

# Documenting Decisions: *Making Learning Explicit in Our CFG*

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**“W**e were unsettled and unsure.... We didn’t know each other....We felt unsure of ourselves professionally....We were tired and frustrated and it was only September! Indeed, we were a motley crew: one new university professor, two veteran classroom teachers, three first-year teachers, one graduate student, and two undergraduate students, all searching for some hope and stability in our professional lives.”

*-Jill, a graduate student in Language Education*

I had no idea what I was getting into when they invited me to come to the first meeting of their CFG. I didn’t even know what a CFG was. I’ll admit it – I was a little intimidated when I walked into Sarah’s fifth grade classroom the afternoon of our first meeting. I was out of my comfort zone of graduate school where the language tossed around, the experiences and discussions of my colleagues and fellow teachers of undergraduates rang with commonalities. This kind of school space was what I fled when I entered my graduate program. What would I have to say to these people that wouldn’t isolate them or me?

Andy also worried, “When I was first invited to a CFG meeting, I was somewhat hesitant about going. In your first year of teaching, time is very valuable, and I did not have the time to “waste” going to another meeting. My level of frustration at the beginning of the year was reaching its peak. I felt like a traitor because I had turned my back on my philosophy of education and was now relying on lessons made by other teachers. There were so many areas that demanded my time that I didn’t

have time to make my own student-centered lessons. I was unhappy about my teaching practice, especially reading and math.

“Even with my feelings of hesitation, I decided to go to the meeting. After talking with everyone, I realized that others shared my problems or had issues that were just as frustrating. I began to feel a sense of support that was missing at my school. One of my greatest fears of graduating college was losing the support of my peers. At this first meeting, I began to find that critical encouragement once again. I decided then that CFG was an essential part of my teaching philosophy to constantly question my practice and focus on student learning.”

Perhaps the strongest concern came from Tina, a veteran teacher, “I hate meetings. Nothing that is meaningful to classroom practice is ever addressed. Nothing that contributes to daily professional growth is discussed.

growth during these meetings and proposed actions supporting student learning. Reflections were guided by two concerns: 1) What am I thinking now? and 2) What do I plan to do about it? In addition, we routinely jump-started the “work” of our meetings with an initiating round of “So, what did we try, or reconsider, or change in our practice based on the work of our group two weeks ago?” This is the place where we claimed what actually happened. We did this in an attempt to make explicit and public the impact of devoting our time and attention to two hours of work together every two weeks. We also wrote summative reports that we read aloud to each other during our final meeting of the year.

Did our commitment to each other and the betterment of our professional selves through CFG meetings make a difference for us and our students? The following excerpts from the final reports explore this issue: “Even if

I came to a meeting empty-handed, I left with a new idea for my classroom. Each issue that was brought to the group caused me to question my own practice. By the end of the year I had added several new elements to my writer’s workshop and ripped down a mural to make room for student work. My first year would not have been as enjoyable without the support of the teachers involved in the CFG. With their help I have improved my

practice and become stronger in speaking out about my beliefs.

“The observations we did with our group teachers forced me to examine my own teaching practices. I observed several styles of reading aloud to students. I made it a priority to read aloud to my students this past year. The teachers I observed validated my thoughts

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*-Jill, a graduate student in Language Education*

Everyone gets off topic. Our focus is always blurred.”

We have records of these initial concerns because we decided to build documentation into the work of our meetings. We included journal writing as one of our rituals of meeting together. We asked ourselves to record connections between our professional

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on the importance of reading aloud to students.

“When I first started with this group, I was a fourth grade social studies and science teacher without a homeroom. As a result of my work with this CFG, I have decided to become a classroom teacher responsible for all subjects. All the reading, peer observation, discussions, and sharing has propelled me back into the classroom where I can have a better sense of community and find answers to many of the teaching and learning questions that have arisen in our professional discussions. Personally, I plan to continue trying to make time for reflecting. Also, I’ll consider the effects of looping on student achievement and focus on the organization of my record keeping and assessments.

“One session I particularly enjoyed was the evening when we came up with absurd ideas. I had many dreams that night. I think we always have to have a dream when we are teaching and work to inspire the children to have them as well. CFG has given me the time and space to dream those dreams.

Talking about what my friends in the CFG were doing in their classrooms with my pre-service teacher students brought validity and meaning to what I was saying. I was no longer isolated. This connection was furthered for me when, for one of our “CFG assignments,” we were to visit each other’s classrooms. I had been to Andy’s classroom before to observe my student during his field experience. I already felt comfortable in the space, and respected so much of what Andy was doing, and how he had guided my student. When I went for my CFG observing, Andy was teaching a math lesson. At one of our CFG meetings, a math professor had talked with us about how to teach math more effectively – Andy was using her suggestions! And his students were loving it! I was seeing how Andy’s already established rapport with his students – the rapport that he had also supported my student in establishing as

well – was crucial to this new teaching method. I could see the community in action. I learned by watching and participating with his students’ learning.

I also went to Sarah’s classroom, and she came to mine. Watching her writer’s workshop was inspiring. I got to see the freedom that her students have to follow what is important to them. I saw how Sarah takes risks by encouraging students to ask controversial questions in their writing and to write scary feelings. I can’t wait to share this practice with my students with Sarah’s permission. When Sarah came to my class, she observed and participated in discussions about homophobia and racism. Not only did she provide a new perspective to my students but she helped me to understand where my students’ thinking processes are. I gave students more power in the planning and leading of discussions for the remaining class periods – my leading seemed too heavy handed.

Another major connection for me happened when, during a meeting, we were asked to participate in an “Absurd Idea” protocol. I think a lot of us felt a little silly doing this at first, but as we warmed up to each other’s ideas, we dreamed of ways to make them happen. My dream was to plan collaboratively for my own undergraduate class with an elementary school teacher, and likewise to help her plan. Eureka! Sarah hopped on board! WE decided that this could really become a reality! We could help each other’s students by bringing our expertise into each other’s classrooms. We set up meeting times for the summer.

Sarah created a very specific top ten list as she reported on the influence of CFG work:

1. Shared reading and text-based discussions help me share my reading life with my students. I can pull from how we discuss text at CFG and use those strategies with my students. Also, just sharing my reading life makes reading so much more real for my students.
2. Honoring time, one of our norms,

has become a huge benefit. I am learning how to structure activities according to time managed protocols. I have tried many – the way we established norms (writing our own lists and moving to larger groups) and tuning protocols. I also created many of my own protocols to use for book discussions, tuning of writing, problem solving, and decision-making. I loved how because we honored time during our CFG meetings, we had time for everything.

3. The importance of having a group was significant. I felt that I had to make a choice to honor my group members every time I went. I became part of the group, which I needed and which needed me. If I chose to stay home, I chose to let everyone down and break our norms. This played out in my classroom because it heightened my awareness of our group’s needs.

As I became more a part of the CFG, I encouraged my students to be more cooperative and to rely on each other more. I structured more learning experiences where they had to work in a group to succeed and where they could learn about each other’s strengths.

4. I loved our norm about having no hierarchy of expertise. This was a change from the school environment and allowed me to learn within a group where everyone stood on equal ground.

5. Another of our norms, “if you wonder it ask it”, practically became my motto. I have always asked questions and encouraged question asking in my classroom but never had I realized how important it truly is to listen to the questions of others. I can’t count the number of questions I heard asked at the CFG that made me think more deeply about something I was doing or something I needed to do in my classroom. I love even the huge questions, like the focusing question for our peer observations, “What am I learning about my practice today and what am I being encouraged to try?”

6. CFG increases my curiosity about possibilities inside the classroom.

When we came up with our absurd  
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ideas and listened to the group work through plans of actions, it all seemed so possible. Our ideas became less absurd and by the end, they all sounded really good and they sounded like ideas that we could work on together. Jill and I are even starting a summer planning adventure based on children's literature.

7. My experiences in the CFG helped me set up a dependable time and process for professional reflection.

8. Visiting other classrooms made me think about what I was brushing over in my practice. After visiting Jill's class, I seriously thought about whether or not I was purposely avoiding risky topics or if I was just waiting for the opportunity to discuss difficult issues when a topic arose more naturally.

9. Visiting Tina's classroom helped me to appreciate her so much more and to revalue the knowledge I gained in her classroom and the space she provided for me to grow when I was her student teacher.

10. The shared text, *Readers and Writers with a Difference: A Holistic Approach to Teaching Struggling Readers and Writers* (Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996) helped me to realize my concerns with our school-wide reform initiative. If I had not read this text and been able to talk through my issues with the group, I might not have realized that my anger with the situation at my school had been affecting my learning.

Sarah was also able to share how the work of CFG meetings spilled over into her classroom life and filled up her spirit. What follows is the end-of-year response she composed regarding the importance of time spent with the CFG and her life as a first-year teacher. She uses an early experience from our CFG work, the group juggle, to organize her connections:

Sometimes my life seems to be one big juggling act - one person trying to keep as many responsibilities going at once as possible. And, if one task takes even one second too long, the whole deal falls to the ground and

here I am, looking at the pieces, feeling like it's impossible to make them one again.

I began this first year in the classroom rationalizing that teaching would require just a bit of juggling. All I had to do was keep all of my assessments, readings, meetings, and reflections going at once. I could do it. I was practically invincible at the start of the year—or so I thought.

I started that first day of school with my fresh class of fifth graders doing a group juggling activity where every person was responsible for maintaining a pattern of throws and catches in order to keep a set of balls moving. Perhaps I planned the activity to symbolize all of the learning my students and I would be juggling together. Perhaps I planned it to show how we all had a part in the classroom that had to be done appropriately or we couldn't succeed. Perhaps I planned it because I knew this group juggle would prove to my students and me that we were already a team, even before the end of the first day.

I was sure my students would not really need practice working together. I would just take some time to demonstrate cooperation with this activity, and we would move on from there, juggling our other tasks but knowing how to accept and offer help if needed. I was juggling many tasks almost solo, and I felt like I learned enough every hour to fill the pages of thirty books. My students would be the same way.

Well, here we were, that first day of school, standing in a circle, preparing for our group juggle, when, splat, I dropped the ball before it even left my hand. The next ball dropped too. Finally, we got one object through the first five people and it dropped again just as the yelling began.

"Why'd you have to drop the ball?" a furious student snapped.

"Don't you know how to catch?" another chimed in.

"Come on, skip him, he can't catch. This game isn't fair anyway. I'll never even get to touch the ball," a

disgruntled student announced.

I looked around, picked up the balls, and quit. I didn't want to see any more failed tosses. I didn't even say anything to stop the put-downs or injured feelings that remained in play as we walked back into the classroom. We moved on to the next thing planned, and I moved on to watch many of my other first year ideals shatter as I dropped them one at a time. I dropped reading my students' reader response journals each night and for a time assigned each student only one day to write. I dropped writing in my journal consistently and for a time produced only one response every Monday. I dropped reading every night before bed and only did this on the weekends. I picked up whining in exchange, and spent many hours after school venting to my mentor teacher, Tina, who always encouraged me just enough to pick up the pieces at the end of each day and start anew. But I was still mostly alone, hidden in my classroom, and the cycle went on for a while.

A few months after school started, I began going to the CFG. This group of educators met once every two weeks to grow as a team of learners. I'd been in a CFG during my ten weeks of student teaching, and I remembered the peer observations fondly, and I must admit, the idea of having another adult physically in my room got me tempted to rejoin.

Almost immediately, however, I saw a problem that made me question the worth of the CFG. Our peer observations didn't start for a while. I quickly began to feel overwhelmed with our shared reading but could not drop it because I had committed to the group. Our norms specifically stated that I was committed not only to coming prepared but to challenging the thinking of the group members. Yet, I remember thinking and saying, "I have to go to CFG tonight" on those days of the first few meetings. The CFG was just another responsibility to juggle. I still kept going, and I still kept whining.

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I found comfort, however, in listening to other people talk about their learning concerns and I liked sharing mine. But did I really need this? The cheering squad of my CFG members often thwarted my efforts to keep my whining and complaining in play. The positive attitudes were contagious, and sometimes I'd even join in and encourage those in the CFG. But I was still THE team and I still had to juggle alone. This one member team could still exist without the cheering squad.

The year progressed slowly. I still whined to Tina at school, my students still whined at each other. We all still juggled with some outside encouragement from others, until the week after winter break. I was sick. I was sick of school. I was sick of learning. I was sick of cheering. I was sick of encouraging. I was sick of listening to myself think. So I quit. I quit reflecting in a productive way. I quit reading as much as I needed. I quit abiding by the norms of the CFG and the norms established in my classroom. I was so overwhelmed with all of my failings for the year that I felt that starting again would be impossible. Work in my classroom became more independent. I quit structuring as many interactive activities. I began seeing all of my students' shortcomings and restarting them again seemed impossible. My classroom was a miserable place to be. And I was its miserable leader.

I decided to bring the issue to the CFG. Or, actually, the issue brought me. I didn't really know why or what the issue was. For the first time in a long while, I knew I needed help and so did everyone else. I knew I couldn't start my juggling act again with my low morale. Betty, our experienced and insightful leader, organized a Charrette, a protocol where, basically, I explained my obstacle for about ten minutes and the group talked about the concern for about twenty minutes. The amazing part was that when we started the Charrette, the issue wasn't my issue any more. The group had to take on the concern as if it were their own. It was part of the protocol. I wasn't

even allowed to talk. I wasn't able to jump in and take my issue back. I lost all control. And for the first time in my life, momentarily, I couldn't juggle with nothing to juggle.

I remember being so scared that night, listening to the others talk about why I was not reflecting and why I had seemingly lost my mind. I remember thinking that there was no way this would work. There was no way that this little activity would end productively. But, it wasn't just an activity. It was an experience that led me to drop the need for total control of my own learning. It was the experience that made me realize that I was not alone and that there was more than one person on my team.

Apparently, the group was what I needed all along. That night of the Charrette, my CFG devised a plan to help alleviate some of my stresses and, as a result, I left that meeting with a reflection partner and ideas for organizing my thinking as I reflected about my learning. I left, with journal in hand, writing as I walked, making comments such as, "I am thinking and that is exactly what I need to be doing! I yearn for this communication every day." I left making the decision to try again.

I walked into my classroom the next day knowing we needed a change. As we met in an oval on the floor, I threw out questions to students, hoping they would catch. "Hey, what is going on in here and how can we work through this together?" They echoed my concerns as questions popped up around the oval as to why people were putting people down, and why some people couldn't be quiet during private writing, and why we had to work so much by ourselves. The previously miserable classroom wasn't my responsibility any more. I'd lost all control as the students' minds raced for solutions. We left that oval, after about an hour and a half of small group, large group, and individual reflection time, with a new set of norms and expectations for our learning environment. We left the oval in committees,

assigned to research certain aspects of our learning, and with a new sense of belonging to a group. We left wanting to work together and wanting to succeed.

Eventually, as the weeks passed, the CFG became a more cohesive team. I was able to take on the concerns of my CFG members as my own and they took mine. My class became a more cohesive team as well, and when we met in the oval to discuss, we were willing to tackle issues together. I could ask my class and CFG to help me and they could ask me to help them. Much of the time, we didn't even need to ask.

On the last day of school, I decided to give the group juggle another go. Perhaps I planned it because I wanted to symbolize all of the learning my students and I had been juggling together. Perhaps I planned it to symbolize how we all had a part in the classroom that had been done appropriately so that we did succeed. Perhaps I knew I had planned it because I just wanted to see what would happen when the objects started to drop.

In the risky spirit of the final days of school, we decided to juggle water balloons. As before, I was the first to drop the object and splat, I was soaking wet. Laughter filled the air and the first thrower picked up a new balloon to start again. Splat, splat, splat. Three times in a row, the balloon dropped before it hit the eighth person. The yelling began, just as it had before, but the words were completely different.

"Wait a second, just listen," one student begged. "We have to figure out how to make this work."

"Yeah, it looks like if we are quieter, we might be able to concentrate." A suggestion was offered.

"Oh, and did you notice that we are all kind of looking around and not watching the balloons. Maybe we should all watch the balloons."

"Okay, yeah, and for those people who keep dropping it, maybe we could throw it a little lighter and higher so it'd be easier to catch."

The balloons were back in play  
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# Looking at Student Work Collaboratively

NSRF and The Looking at Student Work Collaborative are offering a day long “Looking at Student Work” pre-conference to the Coalition of Essential Schools’ Fall Forum.

The practice of looking at samples of student work in collaborative teacher inquiry groups, such as Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), has become a prominent form of professional development. In this session, participants will explore the purposes and principles for looking at student work collaboratively (LASW), as well as engage in some of the practices of LASW. Most of the workshop will be devoted to looking at student work samples that participants themselves bring and present. We will work in

small groups, learning about, using, and reflecting on different “protocols” (e.g. the Tuning Protocol, the Collaborative Assessment Conference, and the Consultancy) to structure the conversations. Groups will be facilitated by experienced NSRF facilitators and members of the national Looking at Student Work Collaborative, which supports schools and teachers in LASW.

This workshop will be offered as day-long session on Thursday, November 14. Capacity is limited, and registration is on a first-come, first-served basis.

## What

Looking at Student Work Collaboratively Workshop

## When

Thursday, November 14, 2002

## Where

Washington, D.C.  
Marriott Wardman Park Hotel

## Cost

\$145

## To Register go to

[www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/fforum/fforum.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/fforum/fforum.html)

## Building Professional Learning Communities

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to share best practices and dilemmas. Whether or not the term CFG is used in training and implementation “models” of the various LA efforts, one can see that the work in LA consistently focus-

es on building the capacity of site principals, teachers, and schools to reflect upon their practices to improve student learning by using the collaborative strategies and tools that folks doing

CFG work have proven to be effective and valuable. ❖

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## UCLA School Management Program

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being treated as a valued professional – some even say it has been their first such experience. ❖

Contact Debbi Laidley at [dlaidley@smp.gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:dlaidley@smp.gseis.ucla.edu)  
or Lisa Manning  
[lmanning@smp.gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:lmanning@smp.gseis.ucla.edu).

Information about upcoming Coaches Institutes can also be found on UCLA SMP’s website at [www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu](http://www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu).

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and after two more stops and discussions, we juggled three balloons through the entire class six times in a row! We walked in the room, patting each other on our backs, congratulating each other on our efforts. It wasn’t the juggling we were proud of. We were proud that we had become a team that needed each other.

Likewise, as I think of the CFG, I feel great pride in the team we have become. I realize that we are not meeting only every other Monday. We are

meeting much more—in the hallways, on the telephone, or in another’s classroom. I realize that I need the CFG and the community we have built so that I don’t just juggle my concerns. I can tackle them with the help of others.

Because of our efforts to begin documenting the learning surrounding our CFG, we’re beginning to shape a process for embedding teacher action research into the ongoing rituals and routines of our time together. We’ve

made a good start, but we will begin again next year trying to do an even better job of not just making our teaching public - but also our learning. We’re coming to accept that we may never feel as settled or sure, as we’d like to be. We are confident, however, that the stability of our critical friends group will give us the support we need to keep asking the hard questions and not feel so alone in the process. ❖

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