



## **Not Just a Rag Session: How Discussion, Collaboration, and Reflection Among Teachers Lead to Better Understanding of Our Practice, of Ourselves and for Our Students**

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### **Project Description**

***"Does understanding your own teaching practice improve your students' understanding?"***

Marin Country Day School, a K-8, co-educational, independent school, provides teachers with time for 'Study Groups.' The purposes of these study groups are for faculty and staff to learn from each other about topics of common interest, to support teachers as learners, to provide time for sustained discussion, and to allow for teachers to work together across grade levels. We have had study groups for four years. In the past, we have tried a similar group to this one, but participation was low, infrequent and in the end not very meaningful.

Since so many of our faculty at MCDS attended the Project Zero conference last summer in San Francisco, we thought we would get more interest than in the past for teachers to look at student work and at their own practice. With new ideas from many of us and the presentation of understanding as a teaching goal, we decided to try again to create a study group similar to the previous effort, but with a sharper focus. We coupled our study group with a teacher who had taken a "Critical Friends" training and wanted to use it in her work this year. (See more about this format for dialoguing below.) We thought that the ideas behind Project Zero and Critical Friends were well-suited to each other. We decided that each teacher would bring to the study group something she wanted the group to help her with, whether it was student work, assessments, a sample lesson or a plan for a unit. The purpose was to understand our own teaching, thus improving our students' understanding.

To assist the group in staying focused on our task, and to help promote a safe conversation, protocols from The Coalition of Essential Schools, "Critical Friends Group" were followed. Our colleague who was trained in facilitating conversations using these protocols offered to guide us all in their use. As others became more comfortable in facilitation with the protocols, they began to help facilitate the dialogues. The protocols used this year included: "Chalk Talk," "Case Story," "Connections," Collaborative Assessment, " and "Tuning."

"Chalk Talk" is a written conversation among group members. On a large piece of paper, "What is understanding?" was written. All the group members wrote down their thoughts. Each person then walked around and responded to others' thinking in writing. This was a powerful silent dialogue and a great assessment of the group's understanding of understanding.

"Connections" was a way for teachers to build a bridge from a personal state to the group. It provided time to share with the group, but was not meant to be a discussion or dialogue with the person who is speaking. Each member took no more than a minute to tell the group what was on her mind. This freed up the "lingering" things on the mind, so we could all be clear for the meeting.

"Case Story" was a guided format for discussing a scenario with focused feedback. The guiding questions included: What is the central issue? What are the factors contributing to the dilemma or influencing the deci-

sion? Which factors are within the main character's control? What are the alternatives and consequences for the main character? What larger issues for the school does this case raise?

"Collaborative Assessment" guided the group through a series of questions which focused on a piece or pieces of student work. These questions include: What do you see? What questions does this work raise for you? What do you think the student is working on? After the group answered the question, the presenter then answered any questions and discusses any information or surprises that she heard.

"Tuning" protocol asks the presenter to take a back seat in the conversation, while the group looks at the work/information and makes comments on the positive points associated with the work, the questions that arise from the work and the challenges related to the work. The presenter then responds to the feedback given to her.

During all of these discussions, the feedback was both critical and constructive. In the end, it was a supportive process. Another structure that helped us maintain a safe space for open dialogue was our established group norms. Together we decided what would help us create a cohesive group.

Our group norms were to:

- stick to structure; it's ok to say "we're getting off the topic"
- have an agenda/plan
- start and end on time
- respect confidentiality
- respect the group (probe ideas not the person; accept ideas/advice as not personal; assume good will from all)
- maintain a sense of humor
- rotate who brings food to each meeting
- check own time clock; watch air time and quietness
- do any assigned reading before the meeting

We decided that check-ins are important. Every member is responsible for the team's success!

Coupled with the structured protocols, these norms helped us maintain our dedicated group of colleagues.

Each of the Project Zero fellows brought work that concerned understanding that we wanted the group to evaluate. One of us brought a 3rd grade science assessment; another brought a plan for a 5th grade unit on the Revolutionary War, and a third brought year-long questions for her second grade students' portfolios. Each of us asked our colleagues if they could give us feedback on how our ideas promoted understanding, and we were all gratified in the responses we received. When ten experienced teachers gather together around a table and build on each others' ideas, the result is a rich exchange. All of us have used the feedback we received from our colleagues to improve our own ideas for teaching for understanding.

Examples of other work the group has brought in are:

- a series of completed assignments and journal entries by students, for feedback about "What's going on?" with a particular student;
- a video tape of a lesson by a teacher who was interested in feedback about student involvement in her morning meeting; and
- a thorny issue with a parent and student with which a colleague wanted help.

All the teachers in our study group have made a strong connection with one another during this year, and have felt that the level of academic discussion between colleagues has been raised.

## Reflection

Our participants found this to be a very worthwhile experience. In the past seven months, we have built a collaborative and supportive group of colleagues. On starting this project, we decided that we would view ourselves as students and use our knowledge of Project Zero, the Critical Friends protocols, and our colleagues to help us better understand ourselves and our practice. Although in the Project Zero's Teaching for Understanding model, teachers are not viewed as students, we approached this study group through the lens of viewing teachers as learners. We felt that with a more complete understanding of our teaching and/or our students, our students' understanding would improve. Although it is too soon to know this for sure, this idea is something we will continue to explore.

When asked to reflect on this experience, our study group members gave us the following responses:

After experiencing and practicing the protocols herself, a teacher decided to share these conversational structures with her second graders. This same teacher presented student work to the group. Reflecting on her use of the group, she stated, "The student I presented has benefited because of the courage and clarity I gained in the process of viewing him in the group. I went very steadily toward focusing on that student's needs in specific ways." The advice and ideas she heard from the group provided her with new strategies to use in trying to help this student become a more focused learner.

One teacher commented, "I am able to serve my students better because I am more compassionate given my new understanding." The knowledge that she gained from the study group helped her to see herself and her job from different perspectives.

Teachers found great value in sharing a part of themselves with the group. A fifth grade teacher commented, "To know that taking time to share work, although it may make the teacher vulnerable, it strengthens the practice and connects colleagues in a profession which can feel isolated." For at least one afternoon a month, members of our group felt like integral members of this teacher community. Another teacher stated, "The bond between members of our group is strong; we've done something very important together."

On third grade teacher shared, "This group allowed me to become a more reflective practitioner. I wish I had more time to meet with my talented and creative colleagues. Through our discussions, I learned new strategies to deal with various class issues. Also, I have learned more about what second graders learn and now have a better sense of their skills and routines. This knowledge will help me prepare for future years and how to help students transition into third grade." An art teacher also mentioned how the group exchange helped her to learn more about what other teachers were doing, "I enjoyed the time to discuss the teaching and life as a teacher (during 'Connections' which was our 'Check-in' time). It has provided me with a window into classrooms that my schedule does not permit. Getting to know my colleagues at this level is great. I think about our sessions at other times in the week." Each discussion left a lasting impression on each of us.

Through this grassroots effort, we helped each other to become more reflective practitioners. By devoting time to understanding our practice better, we feel teachers will find more effective ways to create curriculum and improve our students' understanding. One teacher said, "I see the unleashed potential of peer groups that set up confidentiality agreements. This is very different than 'rag' sessions because everyone honored the best in all of us--even when we needed to unload tough stuff. The agreements in the group with protocols helped because we had a neutral structure to hold us all to agreements."

## The Future of The Study Group

Traditionally the school has provided time for monthly study groups each year. We would like to continue this study group to continue to allow teachers to reflect on and improve their practice. In a survey given to the group, they responded positively in desiring to continue the study group next year.

To the question, "Would you do it again? Why or why not?" here are some of the responses:

"Yes. I will explore Project Zero and the Coalition of Essential Schools work in my future, I'm sure."

"Absolutely. I thrive in a collaborative setting. Since graduate school, I have been looking to be a part of a teacher research group. In this study group, we have done mini-research projects."

"... I loved it and want to incorporate more understanding into the group next year."

"...a fun, safe, thoughtful group of people. The process encourages a mindful approach to the teaching practice. It also offers a sense of scope and sequence because so many grades are represented."

"Yes, because there is always more to learn and I want to incorporate Project Zero in my teaching. We have that in common."

It clearly appears that our members have benefited from taking time to reflect on their practice. As is stated with all Project Zero participants, starting small and reflecting large is a great beginning. We believe that this has happened here at MCDS. The future means continuing this reflection and allowing teachers time and space to fine tune their understanding, in order for their students' understanding to grow.

As with any group, there is always room for improvement. We are interested in improving it to help support the growth of the teachers involved. In response to the question, "How would you improve our study group? Are there other ways to look at students' understanding that we could use or add?" we gathered these suggestions:

"Meet more frequently, perhaps during the day (I can dream, can't I?). From the beginning, clarify that our ultimate goal is to look at how our involvement in the group improves/affects students' understanding."

"Perhaps collecting samples of work throughout the year to see if we can find ways to see progress over time. This is often challenging for one teacher to do solo."

"Involve more people in the facilitation of protocols. Do text-based protocols on articles directly related to PZ [ideas]. Watch more videos of teaching. Be better at having people come back to the group after a protocol and sharing what they learned/changed etc."

"Focus more on how we know students understand what they are 'learning' - talk more about this, read more and discuss it amongst ourselves."

"I think our group would be stronger if we met more consistently and we weren't so scattered with other obligations. I think if time allowed we could observe actual teaching and experiential learning rather than just the work."

"Just keep the size low."

It certainly appears that people would like to continue the study group and to incorporate more text-based

learning from Project Zero literature. Unanimously teachers agreed that they would do this again if they had the opportunity. The majority of the group felt extremely fortunate to have a strong cohort of colleagues with whom we can share our practice.

### **Samples of Presented Work**

The following science assessment was improved after consulting with colleagues in our study group. The task is a third grade science assessment for a unit on worms:

#### ***Worm Inquiry Assessment***

1. What do you know about worms? Please list all the things you know or think you know about worms.
2. Sketch a worm in its favorite environment. Label your picture.
3. Name some places that you have seen worms. In other words, where might you find a worm? Where will you not find a worm?
4. What do you think a worm might do if it found itself on a sandy beach?
5. What do you think a worm might do if it found itself on top a grassy field?
6. On a rainy day, where would you find worms? How might the worms spend their day?
7. What does a worm eat? What happens to the food that it eats? Use words or pictures to answer these questions.
8. Write a timeline for a worm's life. Use pictures and words to show the life of a worm. Use as many boxes as you need.
9. What do you want to learn about worms?
10. Why are worms important to the earth?

### **A Fifth Grade History Unit Plan**

A PZ Fellow teacher presented, then added some of the questions and feedback she had received, for a unit on the Revolutionary War period using the Teaching for Understanding frame:

A third fellow from our school asked us to help her with portfolio questions she has been using for students to share with their parents:

The Revolutionary War Era in the Colonies

Throughlines  
 1. In what ways is our country today like the early colonies?  
 2. How does where you live affect the life you lead?  
 3. Why is it important to know what happened in the past?

Understanding goals: where are we

We won't take it anymore

How did the location and environment of the colonies lead to, and help win, the revolution? 1	What happens when people are deprived of their civil rights? 2	When is it right to revolt? How did colonists justify their actions? 3	How did the framers of the constitution use their experiences with England to make a better government? 4	In what ways are people protesting today? 5	What responsibilities come with liberty? 6
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Understanding Goals	Understanding Performances	Ongoing Assessments
2,3	Brainstorm reasons you would be willing to protest against your government or school	Develop reasons in table groups and create a class poster. Peer feedback; use protocol from CFG?
1,2,4	Read two different versions of the Boston Tea Party. Compare and contrast development of the issues.	Debate sides of the revolution (or the Boston Tea Party?) in two teams. Discuss ethics of both sides. Peer feedback through student-developed rubric.
1,3	The BTP as political protest: discuss merits and hardships created by this protest. Is there another way they could have successfully protested without hurting themselves and England, or was this the only way out?	Develop ideas in groups to present a mock assembly of the Sons of Liberty deciding to dump the tea in the Boston Harbor. Use Johnny Tremairas the tool for understanding the issues. Teacher anecdote/observation.
4,6	Develop a utopia of your own, or with a group. What laws, decision making systems, consequences of law breaking. Study the Bill of Rights, discuss why framers created it.	Create a Children's Bill of Rights. Use goal #4 to evaluate (compare the original with the new one) Use the original, analyzed, to decide what should be included in the new one. Create rubric for activity.
3,5	Look at the news today. Who is protesting now? Discuss ethics of protests and who is hurt and who is helped. Discuss the larger good: the people (consumers) hurt by the strike, or the changes in labor law that the strike will hopefully cause?	Write an essay on what you would protest (that you know is going on now). What form would your protest take? How would you get people to join you and "make a noise?" How would you make your protest as positive as possible?
6	Lose liberty for awhile - how does this affect you?	Reflect on the responsibilities that come with liberty - what liberty means to different people (ask) then to you. What do the words "the land of the free" mean to you?
3	Learn positive and negative ways to protest - what is the goal in a protest? How would you want to be heard and to have things changed?	Write an advertisement for a protest meeting - about what, why should people come?
1,2,4	Point of view: history as told by...who? How would tell the story of the side that lost and how would that story sound as different from the side of the winners?	Write a newspaper article explaining both sides of the issue, as if you were a reporter. Be objective and fair, or draw a political cartoon supporting one side or the other (of the Revolution) Rubric.

Ideas from Study Group:

- Have debates from a different perspective; take the point of view of a different person; a group that feels the difference in their treatment
- Time line of great protests in history - are there themes of the protests? What happens to people who protest?
- Present the kids with choices for how they want to show what they know and how they understand it.
- Two points of view about BTP - from both sides. How would a protest today be seen from two different sides?
- Look back at 2nd grade, 3rd, 4th - what do they remember about history learned.
- Look at news for political protest - what's in the paper about people making a noise - are there themes here?
- Think about something that might not have happened - if it had not (like the BTP), how might history have been different? Would it have changed?
- Interview adults in the MCDS community about the throughlines - what are their answers? Are kids' opinions different from their parents' or do they see things the same way?

## Looking at my work

This piece of work is an example of

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I selected it because:

- it shows what I have learned.
- it shows how hard I have worked.
- it looks very neat.
- it is an example of my understanding.
- it points out that I have taken time to edit and fix my work.
- it may not be perfectly neat, but it REALLY shows that I worked hard, took thinking time, and didn't give up.
- \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Looking at my work

#2

This piece of work is an example of

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I selected it for my portfolio because:

- it shows what I have learned.
- it shows how hard I have worked.
- it looks very neat.
- it points out that I have taken time to edit and fix my work.
- it may not be perfectly neat, but it REALLY shows that I worked hard, took thinking time, and didn't give up.
- \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewing My Work

#3

What I am noticing about my learning.

This is a sample of \_\_\_\_\_

I selected this piece of work for my portfolio because

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This assignment was

- pretty fun
- challenging
- me that I learned a lot
- other \_\_\_\_\_

Reflections on My Portfolio and  
My Second Grade Year

When I look back on my portfolio, I noticed \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I can really tell that I learned a lot and grew in \_\_\_\_\_

Here's how I can see this growth \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I also learned a lot in \_\_\_\_\_

Here's how I can see this growth \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

This year has been special because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I will always remember Buckeye by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signed, \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*This paper is a result of research conducted by the author. Any use of this material in any theme, essay, term paper, research paper, thesis, or dissertation should be credited to the author. This research was conducted with the support of the Bay Area Teacher Development Collaborative.*