CHAPTER 3

What Makes Some Learning Communities So Effective, and How Can I Support My Own?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a review of research and the findings of a multiple case studies, this chapter explores several key distinctions between learning communities that are in the beginning stages of collaborative work and those that are well established and highly effective in the areas of professional community, professional learning, and action and accountability. It also points to the potential benefits of engaging in a reflective process of group analysis and goal setting.

Research from recent decades suggests that collaborative learning communities hold promise for school improvement because collaborative actions (e.g., shared work, frequent and precise discussion of teaching practice, and mutual observation and critique) support teachers in changing their teaching practices in order to better address the needs of all their students (Little, 1982; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Research has documented a connection between a learning community’s stage of development and student achievement (Wheelan & Tilin, 1999; Wheelan & Kesselring, 2005). However, the task of replacing traditions of isolation, privacy, and competition with habits of collaboration, collective responsibility, and ongoing inquiry can be a challenging enterprise, “a journey, not a destination, a verb rather than a noun” (Grossman, Wineburg & Wool-
worth, 2001). Just as the implementation of any reform or innovation can result in varying levels of success, there are some cases in which groups develop into powerful authentic learning communities and other cases where groups function as learning communities in name only.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the factors that set apart the truly authentic and effective learning communities. It seeks not only to distinguish the highly functioning communities from the less developed communities, but also to identify the areas in which all learning communities might focus their efforts in order to facilitate group development. More specifically, this chapter focuses on small learning communities commonly known as critical friends groups (CFGs).

CFGs, first initiated in 1994 in 70 participating schools by the Annenburg Institute for School Reform (Olsen, 1998; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000), are now affiliated with the National School Reform Faculty and include tens of thousands of educators in 26 states (NSRF, 2007). A CFG is typically composed of six to twelve professionals who make a commitment to meet together regularly to collaboratively inquire into teaching practice. CFG participants include preservice teachers, novice teachers, veteran teachers, administrators, university professors, and any other interested stakeholders. CFG meetings frequently use structured protocols for looking at student work samples or other data, discussing relevant texts, and working through dilemmas of practice (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Bambino, 2002).

Strong foundational principles and practices guide these learning communities, but there is still variability in the implementation and effectiveness of CFGs (Dunne & Honts, 1998). The following narratives, fictional composites derived from actual CFG cases in the literature, serve to illustrate the attributes and experiences of two different CFGs. The first composite describes a CFG just beginning as a professional community, while the second composite describes a more highly developed and experienced CFG.

**Composite 1.** CFG members at Middleburg Elementary School are glad they have made the commitment to set time aside to meet together regularly this year. They are developing a new appreciation for their colleagues as they discover that others in their group share similar passions and offer unique insights and expertise. They are also relieved to find out they are not the only ones with questions about their teaching practice. These individuals describe a typical CFG meeting as collaboration focused on problems that arise with students, analysis of successes in their teaching, and discussions of texts through the use of protocols. Intrigued by the difference they see in their conversation when it’s structured by a protocol, teachers in these CFGs are eager to try out many other types of protocols to see how they would work. However, they fail to mention that they still feel insecure about putting their own students’ work out for others
to look at and that their coach frequently ends each meeting by asking, “Would anyone be willing to bring work for the group to look at next time?” The coach of this group is trying to balance two important roles. First, she is working on logistics: helping participants follow the established norms, to stick to the protocols, to discern between clarifying and probing questions, and to distinguish between observations and judgments. Second, she is working to help the group develop a vision for collaborative work. She tries to find texts that will raise questions about teaching and learning to help the group find direction for shared work, and she supports group members in identifying questions within their practice that they might bring to the group for examination.

**Composite 2.** CFG members at Deer Woods Elementary School describe their work together as a commitment to ongoing professional learning. While some years they have supported each other in their own individual year-long inquiries into teaching practice, other years a shared inquiry drove their collaborative work. To support these inquiries, they read research together, examine student data, consider appropriate standards for student work, and analyze lesson plans, assessments, and units. Deeply internalized norms of respect for one another and much experience in working together has helped them to develop that optimal balance between safety and risk needed for learning. They speak very candidly with one another, asking challenging questions, pressing one another for clarification, and looking for each other’s underlying assumptions. They are not afraid to disagree with one another. On the other hand, they encourage and support one another in such a way that members feel they can expose even their deepest questions and concerns about their practice without fear of judgment. To maintain their mutual accountability to ongoing learning, this CFG’s coach continually challenges the group members to report back to the group the ways they are learning and growing through their inquiries and in what ways this learning is impacting their students. Because the group members have such clearly defined learning goals, they have not found it difficult to document their own learning and that of their students through lesson plans, student work samples, student achievement data, and other artifacts. Though they have grown significantly as a group, the members of this CFG strive never to become complacent or stagnant in their work together. Their coach continually encourages them in monitoring their collaborative work, and as a group they are considering how they might seek further perspective from parents, students, and community members. Since they have learned so much, they are also talking as a group about how they can take action at the district level in order to effect change.

These narratives describe two vastly different CFGs. This chapter will elaborate on the distinctions between the CFGs represented in these composites by examining three facets of CFG growth and development: professional community, professional learning, and action and accountability. Both a review of the
CFG literature and the findings of a multiple case study provide a basis for the analysis presented here. The chapter concludes with a list of questions based on this analysis that leaders or members of learning communities might use as reflective prompts for stimulating their own group’s development.

**Professional Community**

Since creating collaborative professional communities was the intent of the CFG design, it is not surprising that a nearly universal research finding is that participation in CFGs leads to deeper levels of professional community and collaboration. For example, Curry (2003) found that CFG participation interrupted the norms of isolation at the high school she studied, creating collegial ties across departments, promoting a shared awareness of the school’s reform philosophy, a more school-wide orientation towards teaching practice, and greater curricular coherence in the school. Similarly, responses to a professional climate survey indicated that CFG teachers collaborate more with each other than non-CFG teachers by sharing ideas and student work samples, meeting to discuss problems, working to develop materials, and seeking advice about professional issues and problems (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). If increased community and collaboration is the norm with the introduction of CFGs, then what sets apart the particularly highly functioning group from the rest?

The two composite CFG descriptions illustrate differences in the level of professional community attained in three respects. The first is trust (Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996; Dunne & Honts, 1998; Little, Gearhart, Curry & Kafka, 2003). The members of the highly developed CFG community at Deer Woods (Composite 2) are willing to be vulnerable with one another and to share their deepest uncertainties about their teaching practice because they have developed deep bonds of trust as they have worked together over time. Trust also allows them to respectfully challenge each other and to give each other honest feedback. In the Middleburg CFG (Composite 1) relationships are beginning to form as members get to know one another in new ways. However, participation is careful, measured, and tentative because members do not yet know whether the sense of safety will last or what might happen if conflict arises.

A second difference between the two groups is commitment (Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). For members of the Deer Woods CFG, actual evidence from their own teaching practice bolsters their commitment to continued participation. They have seen first hand how CFG participation helps them to better meet the needs of their students. Members of the most established CFGs often cannot imagine how they ever functioned without it (Neufeld & Woodworth, 2000). In contrast, members of the Middleburg CFG have not worked together
long enough to have solid evidence of the benefits of working collaboratively. Their enthusiasm for CFG work often stems from doing something new and different and from an initial affective response experiencing “a breath of fresh air” at meetings.

New CFG participants often describe their group as a safe space, an oasis from the stresses of the profession, a source of affirmation of teaching practice, a support group, an energizer that boosts morale, and a welcome reprieve from the traditionally isolating nature of the teaching profession (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Neufeld & Woodworth, 2000; Yendol-Silva, 2003). This initial affective response could provide powerful inspiration for collaborative work early on, but it is not sufficient to fuel a lasting commitment to collaborative learning. The challenge for this CFG in order to grow in both trust and commitment is to continually delve deeper in truly meaningful activity, that which will result in powerful learning.

**Professional Learning**

Research examining professional learning within CFGs and how that learning impacts teaching practice and student learning is less conclusive than it is for a CFG’s role in promoting professional community. Some participants have named CFGs one of the most powerful professional development activities in which they have ever participated (Dunne & Honts, 1998), and several studies document specific changes in teaching practice to support improved student learning that have resulted from CFG participation (Bernacchio, Ross, Washburn, Whitney & Wood, 2007; Nave, 2000). On the other hand, Neufeld and Woodworth (2000) describe groups whose meetings were often consumed by administrative details or frittered away with arguments about how to interpret a rubric with little search for the meaning behind the rubric or the student work. Furthermore, Curry (2003) noted a waning interest in CFG participation as group members sensed their participation led to diminished returns in professional growth over time. The questions that arise are: What makes the difference? What factors lead to significant professional learning that can have a profound impact on teaching and student learning? The literature suggests three important factors: time, use of time, and shared purpose.

First, the amount of time CFG members have available to meet together is an important matter influencing possibilities for professional learning. Several authors assert that an administrator’s willingness to provide time and space for groups to meet is critical for CFG success (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). Another study contrasted the rich conversations and learning occurring in groups meeting regularly for 60-75 minutes at a time with
the lack of depth in conversations where groups met sporadically for 30 minutes or less (Nuefeld & Woodworth, 2000).

Although having time to meet is important, how participants use that time is a second crucial consideration. Dunne, Nave & Lewis (2000) assert that the amount of time a group spends in the rigorous task of analyzing student work is what correlates most strongly with changes in teachers’ thinking and practice. A common pitfall for beginning CFGs is putting too much time and focus on trust building or community building activities (Armstrong, 2003; Whitford & Fisher, 2003). The participants in these groups may not realize that the deepest level of trust develops alongside a deepening sense of purpose and meaning while seeking greater insight into students’ understanding and using that insight to analyze and plan for instruction.

Finally, the most obvious difference in possibilities for professional learning between the fictional composites described in this paper is a shared learning purpose (Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). As with many beginning groups, participants in the Middleburg CFG are caught up in the process of using protocols to structure their conversations. In fact, a common stumbling block for beginning groups is to focus more on trying out a number of different types of protocols or refining their use of the protocols than on the purpose of using the protocols to focus their conversation around important questions about teaching and learning (Wood, 2003; Yendol-Silva, 2003). The members of this group have not yet developed a clear sense of shared purpose.

In contrast, participants in the Deer Woods CFG use their collaborative relationships to pursue ongoing inquiries into teaching and learning and use protocols as tools to support those inquiries. Similarly, the characteristic that seems to truly distinguish the most CFGs in the literature is an ongoing inquiry focus or shared goal for student learning. This might be an inquiry into improving student achievement (Yendol-Silva, 2003), an inquiry focus of improving student writing skills (Nave, 2000), or the implementation of a school-wide literacy reform effort (Neufeld and Woodworth, 2000). In order to pursue these shared inquiries, participants of the highest functioning learning communities have honed their skills in asking meaningful questions about student work and teaching practice in areas connected to the inquiry, accessing relevant outside resources and expertise in order to understand best practice, collecting relevant data, and using the data to make instructional decisions (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Neufeld & Woodworth, 2000).

**Action and Accountability**

Having a clear plan for professional learning and the skills it takes to pursue that learning is important, but intentionally monitoring progress towards learn-
ing goals is the next challenge. A professional learning community must take on a results orientation, assessing their work “on the basis of results rather than intentions” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. 29). Pursuing learning is not enough. Taking action based on what is learned by analyzing student work and teaching practice and then monitoring the results of those actions is the important next step for learning communities.

It is likely that only the most highly functioning of all CFGs attend to this facet of the work. Only the most highly functioning groups would have a clear enough shared inquiry and well coordinated efforts for pursuing that inquiry, so it is likely that these are the only groups able to concretely monitor and document the results of their collaboration. This explains why there is no mention of action or accountability in the description of the Middleburg CFG. For the Deer Woods CFG, however, the process of monitoring and documenting learning provides accountability for applying what members are learning and evidence by which they can determine their success.

There is little emphasis presented within the literature to date on action and accountability in CFG work, but a few studies document the importance of this aspect of an effective learning community. The very first cohorts of CFG participants committed not only to meeting regularly as a group, but they also agreed to form peer coaching partnerships for ongoing feedback and support and to develop a portfolio to document their learning and that of their students over a two year period (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). In this way, accountability was built into the learning community both for the individual participant and for the group as a whole. Participants knew that they were expected to take action on what they were learning as a community. Peer coaching could provide the support they needed to try new instructional approaches, and the portfolio process required that they monitor their own learning and that of their students over time. The portfolios also served as evidence of success for the CFG as a whole. Nave (2000) and Armstrong (2003) each found that the more faithfully a CFG followed this intended program design, the more likely it was to engage in the kind of meaningful reflection and focused work that leads to changes in teacher practice and improved student learning.

Neufeld & Woodworth (2000) also emphasize action and accountability as setting the most advanced groups apart from the others. In these groups, a norm of “reporting back” provides accountability for trying new strategies or instructional practices based on what participants learn in group discussions. This also leads to new questions for the group to explore. Thus, these CFGs engage in a cycle of inquiry and experimentation, monitoring their growth and continuously seeking to improve.
Monitoring CFG Work through Intentional Group Analysis

A multiple case study (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 1998) examining the experiences of three CFGs as they engaged in a process of group analysis and goal setting offers additional perspective on how highly functioning groups might differ from beginning groups in the area of action and accountability. The three cases included two school-based CFGs comprised primarily of teachers and one CFG in which administrators from several school districts met together at one member’s home. The members of each CFG had already been working together for a minimum of one year and for as long as four years in one case. During the process of group analysis members of the Case 1 CFG self-identified most often with descriptors of beginning and developing groups, the members of the Case 2 group self-identified with descriptors of both the beginning and the highly functioning group, and the members of the Case 3 CFG self-identified most with the descriptors of a highly functioning group.

The process of group analysis involved three steps. First, participants used descriptors of the three stages of group development based on literature pertaining to CFGs and small-group development to assess the strengths of their CFG and areas in which they would like to grow, ultimately coming to consensus on specific goals to pursue. At a second meeting, they developed an action plan for achieving their goals. Finally, the CFG members checked back in on their goals several months later to consider what kind of progress they had made and what they needed to work on next. Data collection during this study included observations of the CFG meetings, document analysis, an interview with each CFG coach, and a final survey of all participants.

One of the most striking results of this study was the vast difference in response between the Case 1 CFG (self-identifying as beginning/developing) and the Case 3 CFG (self-identifying as highly functioning). First, participants responded very differently to the process. A number of Case 1 participants were quite critical in their response. About half of the participants questioned the value of spending so much time on group analysis and goal setting since it expended time they could have used to discuss their teaching. In contrast, members of the Case 3 CFG expressed the greatest value for the opportunity to participate in this process. First, reflections on their CFG’s development during the first meeting were so rich and meaningful that half of the participants suggested that a longer meeting, perhaps even a full day retreat, could have been useful. They did not view this process as being separate from the real purpose of their group, but as integral to their continuing growth, as one participant commented, “I have to say that I don’t see this as not being part of our work as
a CFG, so that’s what made it for me meaningful. . . . So I don’t think it was an aside.”

Second, participants differed significantly in their response to the descriptors provided. Participants from Case 1 identified with descriptors of the beginning and developing groups, but struggled to find a vision for the possible in the descriptors of the highly functioning group. Several questioned whether their own definitions of a highly functioning group matched the descriptions provided and whether their CFG’s specific context and the time they had available would ever allow them to attain the provided descriptions of a highly functioning CFG. On the other hand, group analysis of the Case 3 CFG’s development provided a solid grounding for envisioning new possibilities for growth. At the same time, participants suggested that the descriptions of the highly functioning group were not truly indicative of most highly functioning, but that they wanted to reach for a challenge beyond that which was described.

Finally, participants in the two cases differed in their follow-through. When the Case 1 participants met for the third meeting in this process, many did not even recognize the goal they had written seven months earlier. In fact, one asked during the meeting, “Did we make that up?” Another commented on the final survey, “[Setting goals] was good at the time, but I’ve not thought about it since.” This lack of follow-through suggests that the group’s analysis did little to actually push their work forward. Conversely, the Case 3 CFG has taken the most concrete actions toward meeting their goals. For example, the agenda for their very next meeting reflected their renewed desire to examine student data and to set more concrete learning goals, while plans for taking a CFG weekend retreat are still well underway a year later.

The contrasting experiences of these two CFGs suggest that members of more highly functioning learning communities are more likely to recognize the value of collaboratively reflecting on their group’s progress, are more capable of envisioning possibilities greater than their current work, and have a greater capacity for taking action and monitoring progress towards goals.

**Pursuing Intentional Group Development**

In spite of the stark contrast in response from the members of the two cases described above, data from all three cases suggests that a process of intentional group analysis and goal setting has clear benefits for helping groups to grow in community and professional learning. First, participants from all three cases
reported that their discussions helped them to develop more of a common understanding of their work and purpose as a CFG. In fact, the coaches of one CFG felt that one of the most valuable aspects of this process was that all group members had the opportunity to share their perceptions of the group’s development and to have a voice in the direction the group should go next. Coming to a mutual understanding of a CFG’s purpose and sharing ownership for the group’s future directions are important factors in strengthening a CFG as a professional community.

Second, participants from Cases 2 and 3 perceived that this process helped them to narrow their focus and direction. They commented on how the process disrupted each CFG’s routine, providing a new vision for the possible, or a clearer direction for their work. A comment by one participant highlights ideas expressed by many: “We became more aware of where we, as a group, may be off track, the direction we want to go, and how we need to reset our group’s path in order to reach our goals and deepen the effectiveness of the work we do and the support we provide one another.” Another participant stated: “Yes, this is exactly what we need in order to get us excited about this again—to jumpstart what we’re doing for this year so we’re not in a rut.”

Participants were surprised by how this process also enabled them to come up with concrete steps to take towards their goals so that the plan seemed “doable” compared with many of the big broad ideas they often come up with during meetings. Developing a clearer focus and a “doable” plan are two factors that are likely to lead a group to more effective collaborative work and professional learning. Although following these groups over time would provide deeper insights into the role that group analysis and goal setting might play in facilitating group development, this study provides provisional evidence that this type of intentional reflection is a worthwhile endeavor.

Therefore it is fitting to conclude the paper with prompts for such reflective analysis. The questions provided after this section draw on this chapter’s discussion of common obstacles CFGs face in their development in the areas of professional community, professional learning, and action and accountability. This list of questions may support reflection for a CFG’s coach, an individual CFG participant, or for entire CFG; but they are also general enough that participants in any type of learning community are likely to find them useful. Regardless of who uses these questions as tools for reflection, the lessons from this research study suggest that reflective analysis is just the first step. In order to reap the greatest benefit from the process, the group should also identify the concrete steps needed to work toward developing as a learning community, then consider the forces that might help or hinder them in taking these steps, and finally plan to monitor their progress to ensure follow-through.
Questions for Intentional Reflection on Group Development

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

• To what extent do I, as a group member, feel I can speak honestly about my perspective? To what extent do our norms support safe yet challenging interactions during our meetings?
• What barriers exist between group members? How can we work to overcome those barriers? How do we address conflict when it arises?
• To what extent do I, as a group member, fully participate in the work of the group by sharing my expertise, by bringing my own questions to the group, and by helping to shape the vision for where our group is headed?
• Why am I a part of this group and to what level of commitment?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

• What is our purpose as a group? What concrete goals or inquiries are we working towards individually and/or as a group? Why are these pursuits important?
• To what extent does each of our meetings help us to progress towards our goals?
• To what extent does our work depend on actual data, whether student achievement data, work samples, or reading research from the field?
• How do we access and use perspectives and expertise from those outside of our group?

ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

• How do we challenge ourselves to meet our goals and purpose?
• How do we hold one another accountable to taking action based on what we learn and discuss as a group, whether within our own individual practice or within our organization as a whole?
• How do we know whether we are making progress as a group? How do we measure success?
• What evidence or documentation do we have of our own learning and impact? What improvements can we see in student achievement across all subgroups?
Final Reflections

The content of this chapter outlines a number of features that distinguish the most highly developed CFGs from those just beginning their work together in respect to professional community, professional learning, and action and accountability. It points to evidence that reflective group analysis has potential for facilitating group development, and it provides prompts for groups interested in engaging in such a process. Yet this chapter leaves many questions about group development unanswered. For example, what is the role of the larger context in facilitating or obstructing group development? To what extent is group development dependent on the skills, dispositions, or vision of the CFG’s coach, or leader, versus its membership as a whole? What factors contribute to a group’s “readiness” to intentionally analyze their collaborative work, set challenging goals, and take action based on those goals? Future research should address these questions in order to further illuminate the factors that distinguish the most highly functioning learning communities in order to provide further direction for those seeking to start or strengthen their own learning community.

The current body of literature provides more insights into the challenges that CFGs have faced than into the factors that lead to strong professional communities. For this reason, future researchers should particularly focus on the strongest examples of CFGs available. One avenue for future research is to continue examining the relationships between professional learning within a CFG and student learning in classrooms and what factors influence that relationship. A second important direction for research is to identify multiple effective practices for ensuring action and accountability for CFG members. These practices would help participants to follow through in the busyness of their professional work, translating professional learning into practice. Strategies for monitoring ongoing learning will help participants to document and celebrate successes. These strategies will also help a group monitor its development as a professional community. Focusing on these specifically named directions for future research will provide a strong foundation for CFGs to envision new possibilities for strengthening their collaborative work.

References


