Critical Friends Groups

Handouts for this chapter include:

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

Roles in a Critical Friends Group

FACILITATOR	PRESENTER	PROCESS OBSERVER	RESPONDERS
• Advocates for the presenter. • Plans the protocol and focusing question with the presenter before the meeting. • Ensures the protocol is followed. • Tracks time. • Redirects the conversation if needed. • Invites comments from all participants. • Monitors the conversation, ensuring that it is shared by all. • Encourages multiple perspectives. • Focuses attention on the question the presenter poses.	• Presents work that raises a perplexing question or reflects an earnest dilemma. • Decides with the facilitator on the appropriate protocol and the framing question. • Listens and takes notes on responders' comments. • Responds to the comments at an appropriate time. • Reports to the group at the following meeting about actions taken based on their feedback.	• Notes the group dynamics. • Provides a picture of how the group works together. • Describes the group's interactions. • Notes who emerged as the informal leader. • Observes distribution of talk, including gender differences. • Attends to body language. • Observes how time was distributed. • Begins the debriefing session by reporting on observations.	• Discuss the work in depth. • Provide warm and cool feedback. • Follow the protocol. • Pose provocative questions. • Maintain respect for the presenter and the process. • Invite quiet members to comment. • Encourage divergent points of view. • Refrain from storytelling.

Matching the work to the protocol

TYPE OF WORK FOR A STRUCTURED CONVERSATION	EXAMPLE OF A PROTOCOL THAT MATCHES THE WORK
A professional dilemma	• Consultancy (see Handout 3) • Peeling the Onion (for a description, see www.coloradocfg.org or www.nsrfharmony.org)
Student work A single assignment from one student, a sampling of assignments from the same student, or a sampling of assignments from a class.	• Collaborative Assessment Conference (see Handout 3) • Atlas (for a description, see www.coloradocfg.org)
Teacher assignments A test, a project, a homework assignment.	• Tuning protocols (see Chapter 23) • Assignment protocol (for a description, see www.coloradocfg.org)
A group project A department's strategic plan, a professional development plan, a school improvement plan, a potential department policy.	• Consultancy (see Handout 3) • Peeling the Onion (for a description, see www.coloradocfg.org) • Tuning protocols (see Chapter 23)
A videotape of a teaching episode	• Tuning protocols (see Chapter 23)

Protocols for discussing text

A. Save the last word for me

PURPOSE

This protocol allows everyone to discuss a significant aspect of a text.

STEPS

1. Write a significant quote from the text on one side of an index card. The quote should resonate with the reader, perhaps stating an idea that the reader agrees with or strongly disagrees with.

2. On the other side of the card, explain the quote's significance.

3. One person at a time reads the quote and points to where in the text this quote can be found. The person does not explain its significance.

4. The rest of the group discusses the quote.

5. After a designated time, the discussion stops and the first person reads the back of the card or explains the significance of the quote. In other words, *the last word* is saved for the person who presented the quote.

6. Move on to the next person until everyone in the group has had a chance to have the last word.

VARIATION

If the group is large or time is short, have each person read the quote on the card even if the quote has previously been read. Do not have the group respond to any of the quotes.

The facilitator listens for patterns or repeated quotes to decide which quotes to clump together for group discussion (Step 4). Only one person should restate repetitive or similar quotes before the group discusses them. However, at Step 5, each individual who listed that quote gets to have the last word.

Protocols for discussing text

B. Socratic seminar

PURPOSE

To build a common understanding of a text; deepen one's understanding of a text (text is defined broadly, i.e. an article, a book, a video, an art presentation.)

STEPS

1. Facilitator selects a text and frames a question or two to guide the discussion.
2. The group reads the text several times to nudge meaning out of every word.
3. The group discusses the text, focusing on the framing questions. Tips:
   - Comments need to be grounded in the text.
     - "Where in the text do you see that?"
     - "The comment on page __ appear to contradict the author's earlier statement."
     - "I wonder what the author means when she says…"
   - Conversation needs to be shared among group members.
   - People are encouraged to challenge ideas, not individuals.
   - The success of the discussion is the group's responsibility, not just the facilitator's.
4. Debrief the process.

Protocols for discussing teacher/student work

A. Collaborative assessment conference

PURPOSE

To look closely at student work, describe it, raise questions, and consider teaching implications. (Suggested time: 45 minutes.)

STEPS

1.   The facilitator reviews the protocol.

2.   The presenter distributes the student work but does not explain it, nor does the presenter explain his/her reason for bringing the work to the group. Possible work for discussion includes work from several students or from one student, work in response to one assignment or work from different assignments, videotapes, art, essays, tests, projects, or whatever the presenter finds helpful.

3.   The presenter moves out of the group to take notes.

4.   The responders *describe* the work. The description does not include any kind of judgment about the quality of work or about personal preference. The facilitator leads the group through the following questions:
     *   What are the students doing and saying?
     *   What evidence do you see of their thinking, learning, and /or understanding?

5.   The responders *speculate* about what the students are working on.
     *   What questions does this work raise for you?
     *   What skills are the students working on?
     *   How did the students try to fulfill the assignment?
     *   What questions did the students seem to be answering?

6.   The presenter speaks. At this point, the presenter returns to the group, adds his/her perspective to the group's conversations, and responds to any issues raised.

7.   Everyone discusses the next instructional steps.

8.   The group extends the conversation to address each person's own teaching:
     *   What new understandings have I come to?
     *   What new ideas do I have for my students?
     *   Based on what I saw today, what strategies might I use?

9.   The facilitator leads the group in debriefing the discussion.

Protocols for discussing teacher/student work

B. Consultancy

PURPOSE

To explore a problem or a dilemma. (Suggested time: 60 minutes)

STEPS

1.   The presenter gives an overview of the issue and then poses a focus question. (10 minutes)

2.   The responders (participants in the group) ask the presenter *clarifying* questions. Clarifying questions are primarily for the benefit of the responders since these questions are aimed at helping responders understand the dilemma brought to them and its context. (5 minutes)

3.   The group of responders asks the presenter *probing* questions. Probing questions are primarily for the responders. They ask the presenter "why," among other things, and are open-ended. Probing questions are worded so they help the presenter clarify and expand her thinking about the issue or question she raised. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question she framed or to analyze the issue she presented. The presenter responds to the group's questions, but the larger group does not discuss the presenter's responses. (10-15 minutes)

4.   The presenter moves outside the group, silently taking notes.

5.   Participants talk with each other about the work and issues presented. What did we hear? What do we need to know more about? What do we think about the question or issue presented? (10-15 minutes)

6.   The presenter moves back into the group, responding to the discussion. During this time, the group remains silent.

7.   Open discussion.

8.   Debrief the process.

Protocols for discussing teacher/student work

C. Assignment protocol

PURPOSE

To provide feedback on a teacher's assignment. (Suggested time: 45-60 minutes)

STEPS

1. Introduction: Facilitator reminds the group of procedures, the time frame for each part, and norms. (up to 3 minutes)
2. Presenter describes the assignment, explains the goals for the work and the context of the assignment, and asks a focus question. (7 minutes)
3. Responders ask clarifying questions. (7 minutes)
4. Everyone, including the presenter, spends a few minutes working through the assignment as though they were students. (5 minutes)
5. The presenter moves out of the group and takes notes on the discussion.
6. The group discusses the assignment: (18-20 minutes)
   - What are the strengths of the assignment?
   - What will students know and be able to do when they complete the task?
   - What type of thinking does this assignment require? Knowledge recall? Analysis? Divergent thinking?
   - How does the assignment connect to student background?
   - What questions does the work provoke? Are there gaps?
   - How could this assignment be strengthened?
7. Reflection:
   - Presenter rejoins the group and talks about what was learned from the discussion. Participants explore interesting ideas from the feedback section. This is not a time for the presenter to mount a defense.
   - Responders discuss how the analysis of the assignment led to insights about their own work.
8. Debrief: Facilitator leads discussion about what worked and what didn't.

   Optional: the group writes in teaching journals about how this discussion informs their own teaching.

Connections

Purpose

Connections provides a transition from where participants were mentally and physically before the meeting to the meeting itself. During this time, individuals are invited to share a thought, a story, an insight, a question, or a feeling they have.

Norms for Connections

- Speak if you choose.
- Remaining silent is an option.
- You may speak, listen, think, read, or write.
- Speak only once until everyone who wants to talk has had a chance.
- Listen and note what people say, but do not respond. Connections is not a discussion time.

Facilitating Connections

- Review the norms for Connections.
- Officially open Connections with this statement: "Connections is now open and will continue for 10 minutes." About eight minutes into Connections, state how much time is left and invite those who have been silent to comment, stressing that this is only an invitation.
- If participants begin to respond to comments, remind them that they can do so at the end of Connections.
- Shortly before closing Connections, ask if anyone who has been silent would like to speak.
- End the time by saying, "Connections is now closed."

Source: National School Reform Faculty.

Microlab for setting norms

Steps

- Each person writes for one to two minutes in response to the first question.
- In a round (one person after another), each person shares his/her ideas — one minute per person — without further discussion.
- Each participant writes for one to two minutes in response to the next question.
- In a round, each participant shares his/her ideas — one minute per person. There is no discussion at this point.
- Continue through question 3.
- Open discussion: What should our norms be?

Questions

When I think about groups that have worked together exceptionally well, I realize that in those groups we:

_____

_____

_____

_____

When I think about groups that did not work well together, I realize that in those groups we:

_____

_____

_____

_____

For us to function effectively and efficiently, we will need to:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Questions — clarifying, probing, leading

TYPE OF QUESTION	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE	TIPS
CLARIFYING	To help the listener better understand the dilemma. To provide missing information.	What grade are the students? Have they done this type of work before? What are the next steps? What do you mean by ____?	Think about *who, what, where, when* questions. The answers often are factual. It's easy to answer these questions. Avoid hints of judgment.
PROBING	To challenge the presenter's thinking. To encourage the presenter to investigate buried assumptions. To think about alternative perspectives.	What do you assume to be true? Why is this a problem to you? What if the opposite were true? What does this say about equity? How would students describe this situation?	If the questioner has an answer, the question should not be asked. Often these are *why* questions. These questions are addressed to the presenter, who decides whether to answer. These questions often cause the presenter to pause and reflect.
LEADING	To disguise a suggestion as a question. To formulate a question in order to direct the response.	Have you tried portfolios? What if you asked the students?	Avoid asking questions that have answers embedded into them.

Tips for debriefing

Skipping a debriefing session to save time is tempting, but unwise. Through careful attention to how the group works together, debriefing enables the group to monitor its evolution and continually improve. A debriefing can begin with the facilitator asking the entire group to spend a few minutes writing or discussing. Discussion can be open-ended and freewheeling or structured in a round, with participation by those who wish to comment. If the debriefing is open-ended, the facilitator should encourage varying perspectives by frequently asking, "Does anyone see this in another way?"

TO UNDERSTAND OVERALL IMPRESSIONS	TO CONSIDER PROCESS	TO ASSESS ROLES	TO CHECK IMPRESSIONS
How did our CFG go today? What did we learn from our work today? What comments made an impact on you? How can we build on our conversation? Did we attend to our goals from last month? How did you feel validated as a professional?	How did this protocol work for this problem? What other protocol might we have used? Were you listened to? What did we do well as a group? What do we need to do to get better as a group? Did we follow our norms? Do we need a new one? Were we more silent tonight than at other times? What might this mean? Were our comments too warm? Not warm enough? Did we have enough time? Too much time?	Let's talk about the facilitation of this protocol. What comments from the process observer were most informative? Do we need a timekeeper?	How did you feel when X said Y? What made you uncomfortable?