

NEH Seminar: Philosophers of Education
Randy Hoover
July 27, 2017

==DRAFT==

Teacher Collaboration -- an Essential Component of Professional Development

The high percentage of U.S. teachers leaving the profession within their first five years has been widely documented. Some sources claim the attrition rate is as high as 50 percent (“The Myth of Charter Schools,” Dianne Ravitch, *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 2010). Common reasons cited include unreasonable workload and large class sizes, unruly student behavior, lack of respect or involvement from parents; as well as more universal experiences such as a sense of isolation, lack of support from administrators and colleagues, and ineffective professional development and evaluation.

Without a doubt, the expectations and demands on teachers is great, and can be especially stressful to those new to the classroom. This paper is going to focus on the last three reasons from the above list. A sense of isolation, lack of support, and ineffective professional development and evaluation overlap in many ways, conspiring to drive many teachers – new as well as veteran – to leave the profession prematurely.

My argument, based on personal experience as well as research, is that schools which provide programs and time during the school day for teachers to collaborate – peer observation and discussion of best practices in particular -- develop more effective teachers and have a higher rate of teacher retention and satisfaction.

That might seem like an obvious conclusion, and probably one which most school leaders would agree is important. Yet, surveys consistently show widespread teacher dissatisfaction that

their schedules and professional development programs do not provide opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

Some effective ways that schools can support teacher collaboration and development that I am going to discuss are Critical Friends Groups (CFG), Qualified Peer Observers (QPO), and National Board Certification.

My observation has been that the teachers who are the most highly-educated, dynamic, and creative individuals are, unfortunately, the ones most likely to leave in frustration after a few years. The inflexibility of the public school grind wears them down. The crushing monotony of teaching five sections of the same subject to the same grade level, in 45-minute blocks of time, day after day, year after year, with limited opportunities for advancement; the relentless workload associated with having 100+ students consumes entire evenings and weekends grading papers, responding to emails, and preparing engaging lessons which accommodate multiple learning styles and modify for disabilities; the mandates from above to deliver curriculum and assessments in lock-step with colleagues – often without time allotted for collaboration – to name but a few of the frustrations.

As for the time that *is* spent with peers, the result often leaves one with a sense of intractability and despair rather than productivity and inspiration, such as meetings dominated with discussing the problems of the same handful of difficult students, over and over. Venting about annoying kid behaviors is also the staple of the faculty break/work room, making it difficult to find a peaceful place to recharge. Consequently, many teachers retreat to a solitary spot to spend their breaks, adding to a sense of isolation.

In their article, “Alone in the Classroom: Why Teachers Are Too Isolated,” (The Atlantic, April 17, 2012), Jeffrey Mirel and Simona Goldin provide an update on an old problem.

“In his classic 1975 book, *Schoolteacher*, (Lortie, D. C. 1975. Chicago: University of Chicago Press), Dan Lortie described teacher isolation as one of the main structural impediments to improved instruction and student learning in American public schools. Lortie argued that since at least the 19th century, teachers have worked behind closed doors, rarely if ever collaborating with colleagues on improving teaching practice or examining student work. "Each teacher," Lortie wrote, "... spent his teaching day isolated from other adults; the initial pattern of school distribution represented a series of 'cells' which were construed as self-sufficient. This situation continues to the present day. A recent study by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that teachers spend only about 3 percent of their teaching day collaborating with colleagues. The majority of American teachers plan, teach, and examine their practice alone... The problem is not that American teachers resist collaboration. Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that nearly 90 percent of U.S. teachers believe that providing time to collaborate with colleagues is crucial to retaining good teachers."

Boston College professor Andy Hargreaves expands on Lortie's concept of *adaptive presentism*, that is, the kind of survival mode of short-term thinking and isolationism that teachers retreat into when feeling overwhelmed by their work and environment.

“This phenomenon had first been described by Michael Apple and others as one of increasing intensification in teachers' work, where teachers were expected to respond to increasing pressures and comply with multiple innovations under conditions that were, at best, stable and, at worst, deteriorating. Intensification and initiative overload led to reduced time for relaxation and renewal, lack of time to retool skills and keep up with the field, increased dependency on externally prescribed materials, and cutting of corners and quality (Apple, 1989; Apple & Jungck, 1992; Densmore, 1987; Larson, 1977). My own research revealed how teachers struggled along alone, did not even have time to return children's work to them promptly, and withdrew from planning and dialogue with their colleagues (Hargreaves, 2003). In the context of educational standardization, imposed reform and adaptive presentism, Lortie's unholy trinity was exacerbated $>P + >I = >C$. ” (*Presentism, Individualism, and Conservatism: The Legacy of Dan Lortie's Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, Andy Hargreaves, Boston College).

In their study, “School Change and the Challenge of Presentism,” researchers James Albright, Jennifer Clement and Kathryn Holmes of the University of Newcastle in Australia acknowledge the factors which cause teachers to practice in isolation and resist change, but their study offers some hope that greater teacher collaboration, if done properly, can break the cycle.

“Inherent in Lortie's and Hargreaves' work is the implication that teachers are more likely to respond positively to proposed changes when the focus is on teaching and learning, and they are

provided with the resources, facilities and time to develop effective curricula for their students, as well as the opportunity to influence the direction of change. Moreover, if the changes are introduced in an atmosphere of trust where teachers can explore how the changes are aligned with their own goals and interests, and there is a future perspective that encourages a long-term view, teachers are more likely to be supportive of the changes.

The individualism associated with presentism was challenged as increased opportunities for collaboration among teachers and schools (was provided), and as teachers joined professional learning communities and teams.”

One antidote to this sense of isolation and frustration is to provide structures and expectations for teacher collaboration. In the 2010 Harvard Graduate School of Education study, “Team Work: Time Well Spent,” the authors (*Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie K. Reinhorn and Nicole S. Simon*) found that “teachers in outstanding high-poverty schools report that working in collaborative teams can produce significant rewards... Teachers in high-poverty schools often feel that their work is so demanding that it may be unsustainable. They can go full-tilt for only so long before fatigue and stress take over. Ultimately, many of them leave. You might expect that if we asked teachers in these schools to commit scarce time to working with colleagues on teams, they would respond with skepticism, even resentment. But our recent study of teachers' working conditions in six successful high-poverty urban schools suggests otherwise. We were surprised by teachers' enthusiasm as they explained how their teams helped them manage the many pressing challenges of teaching. Although the teachers reported serious concerns about the pace of their work, they said that their teams reduced stress rather than intensified it.”

Other studies, such as the ones cited below, confirm this finding, as well as suggest that the presence of an expert teacher can raise the level of the whole team’s performance:

“Many urban schools today look to instructional teams for teachers as a central component of their improvement strategy. Teams are intended to decrease professional isolation, promote teachers’ ongoing development, and substantially reduce well-documented variation in teachers’ effectiveness across classrooms (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). As they collaborate, teachers with different skills, areas of expertise, and levels of experience may find that teams not only support them in curriculum development, lesson planning, and pedagogy, while also offering professional relationships that sustain them and improve the instructional capacity and professional culture in their school (Newmann, King, and Youngs, 2000; Goddard, Neumerski, Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2010)•••

“Meanwhile, evidence grows that ongoing collaboration among teachers benefits not only them, but also their students. Studies of school improvement and effective schools over three decades repeatedly report strong correlations between reported or observed levels of collaboration among teachers and their students’ achievement (see, for example, Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Goddard, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Louis, Marks, and Kruse 1996; Newmann & Wehlage 1995; and Rosenholtz, 1989). In a very influential, large-scale analysis of statewide data from North Carolina, Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) found that, when a more effective teacher (based on her students’ standardized test scores) joins a school’s grade level, students in all classes of that grade make larger achievement gains in English language arts and mathematics, both initially and over time. The authors estimate that 20% of an individual teacher’s value-added score is explained by the value added by his or her grade-level colleagues. Jackson and Bruegmann call these widespread, positive effects “peer-induced learning” (p. 87), but they do not explain the mechanism that generates such learning. (“Ending Isolation: The Payoff of Teacher Teams in Successful High-Poverty Urban Schools,” Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie K. Reinhorn, Nicole S. Simon, Working Paper -The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers Harvard Graduate School of Education June, 2016)

A successful teacher collaboration program that my school implemented is called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). The following is explanatory information that was distributed by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), the organization that pioneered the concept. More information can be found on the website, NSRFHarmony.org.

“What is a CFG?”

A CFG is a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8-12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning.

How did the idea of Critical Friends Groups develop?

In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform designed a different approach to professional development, one that would be focused on the practitioner and on defining what will improve student learning. Since the summer of 2000, Critical Friends Groups training is coordinated by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana.

What are the purposes of a Critical Friends Group?

Critical Friends Groups are designed to:

- Create a professional learning community
- Make teaching practice explicit and public by "talking about teaching"
- Help people involved in schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities (Bambino)

- Establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on a spirit of inquiry (Silva)
- Provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning
- Help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning
- Improve teaching and learning

What are the characteristics of a professional learning community?

Professional learning communities are strong when teachers demonstrate

- Shared norms and values
 - Collaboration
 - Reflective dialogue
 - Deprivatization of practice
 - Collective focus on student learning
 - Spirit of shared responsibility for the learning of all students
- Professional learning communities can develop when there is
- Time to meet and talk
 - Physical proximity
 - Interdependent teaching roles
 - Active communication structures
 - Teacher empowerment and autonomy

A professional learning community is enhanced when there is

- Openness to improvement
- Trust and respect
- A foundation in the knowledge and skills of teaching
- Supportive leadership
- Socialization or school structures that encourage the sharing of the school's vision and mission (Kruse, et al)

I felt uncomfortable at those sessions critiquing or criticizing a colleague's work. I have a hard time with the word "critical."

That is a common misconception about the word "critical." In CFG context, critical means "important," "key," "essential," or "urgent" such as in "critical care." Furthermore, when a group of educators develop a CFG, they begin by spending time discussing and developing norms about how to give feedback and how to question in a sensitive manner so that everyone feels comfortable. Trust and confidentiality are established among participants.

What might those norms be?

That depends on what the group decides. The norms might range from being on time, to watching air time, to confidentiality, to being prepared, or to challenging the thinking of group members.

What happens during a CFG session?

Lots of different activities may occur in the ongoing sessions, each of approximately 2 hours.

- The coach typically may facilitate one of several time-managed protocols (strategies or formal structures) for examining student work, brought to the group by one of its members.
- The coach may facilitate a protocol for examining teacher work, brought to the group by one of its members.
- Group members will support each other and improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback, by questioning each other and themselves, by reflecting on their work or their students' work, by addressing dilemmas, by collaborating across disciplines, by confronting assumptions, mindsets, and expectations, but never by blaming students or social conditions.
- Members might maintain a reflective journal on a given prompt or around the more generic, "What am I thinking about now? What do I plan to do about it?" (Bisplinghoff, et al)
- The coach may begin the session with, "So, what did we try or reconsider since the last meeting?" (Bisplinghoff, et al)
- Group members might request a peer observer to help them improve a specific aspect of their teaching.
- The coach might facilitate a text-based discussion of a topic of concern or interest to the group.

Why do CFG participants say that CFG work is more satisfying when compared to other kinds of professional development?

- It is continual.
- It is focused on their own teaching and their own students' learning.
- It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school.
- Participants have control over their own professional learning needs.

What changes happen as a result of an individual's participation in a CFG?

Quoting Jon Appleby, a CFG coach in Maine, "I have been fortunate to experience what the support and push of a CFG can mean, and how powerful and accelerated our learning can be if we allow ourselves to both lead and follow, to question and to be questioned, as equals with thoughtful peers. I have also discovered, personally, that my energy and wellness as a teacher depend upon the revitalization that occurs when I share, among friends, in critical reflection and when I am, therefore, learning myself."

*Research indicates that classrooms **move from being teacher-centered toward student-centered.** Furthermore, teachers are more thoughtful about connecting curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Teachers in CFG's believe that they can affect student achievement and these teachers have higher expectations for student learning, which, in turn, leads to greater student achievement."*

My school implemented CFGs as its primary component of professional development for six years (2003-2008). Initially, eight teachers (myself included) and the principal were trained as coaches by taking a 40-hour summer course together.

The success of any all-school initiative is determined by several factors: how skillfully it is introduced to the staff, how it is implemented logistically, the degree of support administrators give it, and, ultimately, the merits of the program itself. The first year, we were given release time during the school day (substitutes were brought in to cover our classes during meeting times) to meet bimonthly with our CFGs, but that was nixed when logistics and costs proved problematic. Eventually, we settled on meeting for 1 ½ hours during the afternoons of our five professional development half-days.

Everything did not work perfectly. Since it was a required PD activity, all teachers were assigned to a CFG, but several teachers did not “buy in” to the philosophy or protocol structure of the meetings, so it was difficult to achieve a sense of equity of participation. When renegade teachers disregarded the discussion protocols and group norms, it made it difficult for coaches to keep the group on track. The lesson learned there is that CFG participation should be voluntary, not mandatory. Secondly, scheduling CFG meetings at the end of a long day (teaching 3 or 4 classes and meeting with one’s curriculum department before CFGs) also worked against energetic discussions. Thirdly, teachers would too often be pulled away from CFG meetings to go other places – meeting with the special education department, assisting with the mentor program (which was scheduled at the same time), etc. This proved disruptive to group building. CFG coaches found it disappointing that administration did not make more effort to protect that time.

But in general, most teachers at my school – even the ones reluctant to join a CFG -- reported coming away from CFG meetings with positive feelings about it. In a survey we conducted after the third year, 70% of participating teachers rated their CFG experience as

“Valuable,” or “Of Great Value.” Of the positive comments on the survey, teachers spoke of “aha” moments resulting from colleagues’ different perspectives on old problems, as well as the practicality of the discussions (“I liked that I could implement the feedback right away in my lessons”). The most common feedback was that it was great to just have the opportunity to talk about teaching and learn more about how colleagues approach similar challenges.

One example of a memorable CFG experience:

When observing the class of a colleague, a foreign language teacher was surprised to see some of her “worst” students to be well-behaved and focused in the colleague’s class. This opened the door for the two teachers to talk about the best practices she was seeing, such as detailed lesson planning, momentum, attention moves, humor, and building positive relationships, especially with challenging students. She later invited her colleague to observe her class. Impressed with her animated style and techniques for involving reluctant students, the colleague came away with ideas he was able to implement with success in his classes. Those mutual class observations started a supportive professional relationship that continued for many years, even after they rotated to other CFGs. And when these types of experiences happen schoolwide, it leads to a dynamic culture of openness and inquiry throughout the building.

I have also found that the use of video in the classroom can be an effective tool for growth. It helps a teacher see how he/she comes across to students, discover student behaviors that may have previously gone unnoticed, and assists in instructional analysis, whether as a vehicle for discussion with other teachers or just for self-reflection. For teachers who seem particularly self-conscious, one could offer to set up the camera on a tripod in a corner of the

classroom, turn it on, then leave the room. Even if the teacher being videoed is the only person to view the video, it still can be very instructive.

Other examples of CFG activities that worked well at my school include:

- examining student work samples (showing different levels of achievement) and giving/getting “warm” and “cool” feedback
- sharing observations from visits to each others’ classes
- discussing a schoolwide issue that need attention, such as our school schedule (analyzing and suggesting proposed changes)
- discussing a dilemma a teacher has brought to the group, such as how to manage a difficult class or how to get wider class participation
- discussing a provocative article about relevant educational issues.

After six years of CFGs being a primary part of professional development at my school, new central office administrators scrapped it in favor of more traditional initiatives: district-wide curriculum reformatting, guest presenters on special education issues, one-and-done technology workshops, etc. In recent years, our allotted professional development time has not included organized discussions about teaching. The default activity for our professional development time has become department meetings. Some department meetings include a bit of discussion of classroom instruction (especially when directed to “get those standardized test scores up”), but agendas are usually driven by directives from administrators, minutiae or logistical matters.

For the past two years, my district has been trying a program we call Qualified Peer Observers (QPO). As with the implementation of CFGs, it started with an intensive training course for teachers who volunteered to be a QPO – sort of like a coach, but on equal footing with the teacher being worked with, really just someone to observe and bounce ideas off rather than to dispense advice. There were about seven of us from each school who volunteered and were then considered qualified to work with teachers who are in the “off year” of their evaluation cycle (the year they are not being formally evaluated by an administrator). From the outset, it was made

clear to all that the QPO process is not evaluative in any way. Most QPOs paired with two or three teachers to meet with on a monthly basis for a semester or whole year. Teacher pairs arrange to meet on their own time, and QPOs are paid a modest stipend.

While it's great that the QPO program provides an avenue for teachers at our school to talk about teaching, it is only vaguely comparable to the full-fledged CFG program we once had. QPO activities and observations sometimes broach similar topics and areas of discussion as CFGs did, but they are limited to pairs of teachers, meeting on their own time, so it doesn't have nearly the same type of schoolwide impact.

A few words about teacher evaluation -- School leaders often consider their evaluation process as a key part of a teacher's growth. In fact, my district lumps the two terms together as "Professional Growth and Evaluation." But from most teachers' perspective, very little growth comes from the typical evaluation process of administrators coming into your classroom a few times every other year, writing up their observation and passing along a suggestion or two -- especially when that administrator is responsible for evaluating 15 or more teachers per year, and when observations are announced ahead of time. As Kim Marshall (of "Marshall Memo" fame) writes: "when an administrator walks into a classroom, students usually behave better, which again masks quotidian realities of classroom life." ("Teacher Evaluation: What's Fair? What's Effective?", Kim Marshall, Educational Leadership, November 2012). My sense is that most teachers find peer-to-peer observations and collaborations to be more conducive to growth than administrator evaluations.

National Board Certification is another teacher development program that can help one break through the isolation and connect with like-minded educators. I found the National Board

Certification experience to be challenging in the most useful ways, as it required me to examine every aspect of my practice within a detailed structure of rigorous standards. (Like most teachers in the throes of daily demands, I rarely felt I had time to reflect.) The culminating portfolio, which the candidate submits for evaluation by groups of NBCTs, includes unedited videos of the teacher's lessons, and extensive written analysis and reflection on every aspect of one's practice. Passing a written content exam in one's subject area is also required. During the yearlong process, I met regularly with other local teachers who were also working on their portfolios, and our NBCT group leader guided us through. I found this collegiality to be very supportive and inspiring, as it connected me with a network of superior teachers which has continued to sustain me over 15 years now. A list of National Board standards and other information about the program can be found on the website nbpts.org. The 5 major components or "5 Core Propositions" underlying the standards are:

- 1: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning
- 2: Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Children
- 3: Teachers are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning
- 4: Teachers Think Systematically about their Practice and Learn from their Experience
- 5: Teachers are Members of Learning Communities

As the years passed, many states and school districts reduced or discontinued funding incentives for National Board Certification, so fewer teachers are applying. But it continues to be the most comprehensive process out there for teacher development, as well as the only national program in which a teacher can have every aspect of his practice objectively evaluated by a group of expert teachers. National certification can also bring the teaching profession more credibility in the eyes of the public. In Finland, Japan, and other countries with high performing

education systems, more rigorous certification requirements, higher status and pay make the teaching profession more comparable to the professions of law and medicine, and therefore attract top quality college graduates.

So, in conclusion, why don't more schools put programs in place that support more teacher collaboration? My experience over the past 25 years in public school teaching is that school goals and professional development programs are most often determined by the superintendent's goals for the district, or by directives issued by the state Department of Education, without input from teachers as to what would be most useful to their practice. This contributes to teachers' sense of powerlessness and frustration when they don't feel their voices are valued. Who is better positioned to know their professional development needs and the needs of their students than those working with students in the classroom each day?

The experience of collaborating with colleagues in a structured, meaningful way breaks down doors of isolation for teachers, and helps them become more open and effective practitioners, benefitting their students and their school culture by creating "a community of learners."