

## Developing Facilitation: A Reflection on Apprenticeship

Andy Plemmons, Georgia

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Many people questioned me when I left my new wife home alone one week after our wedding while I apprenticed at a CFG Coaches Institute, but my wife and I knew that beginning the apprenticeship process toward becoming an NSRF National Facilitator was an opportunity I could not decline. Now, one year after my apprenticeship experience began, I realize how much I have grown as a facilitator by learning from national facilitators who make the process seem natural and transparent.

CFGs have played a vital role in my growth as an educator over the past five years. In my first year of teaching third grade, I joined a CFG consisting of teachers of various experience levels from schools other than my own. My principal began to notice the risks that I was taking in my classroom as a result of my membership in a learning community and became interested in CFGs. As a result, I attended a Coaches Institute and began to coach a CFG at my school, with Betty Bisplinghoff as a mentor. After one year of coaching, Betty Bisplinghoff, Frances Hensley, and Thomas Van Soelen invited me to become an apprentice at a Coaches Institute that they were leading. This apprenticeship was followed one year later by another apprenticeship in a leadership role with Debbie Bambino.

In my first apprenticeship, I realized that a challenge for myself would be to make a transition from being a third grade teacher and CFG coach to becoming a facilitator who could convey the meaning and understanding behind the work of NSRF to people who may be unfamiliar with the work. Betty, Frances, and Thomas invited me to take an observational stance in the beginning days of the institute. Equipped with my pen and journal, I began to write down exact words that were used to introduce NSRF principles and protocols.

When Frances introduced the *Consultancy Protocol*, she stressed, "We're going to help Don *untangle* his dilemma and perhaps *find a thread* that he might follow. We are *not here to solve* this dilemma. If Don could have figured this out, he would have." These words from an experienced facilitator laid the groundwork for a successful protocol. Frances made the protocol inviting, while setting up the true purpose of a consultancy.

It was through my close monitoring of word choice and conversing with my mentors that I realized how my own word choices might not be as inviting as a facilitator's words should be. I was accustomed to using phrases such as 'I'm going to give you 10 minutes to do this activity' or 'I want you to get out your book and turn to page 26'. These words made me sound like a person in a rigid, controlling role instead of a facilitative role. I began to change the way that I presented protocols and instructions as a result of this study. Now when introducing a time of reflection, my wording might be 'You have an *opportunity* to spend some time reflecting on what you have experienced today. These 10 minutes will be a *sacred time* that we will *honor* at the end of each day.' These words create a more inviting atmosphere for participants to step up and become a part of a learning community instead of feeling like they are being told what to do.

Another transition that I had to make was creating an agenda that met the needs of a larger group. As a coach of a CFG, I was accustomed to creating a responsive agenda. However, I never realized the volume of reflective thinking that goes into creating an agenda for a Coaches Institute. Before an institute begins, the facilitators create a draft agenda. I soon learned in both apprenticeships that this draft agenda changes multiple times before the institute even begins. For example, the room layout for the institute is not always known in advance. This can cause a draft agenda that planned for the large group to be divided into two smaller CFGs to change to keeping the whole group together. Facilitators have to think critically about the use of the space to ensure that the participants have a meaningful experience.

One piece of the agenda that can become stressful at times is the inclusion of participant work. In my first apprenticeship, there was an abundance of both student and adult work. While this is a wonderful problem to have, it becomes complicated as decisions are made on how to include every participant's work. The national facilitators and I sat down with participants and conferenced with them to see if the work was something that they had a genuine interest in or if they just brought it because they were asked to. This process was uncomfortable at first, so I began conferencing by sitting in with a national facilitator until I felt confident enough to talk with participants on my own.

In my second apprenticeship, we began the institute with the problem of not having much student and

adult work. We had to think about ways to *begin* protocol experiences without a lot of participant work. Debbie Bambino encouraged slowing down the protocol process and looking at pieces of protocols to build a foundation for the types of conversations that take place ~~during protocols~~ with the help of these structures. Debbie keeps a collection of student work that she can let participants use to practice describing work before going through a full *Looking at Work* protocol. By providing examples of student work for participants during the institute, Debbie ~~provided~~ introduced two important experiences. She gave participants an opportunity to practice describing work without judgment before doing a *Collaborative Assessment Conference*, and she showed participants some types of work that they could bring to the table. This reminded me to keep a collection of student work available in the event that an institute does not begin with work from the participants. As the week progressed, participant work began to come in, and I saw how Debbie's responsive agenda conveyed the importance of authentic work to the participants and helped them to see that the kinds of conversations that take place within a CFG cannot be achieved without ~~authentic~~ the real work ~~from~~ of members from within the group.

In addition to thinking about participant work, we also had to consider the home learning opportunities that we were giving to participants. Each night we had to decide on readings to assign that would push the participants' thinking. These readings were another aspect of being responsive to the group. Some readings focused on elements of protocols that would be used the following day, while others focused on topics that came up within the group.

In my second apprenticeship, the group was struggling with the definition of *equity*. The facilitators had to make a decision on whether or not to include readings that focused on equity or to push the idea of equity in the discussions held throughout the week. In the end, we used a combination of both to be responsive to this group need. Home learning adds one more piece that we had to make room for in our agenda. It was crucial that we provide time to do a text protocol in the agenda if we asked participants to read at night.

The agenda was the most exhausting part of the institutes for me. It was always on the facilitators' minds. Throughout the day, we had to check-in to make sure that we would be able to get to all of the agenda. If we felt that we would be pressed for time, we had to make a quick, reflective decision on what to take out or shift to another day. To me, this was a big difference between being a national facilitator and coaching a CFG. In my own CFG, our agendas rarely change during the meeting because we are only focusing on a two-hour meeting, instead of a eight-hour day that left room for many decisions to be made.

In both apprenticeships, I saw the importance for facilitators to remain transparent about their facilitation when changes take place in the agenda throughout the day. Before my apprenticeship, I occasionally explained my facilitation decisions to the groups that I coach. To convey what it truly means to facilitate, it is important to explain why you make the choices that you do. My first apprenticeship allowed me to have time to begin thinking about why I make certain choices in protocols or why I chose certain words to explain a process. I watched as the national facilitators stopped periodically to tell the group what they were thinking. I rarely saw the facilitators whispering to each other to privately make decisions. They would open up this conversation for the group to hear so that facilitation didn't become a secret process.

My second apprenticeship gave me the opportunity to start vocalizing my facilitative decisions to the group. I frequently stopped after each section of a protocol or during the debriefs to reveal to the group some of the decisions that I made. For me, this was a big step in making my work as a facilitator public just as I have made my work as a teacher public through participation in a CFG.

I also found myself needing to be transparent as I moved people out of their comfort zones and into an area of risk-taking. Throughout my two apprenticeships, I watched as the national facilitators chose times where they would specifically call on individuals to tell how they felt about a topic, give input during a protocol, or step up and present their work. In a CFG, we are called to ask questions that challenge our assumptions and habits as well as hold one another accountable for meeting the needs of our students and each other. The national facilitators made it so easy and inviting when they singled out individuals, but I found that it put me in an uncomfortable role.

In one instance, I pushed someone into a danger zone by asking for feedback. We were doing the *Zones of Safety, Risk, and Danger* activity after lunch. I was randomly calling on people to tell why they chose the zone that they were in. During one scenario, an individual was having trouble deciding which zone to move into. I asked this individual, "Tell us what you are thinking". This person was caught off guard and was immediately placed in a danger zone. As a facilitator, I had to be transparent in that moment and explain that a facilitator has to make quick decisions, and those decisions don't always turn out for the best. When you try to push someone's thinking, sometimes you push too far, and you have to have norms in place that allow you to move beyond this uncomfortable experience. That moment was very troubling to me, but it made me realize that mistakes are going to happen. I will use that experience to continue to think of ways that I can make nudging people out of their comfort zones more inviting.

Another area of my facilitation that needed improvement was my leading of debriefs. When I first attempted debriefing a protocol, the national facilitators would often assist me by following up on questions that I had initiated with the group. I had trouble thinking of questions that would push the group to think deeply about what worked or felt awkward about the protocols and *why* the protocols felt this way. It was easy to start the debrief by saying, "What came up for you?" or "What was it like to use this process?", but it was a challenge to think of questions that would keep the conversation flowing. By watching the national facilitators, I realized the importance of listening closely to each participant's input and building questions off of the existing conversation. It is also important for a facilitator to listen for the conversations that *aren't* taking

place in the debrief. Throughout the protocols, a facilitator can make notes about norms that were honored or dismissed, assumptions that were made, protocol elements that worked for the group, and any other observations about how the protocol functioned within the group. These observations can lead to questions that take the group into conversations that may not have taken place if it were not for the facilitator's close observation.

By my second apprenticeship, I was ready to step up and try to improve my debriefing skills. I let Debbie know that this was an area that I was working on. She encouraged me to keep the conversation moving and focused. During each debrief, I found myself listening more closely to each participant's comments and asking follow-up questions as needed along the way. My observations helped me to ask questions that took the conversation in new directions. The debrief is still an area of my facilitation that needs improvement, but I know that having many opportunities to practice debriefing will help me to get to a level where I feel comfortable leading an effective debrief.

The path to becoming an NSRF national facilitator is one with many forms of support along the way. The transition from participant to coach to apprentice to apprentice-leader has been a gradual process. My close work with national facilitators along with my coaching of two CFGs and attendance at the NSRF Winter Meeting has all worked together to develop my facilitation skills. I look to the future knowing that I am ready to lead this work at future institutes, and I will continue to grow as a facilitator along the way.

*Andy Plemmons can be contacted at [aplemmons@oconee.k12.ga.us](mailto:aplemmons@oconee.k12.ga.us)*

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