

Blogs: Tools for Critical and Collaborative Conversations

Evaluation and Inquiry (Including Reflection and Dialogue Epicycle)

I have been a high school English teacher for five years, and in that time I have experienced a variety of professional development models. Some of these models rely upon an “outsider” (consultant, administrator, etc.) teaching teachers how to change or enhance their instruction. Some of these models rely upon some form of collaborative learning, sometimes called “professional learning communities,” sometimes called “critical friends groups” and sometimes called “circle of knowledgeable peers.” Even with this variety of titles, however, these groups are all essentially groups of teachers working collaboratively to share knowledge. I have been in these types of collaborative groups in the past (some more formal than others) and I, personally, have always found them to be both very topical and useful. These groups, far more than consultant lectures, workshops or other forms of professional development, have been what has helped me change my classroom instruction for the better.

When I started teaching at a new school in September, I was initially very excited by the fact that we had time set aside during the school day to meeting in content-area departments. I looked forward to replicating my positive experiences working with others where we had planned project together, developed lesson plans together and reflected on our assessments together. However, after the first three months, I realized that, while I was learning a lot from my English teaching peers when we met informally, the time we spent in department meetings was not helping me reflect on and change my teaching practice, even when the meetings were supposedly used for professional development sessions. In addition to the fact that I was not gaining much from these sessions I was also finding that my teaching and attitude were suffering greatly after these meetings. I heard similar sentiments from several colleagues who were also discouraged by what they perceived as a lack of useful, thoughtful work being done in the meetings. It is important to point out here that this is by far the most teaching and learning centered department I have ever worked with, and we have had numerous “looking at student work” sessions. However, we have yet to move forward to use those to change our teaching practices (myself included).

In researching effective teacher development (specifically, development that would lead to a positive change in instruction) I found that there is quite a lot of work that has been done around improving discussions and meeting time among teachers. I chiefly focused on projects and research that centered on using teacher collaboration time to actually impact/change classroom instruction (assuming that the change would be an improvement) and that effected how teachers evaluated those changes in instruction. I chose this focus because of my own positive experiences with collaboration, where I found my teaching not only improving, but my sense of isolation (and therefore discouragement) dissipated. One study detailed the effectiveness of “critical friends groups” (CFGs) as ways of focusing teacher collaboration. CFGs are groups of teachers, led by a trained coach, who “promotes close reflection on practice and student work, with a constant focus on improving student learning.” (Dunne, 1). Research done by the Phi Delta Kappa Center for Evaluation, Development and Research compared two groups of teachers that met within the same school. One used CFGs and one used “traditional” meeting methods. Researchers used surveys, interviews and classroom observations when evaluating the program and found that “classroom conversations and interviews with teachers [in CFGs] indicated a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction in classes taught by CFG teachers.” (Dunne, 3).

In reading this research, as well as the sample protocols provided by CFG practitioners, I found that there were some important principles that were essential to replicating CFG success. Specifically, the conversations of teachers needed to be focused on students’ learning and on teachers’ own classrooms. The groups also needed to be small and the discussions needed to continue beyond a one or two hour session. Also, it seemed vital to have a trained coach to lead the groups.

In addition to learning about CFGs I was also reading about other tools that were used to enhance teacher collaboration. Some of those tools included online resources such as blogs and wikis. In an article from *Educational Leadership* entitled “Learning with Blogs and Wikis” Bill Ferriter provides an explanation for how these online tools can be used to build collaborative teaching structures, especially in school climates that are “hostile to learning” (Ferriter, 34). Ferriter points out that one of the most effective aspects of using online tools for professional development was that “this learning has been uniquely authentic, driven by personal interests and connected to classroom realities.” (Ferriter, 35). He describes what he

learns from reading the blogs by others, as well as how he learns by having others comment on his own blog.

Reading Ferriter's article not only piqued my interest, but gave me a new perspective on how blogging could be used as a tool for collaboration. Specifically, it sparked the idea that blogs could be used to keep collaborative conversations continuing after our department meetings. I also found that, while I agreed with all of his points, I had another to add; as a new blogger myself, I found that the act of blogging itself was often a way for me to reflect on my practice and pedagogy, and that this reflection was also a way to enhance my practice. This article helped me understand how blogs could be a tool for not just creating teacher conversations but also continuing them. This led directly to my plan for a blog as part of my implementation of my project.

Proposal and Planning Actions

Given all of that I had learned and processed, my goal for the action research project was to integrate critical and collaborative conversations into my work environment as a way to change teachers' classroom instruction. I define critical conversations as conversations that focus on teachers' deep thinking and processing about teaching and learning and I define a collaborative conversation as a conversation where two teachers are actively participating in the conversation and are sharing a dialogue, not simply acting as speaker and passive listener. My work focused on creating more conversations in my work environment (particularly in my department meetings) that are *both* critical and collaborative. I wanted to see if these conversations, and the continual nature of these conversations through an online-blog discussion, would directly effect classroom instruction.

My original plan (which changed drastically due to issues I will discuss shortly) was to use a typical "looking at student work session" in my department to create critical and collaborative conversations. Based on the research discussed in the previous section, I used sample CFG meeting protocols to develop a proposal (appendix A) for what this "looking at student work session" would look like. My plan was to record my ideas and reflections about this session on a blog to both model this type of change in classroom practice and to encourage other teachers from the session to continue the dialogue on the blog.

Due to the fact that I was trying to build a constituency in my department around these ideas I decided it was prudent to integrate the CFG protocols that enhanced collaboration with protocols that my department was familiar with. I also had to present this to the department chair, who values continuity, and so I knew that having similar protocol pieces would be vital to getting his buy in. Also, I struggled to figure out exactly how I would have a trained facilitator at the session without bringing up the animosity my department has to outsiders. I planned on discussing and solving this problem with my department chair as a way to try and gain his support.

At this point in the planning process, I also developed an evaluation tool to use to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan I was developing. Specifically, I was hoping that the agenda I developed, as well as the blog that I would write, would cause some form of change in the classroom instruction of teachers in the department. Specifically, I planned to use a survey both before, and after the session, as well as several weeks after the session (while the blog had been active) to find out which blog interactions, if any, members felt impacted their classroom practice. I planned to use an anonymous survey, in part to keep members of the group from feeling like they needed to claim an effect when there was none. However, due to the small number of group members, I was concerned that there was no easy way to ensure anonymity with a short answer survey (since handwriting was fairly easy to identify). So, I planned on simply using strongly agree-strongly disagree questions, as well as questions to rank certain tools used in the meeting in terms of impact on instruction.

Constituency Building

I started by realizing that any change or adaptation I wanted to make to my department (even in one meeting) was going to require not only going through my department chair, but also getting his buy-in. People in the department are (rightfully) very respectful towards him and, with two notable exceptions, are often amenable to doing what he proposes we do. However, I have also been speaking with him as a friend and colleague, and he has expressed frustration with the lack of input others in the department are giving him - he has said lately that he would be very appreciative if someone else wanted to suggest or even lead departmental professional development.

However, there had been one more complication in the works. I had planned on using our groups looking at student work session to enact the protocol I had based on the critical friends protocols I had read. However, several of our meetings had been canceled, and my meeting with the department head continued to be postponed so that, by the time we met, I realized that we were not going to have time another looking a student work session. Instead, due to lost time and administrative needs, our last five meetings would be dominated by writing diagnostic assessments and developing essential questions for the next school year. I had this in mind when I went to speak to my department chair, and I asked him about this. He confirmed that we would not have time to do a looking at student work session but would instead be working on the abovementioned items.

So, with all of this in mind, I wrote the attached proposal (appendix B) about creating a department blog. I did this for several reasons. Firstly, the blog had been part of my original plan, and it seemed to be the part of the plan that was best adapted to the current circumstances. Secondly, I now could frame the blog as a way to have the kinds of interactions and conversations that we wanted to have in the department, but were unable to have due to administrative constraints (this seemed to be a shared sentiment among department members). This was a way to get people excited about the blog and to see it as an opportunity to still collaborate in the confines of administrative concerns.

With the change of proposal, I still planned on using a before and after comparison to evaluate the effectiveness of this tool. I was also interested in using the evaluation as a tool for deciding how to format the blog. I was hesitant to use the evaluation for two different purposes, so I designed it with a straight comparison model in mind, and then revisited it to see if it could also work to inform my development of the blog. I decided it did. For the evaluation (appendix C) I created a short survey about department members' perspectives on the department meetings, and I also asked them to rank the usefulness of certain tools. I also wrote a longer, open-response portion of the survey, in hopes that this would give me some valuable qualitative data to use. However my department chair suggested that my open-ended questions might take a bit too long and might frustrate or annoy some members (a concern I also had). So, I simply used the simple survey to both evaluate member's states before the blog as well as to get input about what types of posts/conversations they would find useful on the blog. Upon reflection, this survey would have been more useful if we had read some

sample blog posts and then had them explain which ones were more useful to them in which way so that they had some benchmark – many of the people in the room did not regularly read blogs, and there are very few blogs out there that function the way I want this to function.

Implementation, Action and Evaluation of Action

When I had my presentation and survey ready, and support from my department head, I planned my action. Here is a timeline of the implementation:

April 15th

- ❖ Present the idea of the blog to department team and have them also take pre-survey.

April 16th

- ❖ Write sample blog posts (based on what types of collaboration that people claimed changed their practice in the survey).
- ❖ Invite group members to the blog via e-mail (the blog is blocked to non-readers)

April 29th

- ❖ Remind teachers about the blog and field questions

May 6th

- ❖ Do a short blog tutorial during the staff meeting (this is done now rather than earlier due to department meeting time needs).

May 12th

- ❖ Complete a follow up survey (same as original survey) with an additional “critical incident questionnaire” (appendix D) geared towards the blog to assess blog’s effectiveness and to make needed changes.

During this implementation, I had several concerns. Firstly, I was concerned that people would be wary of discussing their classroom practice in an online forum. With that in mind, I created a blog that was blocked to un-invited readers, and then simply invited the members of my department via e-mail. Also, I did not stop and reflect after realizing that I was not going to be able to use the original plan I had developed, and, as a result, I did not fully incorporate the research about how teachers learn that into the development of the blog. Finally I was not sure about how many people read blogs, or wrote their own. Upon reflection, it would have been useful to assess “blog-savyness” before my presentation in a short

questionnaire, and then done a tutorial about blogging the same day that I presented the original proposal. However, I realized this after the actual presentation, and so planned for a time during the department meeting to do a short tutorial about blogging, and to have everyone write a sample post on the next possible department meeting date. Also, during implementation I made sure to include a formal evaluation follow-up that gathered both survey data as well as questionnaire data in order to both assess the effectiveness up until that point, as well as to see what changes could be made to improve the blogs effectiveness.

Conclusion:

As I reflect on this action research process I am struck by how different it was from previous action research processes I had followed. In previous action research courses I participated in the focus was primarily on the action itself. In fact, within the first three weeks of the fifteen-week course, we were expected to have the action decided on, and from that point our goal was to complete that action plan. This was consistent with the types of action plans (be they action research or just actions) I had experienced in my career in education. The goal was always to “do something” in hopes that this “something” would yield positive results. That is not to say that these actions were not research-based, but often actions or changes were made in my classroom or my school based on one article or research someone had recently read. This was not just done by others – I too was always ready to try something new if it sounded like it might work.

What I have learned through this process is that reflection is not only important because it forces a researcher to synthesize his/her own ideas, but because it also because it forces a researcher to slow down and consider how they have gotten to the point they are at. It was reflection that pushed me to not simply use the first good idea I read about, and instead investigate numerous theories and programs of teacher collaboration before deciding on the critical friends groups. It was also lack of reflection that meant I pushed ahead with a flawed presentation on blogs, which may be part of the reason members of my department were slow to read and post on the blog. The deliberate act of reflection is often difficult, especially when one works and resides of a climate where action is rewarded and pausing to reflect is often seen as a hindrance to the reform process. However, any action taken, especially within the context of action research demands that we not only consider *if* the action was effective but *how* it was

and was not effective. Even before that, in order to know what action to take, one must consider many different sides and perspectives on the issue at hand, which requires time and reflection as well. In the end, this study shows how the new online world of instantaneous communication and information we live in might give teachers the tools needed to truly have critical and collaborative conversations, but only if we take the time to reflect on both what we think and what we say.

Bibliography

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Appendix A

Proposal for My “Looking-At-Student-Work” (LASW) Session

Trends in CFG LASW (looking at student work) protocols that my department is familiar with (and therefore that I want to maintain in order to build constituency)

- ❖ There is an objective facilitator whose main role is to keep the group focused on the topic and on the students’ learning.
- ❖ There is time for both clarifying questions and probing questions
- ❖ There is a goal/objective.

Objective of My LASW session: What instructional practices can I use to increase topic development and “showing their thinking from A to B” in student’s paragraphs?

Agenda

- 1) Think-pair-share with this question: How do you deal with topic development in your classroom? What do you think your practices in this area? Why do you do what you do? *(Purpose: Activating prior knowledge and getting teachers talking)*
- 2) Read the work Marie has brought in (student work sample, new assignment with rationale, student work as a result of that assignment). After reading participants will create and share a “notice/think” chart. *(Purpose: to make my practice transparent and to have a common focus for discussion)*
- 3) Time to ask clarifying questions (what, when questions) *(Purpose: to clarify any logistical questions about the materials)*
- 4) Time to ask probing questions (why questions) and time to write reflections on probing questions. *(Purpose: to push the presenter to more deeply consider her practice and to get other teachers thinking about their own practice in a deeper manner)*
- 5) Discussion of the work among the group without the teacher who brought the work in *(Purpose: for participants to build on each other’s ideas about the classroom practice of the presenter)*
- 6) Discussion small groups about instructional practices the presenter could try and implement *(Purpose: to create critical and collaborative conversations around a safe topic)*

Share out with suggestion for next steps for Marie. Marie will share the blog address and ask everyone to follow her progress as she implements changes. *(Purpose: to encourage the continuity of such discussions)*

Appendix B

Reclaiming Teacher Talk – Conversations Through Blogging

The What:

I have recently been getting more involved with the world of teacher blogs and have found them to be an interesting and useful way for me to both reflect on, and adapt, my practice. I have also found that, while I always want to talk to many of you about teaching it is often difficult to find the time. So, I am interested in starting a blog where BCLA English teachers can post ideas and comments about teaching as a way to create some “critical and collaborative conversations” that will help me and others improve our instruction.

The Why:

It is safe to say that teachers can learn from other teachers. One of the ways this happens is through conversations about instruction, student-learning and pedagogy (critical) and through conversations where all parties contribute and build their own knowledge-base (collaborative). The purpose of this blog is to promote these critical and collaborative conversations between teachers. The first reason to use a blog for this purpose is time. It is often difficult for any of us to find face-to-face time to have rich discussions, especially as our time together gets more and more dominated other school issues. The second reason to have these conversations in a blog is that blogs are great forums for letting people enter the conversation where they are. You can always just read posts about a specific topic and you can simply use comments or ideas that relate to your classroom. Also, this forum lets people become engaged at a time and place that works for them – just because it’s a busy week for me doesn’t preclude you from reading what I wrote when I had time the week before. In this way we can all become more engaged in each other’s work while simultaneously having a reason to write and reflect on our own work.

How it Works:

Who can read this thing?

Most blogs are open to anyone. However, for the purposes of this blog, I think it might be helpful to open it only to interested members of our department. So, in order to view this blog you will need to be invited to be a member – its easy to do by e-mail. Once you are a member, you will also be an author. This does not mean you ever need to write anything – it just means you have the option of doing so.

What the heck is a post?

When you write a post, you are starting a new conversation topic. You title your post, write your post and then write down “labels” for the post so that people could find it by topic. For this blog, a post can be a description of something that happened in you classroom, a question, a link to a document, a summary of recent research etc. – anything to spark conversation and ideas with others!

What if I just want to comment on what other people post?

When a post is written you may comment on it by clicking the “comment” link at the bottom of the post. Comments usually start off by being connected to the post, but often, as more people comment on the comments, a conversation evolves.

Appendix C

The Survey

Blogging is a tool that I know some folks might find useful and others might not. In an attempt to make this tool as useful and interesting as possible for those of you who choose to check it out, I have drafted this survey. Please fill it out, even if you think that you may never check out this blog – all comments are helpful to me!!

Please circle the appropriate response to each statement:

I enjoy talking informally to other teachers at this school.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find my conversations with other teachers useful in relation to my classroom practice.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I often get ideas for teaching by talking to my colleagues.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The LASW sessions in CT led me to change my instruction in some way	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Recent CT meetings have led me to change my instruction in some way,	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find being observed by non-teachers to be useful	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find being observed by teachers useful	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I would like more time to share classroom ideas with my colleagues within my department	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I would like more time to share classroom ideas with my colleagues outside my department	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Please rank the following in terms of how useful each one is to helping you develop your instructional practice as a teacher. There are 9 items – please number them from 1 to 9 with 1 being the *most* useful to developing your instructional practice.

- _____ Talking to others about what is going on in your classroom
- _____ Hearing about what people you know are doing.
- _____ Reading about what people are doing outside your school
- _____ Reading research in the field of education
- _____ Getting materials from others
- _____ Talking about students with others
- _____ Discussion general ideas and theories about teaching with other teachers

4. What parts of our CT meetings have most influenced your classroom practice?

Blog info

These questions are just to give me a sense of how familiar people are with blogs.

1. Do you read any blogs? If so, what types?
2. Have you ever commented on a blog?
3. Do you have your own blog?
4. Do you have a google account (gmail and/or google docs)? If not, would you be willing to create one to be part of a English CT blog?
5. Would you be more likely to post and comment on a blog if you knew exactly who was going to be able to view it?

