- ▶ Demonstrate a commitment to informed teaching through self-directed professional development activities (conferences, reading new publications and journals, continuing education, writing for the profession).
- ▶ Are passionate about providing positive, motivating learning experiences for all students.
- ▶ Advocate for rigorous learning outcomes and reject the status quo.
- ▶ Actively collaborate with other teachers.
- ▶ Don't shy away from controversy and find ways to mediate and solve problems by engaged participation and leadership—especially in meetings.
- ▶ Are trustworthy (<http://www.cesnorthwest.org/cfg.php>).

When a group of educators in a school possess these attributes the critical friends group is very close to reality. Gaining administrator support, however, is vital for officially launching this endeavor. Educators should ask for embedded time to meet with this group as well as for

opportunities to meet with the rest of the faculty and administrative teams to share progress and learning outcomes and to receive some honest feedback.

They can make it clear that the ultimate goal of this group is nothing less than improved student achievement. The administrator needs to know that improvement

across the board is being targeted—from project-based learning including 21st-century learning skills to standardized test

## Chalk Talk

The chalk talk begins with writing a question in the middle of a board. For this protocol pose the question:

How can our school embrace the out-of-school learning of our students?

Crafting the question is an important step, and care should be taken to ensure that it is not negative or indirect. A designated facilitator could write the questions or all members of the group could submit an opening question about the state of the school. After the question is written, members of the group take turns writing their response to the question. This work is done in silence and can last for 20 minutes. The facilitator can be silent throughout the process or he/she can use one of these tactics offered by the COS:

- ▶ Circling other interesting ideas, thereby inviting comments to broaden;
- ▶ Writing questions about a participant comment;
- ▶ Adding his/her own reflections or ideas; or
- ▶ Connecting two comments together with a line and adding a question mark (<http://www.cesnorthwest.org/CFG-protocols/chalk-talk.php>).

Having this much time to exchange ideas about a pressing question with this much opportunity for open response is not usually the norm in education. These protocols could bring out new voices or angles of teacher inquiry.

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[cesnorthwest.org/cfg.php](http://www.cesnorthwest.org/cfg.php)). The Coalition for Essential Schools (COS) Northwest provides a toolbox of expectations, goals,

## Tuning

This protocol asks someone to bring a work in progress before the group. The presenter asks peers to help “tune up” the work under development. This protocol is an ideal way to get at the challenge of old teaching strategies and materials. Each member of the group is asked to bring a prepared lesson plan. Each person will take a turn going through the tuning process:

- ▶ Teacher presentation of lesson
- ▶ Questions from Tuners (the peer group) to gain clarity
- ▶ Tuners provide feedback (Warm, Cool, Hard)
- ▶ The Teacher (Tunee) reflects on feedback and responds
- ▶ Facilitator ends session by having group reflect on total process. (<http://www.cesnorthwest.org/CFG-protocols/tuning.php>).

The tuning protocol could be an ideal way to find areas of collaboration between teachers, identify missing content or skill development, or prevent unwanted/unintended student outcomes. For the school librarian this would be a valuable opportunity to demonstrate the informed, thoughtful teaching offered through school libraries. It would also help gain new vantage points on the work of school librarians and make it even more relevant to the schoolwide community.

scores. What school isn't paying attention to state test scores? The group's mission can address this looming and ever-present question while introducing and expanding student experience well beyond the requirements of the test. The administrator should be well-informed of the group's vision. If embedded time isn't possible at this time, meetings could be held before or after school. Is the benefit worth this cost? Absolutely!

## Setting Out

The protocols provided by the Coalition of Schools are designed to bring tough issues and questions to the table in a nonjudgmental and positive way. As the initiating teacher, the school librarian is in a prime position to introduce topics for discussion. School librarians have many topics at the forefront of professional concern—continuing challenges to intellectual freedom, support of literacy development and unique reading contexts across the grades, effective and meaningful integration of information and media resources, and the creative and ethical use of information. These concerns should be meshed with schoolwide issues such as the achievement gap, high school drop-outs, and the accountability movement, to name a few. The sidebars, “Chalk Talk” (page 33) and “Tuning” (left), are two possible issues inspired by *The Horizon Report* and the protocols to explore them.

## Make It Meaningful

School librarians, in this school year, should make a commitment to invigorating the time spent with fellow educators. They can strive to put a stop to pointless meetings where someone reads informa-

tion that could have been posted to the school intranet or emailed out in advance. They can help make meetings engaging and thinking centered. The establishment of a Critical Friends Group can help colleagues see how meaningful such meetings can be.

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