Towards a General Theory of Critical Friends Groups

Abundant research suggests that schools in which adults learn together in thoughtful, sustained, and persistent ways can improve teacher practice and student learning. (A. S. Bryk, 2010; Carroll, Fulton, & Doerr, 2010; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; F. Newmann & Whelage, 1995; F. M. Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, Luppescu, et al., 2006). However, it is not at all clear how adults in schools learn to work and learn together, to be reflective, to share their practice, to focus on student learning, to give and receive useful feedback, or to build shared understandings of fundamental ideas about schooling. Mindich and Liebermann, for example, note, “This situation raises important issues for both practitioners and policy makers. Researchers including Little (Little, 2003; Little & McLaughlin, 1993) and McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) have closely documented elements of successful learning communities, but those studies and others have done less to document the process of implementation. More specifically, there is a great deal of discussion about the importance of factors like trust (A. S. Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and good leadership (Elmore, 2000) in creating and sustaining adult learning situations in schools, but “there is less research about exactly how to create [emphasis added] community and how principals work to support and monitor PLC efforts to allow for successful changes in practice” (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012, p. 1).

At their best, Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) are highly-articulated professional learning communities in which educators learn the skills of reflecting, collaborating, deprivatizing practice, and exposing and exploring fundamental assumptions related to teaching and learning. CFGs, by definition, help groups build shared norms and values and hold each other accountable for being faithful to them.

What often attracts educators to the idea of a CFG is its apparent simplicity. CFGs provide structures that support adult learning in schools. They are groups of educators who meet regularly with the goal of improving teaching and learning and are characterized by: (1) skilled facilitation, and (2) the use of protocols to guide adult learning. This simple structure assumes that teachers have both things to learn from each other and things to teach each other, and that learning together will improve their teaching practice, deepen their knowledge of students, and build a shared understanding of fundamental ideas about schooling. Yet experience and considerable research suggests that this simple idea is neither simple nor easy to implement.

The enactment of the CFG model is influenced by a variety of factors, including the skill of the CFG coach, support of the principal, and the culture of the school. CFGs are also affected by the

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membership of the group, their reason for being there, the focus of the CFG, the time available to meet and even the size and stability of the group. There is a long list.

This “General Theory of Critical Friends Groups” attempts to situate the simple idea of CFGs within the larger literature and research frameworks around: (1) adult development, (2) organizational culture, (3) school change, and (4) transformational learning. Hopefully, situating the CFG concept in this larger, more complex context will help practitioners and researchers explore their understandings and assumptions around why such a simple idea leverages such complex behaviors. It may also reveal some of the reasons why certain CFG-like professional learning communities stall or falter. However, like any such broad theoretical framework, some ideas are very well supported by research, while others are only best guesses. Our hope is that both researchers and practitioners will continue this discussion as a way to understand how critical friendship and facilitative leadership can make schools better for every student.

**CFGs: The Simple Idea**

One formulation of the apparently simple idea behind CFGs is that for schools to become better places for students, adults have to learn. CFGs help adults learn with and from each other.

How do schools become better places for kids? The answer is not so complicated. Schools become better places for kids when teachers become better teachers, when they relentlessly improve their practice, when they are learners. Moreover, teachers (or any other educators, for that matter) cannot improve their craft in isolation from others. How do teachers improve their practice if they receive no feedback from students or colleagues, if they never observe other adults teach, if other adults never watch them teach, if teachers never look at students’ work with colleagues, or if they never struggle to understand complex pedagogical practices with others? (Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, & Hensley, 2012, p. 3)

Many schools have put in place some form of a professional learning community (PLC) in which educators work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence of its impact, and make changes to improve teaching and learning (DuFour, 2007; Gillespie, 2010; Hickman, Schrimpf, & Wedlock, 2009; Ikhwan, 2011; Kincannon, 2010; Tormala, 2009; Watts, 2010). A Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a particular form of learning community characterized by the rigorous use of protocols to build adult learning and attention to the facilitation needed to guide that learning (Bambino, 2005; Bernacchio, Ross, Washburn, Whitney, & Wood, 2007; Bisplinghoff, 2005; Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011; Cox, 2010; Curry, 2008; F. & F., 1998; Fahey, 2011; Franzak, 2002; Hudson, 2005; Law, 2005; Miech, Nave, & Mosteller, 2001; Silva, 2005; Vo & Nguyen, 2010; Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011).

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Use of Discussion Based Protocols

CFGs are distinguished by the use of structured conversations or protocols (Allen & Blythe, 2004; Easton, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). Protocols push against the pull of how things are or how we typically talk, a powerful force in every organization (Schein, 2010). Schools are no exception. The use of protocols helps CFGs as they struggle to not have the same conversation in the same way with the same folks with the same, predictable results. Protocols are the structures that help educators try on different ideas, examine assumptions, ask unsettling questions, and embrace discomfort in a way that is safe and manageable.

The steps embedded in most protocols are designed to help educators go against the grain of interactions that adults usually have in schools (Easton, 2009; McDonald et al., 2013). For example, adults in schools typically work in isolation, yet every protocol asks them to work with a group of colleagues. In many settings, this can be a challenging shift. Besides encouraging collegial work, protocols often support three other “against the grain” interactions. They are: (1) slowing down, (2) sharing practice, and (3) embracing discomfort (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

Skilled Facilitation & Coaching

Protocols are not easy answers, and they certainly don’t facilitate themselves. However, because the forces that conspire against adult learning in schools are so strong, the efficacy of protocols in supporting adult learning is directly related to the degree to which protocols are supported by skilled facilitation. McDonald and colleagues (2013) suggest, “At its heart, facilitation is about participation, ensuring equity, and building trust” (McDonald et al., 2013).

In the most successful CFGs there is not only skilled facilitation, but also skilled coaching. The coach does not necessarily facilitate every protocol, but rather asks difficult questions of the group, takes responsibility for the arc of the group’s learning, and persistently pushes towards deeper learning. The work of a coach is complicated and important (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Costa & Garmston, 2002; Ippolito, 2010; Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009).

Having outlined the “simple idea” of Critical Friends Groups, and the two most recognizable elements of protocols and skilled facilitation, it is now possible to tell a more complex story about CFGs, a story rooted in four larger frameworks and bodies of research. This more complex story illustrates both the power and challenges of implementing CFGs to leverage changes in teaching and learning in schools.
Framework #1: Adult Development and Learning

There exists a substantial professional knowledge base that demonstrates a strong connection between adult learning and student learning. Student learning increases in schools where educator communities are reflective, collaborative, and focused on issues of teaching and learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Donaldson, 2008; Guskey, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Stoll & Louis, 2007). The strong suggestion from research is that when adults learn with and from one another, student learning increases.

If CFGs are designed to support adult learning that improves teacher practice, then any “General Theory of CFGs” needs to take into account the different ways that adults in schools understand such a complicated learning event. Constructive Developmental Theory (Kegan, 1998)—which explains how adults intellectually grow and develop over time—can help us do this.

The fundamental constructs of Constructive Developmental Theory are:

1. Adults continually work to make sense of their experiences (constructive).
2. The ways that adults make sense of their world can change and grow more complex over time (developmental).
3. Three of the most common ways adults understand their worlds can be described as instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring.

Figure 1 (below) suggests that as adults develop they move to increasingly complex ways of understanding the world and their place in it.

![Figure 1](image)

In every school, there are instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring knowers who experience learning opportunities in different ways. An instrumental knower might experience an opportunity to

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complete a collaborative inquiry project with other teachers as a waste of time until she figures out how to get her classroom organized or learns the school’s new math program. A socializing knower who thrives on teamwork might be uncomfortable when that teamwork starts to uncover issues of race and class that require her to take a stand independent of her grade-level team or department. The self-authoring knower might find a PowerPoint presentation on bullying too prescriptive and a mechanism to avoid difficult questions.

Constructive Developmental Theory also acknowledges that adults can adopt different learning stances in different situations. A self-authoring knower may very well find the PowerPoint on bullying too prescriptive and a mechanism to avoid difficult questions, but the self-authoring knower can certainly act as an instrumental learner for a while and absorb the content of the presentation if the situation demands it. On the other hand, even when the situation demands it, an instrumental knower will struggle with a collaborative inquiry project that requires socializing or self-authoring learning. They just don’t know how to operate in that way. As with all developmental learning, it is much easier for a learner’s behavior to reflect the characteristics of a stage that they have previously experienced rather than the characteristics of a stage they cannot imagine. A self-authoring knower can act in instrumental ways because they have already experienced that stage themselves. It is more difficult for the instrumental knower to act in self-authoring ways, a stage they cannot envision. Moreover, Constructive Developmental Theory does not argue that one way of knowing is fundamentally better than another. Rather, it suggests that individuals at different stages of adult development might experience anxiety or satisfaction depending on the match between the personal and professional tasks at hand and the degree to which an individual is able to learn/act effectively in response. Both a kindergartner and an 11th grader could identify a bully, but the kindergartner would experience great anxiety at being asked to serve on a student committee to collaboratively define and solve a school-wide bullying epidemic. The 11th grader is not better than the kindergartner in this example, just more equipped to meet the demands of the task.

Constructive Developmental Theory suggests that skilled CFG coaches and facilitators need to understand not only that adults have different ways of knowing, but also that what happens in any CFG—different conversational structures, formats, and approaches—will be understood very differently by the adults in the school and group. Coaches also must know that how adults understand their experiences can change. Under the right conditions, adults can move from instrumental to socializing to self-authoring knowers.

CFGs help adults learn and grow, and Constructive Developmental Theory suggests that this learning is complicated by the different stages of adult development of the members of the group. Moreover, both Constructive Developmental Theory and our own experiences tell us that where learning happens is important. CFGs are located in schools, so the characteristics of each school make a

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difference. Context matters (Birenbaum, Kimron, & Shilton, 2011; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1992), and so it is important to consider organizational culture as part of the complex story of how CFGs affect teaching and learning.

**Framework # 2: Organizational Culture**

Experience and a growing body of research describe the factors that influence how CFGs are enacted and make a difference in teaching and learning (Curry, 2008; Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Fahey, 2011; Miech et al., 2001; Silva, 2005). To better understand this phenomenon, we turn to literature on school culture that explains how context makes a difference (A. S. Bryk, 2010; A. S. Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1992).

For example, Andy Hargreaves (and many others following the seminal work of Dan Lortie) points out that the forces of presentism, isolation and conservatism (Lortie, 1970) that characterize many schools are significant barriers to the adult learning that could make a difference for students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Simply put, many schools are organized in ways that not only do not support adult learning, but also actively discourage it (A. S. Bryk, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003)

On the other hand, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that schools that were able to work collaboratively, deprivatize their work, focus on teaching and learning, reflect on practice, and maintain shared norms and values improved teacher practice and student learning. The difference between the schools Lortie describes and the ones Newmann describes is that in the second group of schools, adults are learning collaboratively and openly about shared questions of practice (A. S. Bryk, 2010).

Figure 2 suggests that schools can be placed along a continuum that correlates with the degree to which adults collaborate with each other, share practice, reflect on practice, and focus on teaching and learning. These characteristics correlate with increased student learning.
Schools can be found all along this learning continuum. Some schools are very much as Lortie described in 1970, while others can collaborate, share practices, and focus on teaching and learning as Newmann describes. Most are somewhere in the middle. It can be the goal of a CFG to move the adults in a school from one end of the continuum to the other, but where the CFG begins its learning journey makes a difference in how quickly the group moves (and learns) and where it goes (Ballock, 2007).

As CFGs learn the skills of collaboration, reflection, deprivatization of practice, focusing on teaching and learning, and building shared norms not only do the adults learn, but the culture of the school also changes. Context certainly makes a difference in how CFGs learn, but the learning that the CFG generates can also change context. Thus it is critical to not only consider the organizational culture of the school in which a CFG works, but it is also important to consider theories and practices of whole-school change and the relationship of CFGs to any potential change.

Framework # 3: School Change

The deceptively simple idea that “for schools to be better places for kids, adults need to learn,” begs the question, “So what do those better places look like?” The answer, of course, is complicated and varies according to who is answering the question. In general, however, the literature on school change makes an important distinction between the improvement and the reinvention of schools, which can be usefully understood as different things.
School improvement can be accomplished, for example, by adopting a new curriculum, finding a new approach to teaching reading, or implementing extended learning time. School improvement often leans toward what various theorists call “technical” (Heifetz, 1994), “Discourse I” (Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1994), or “first order” (Cuban & Usdan, 2002) approaches. The list of improvements schools adopt is long and varied: teaching phonemic awareness, writing across the curriculum, wearing uniforms, single sex classrooms, and expanded AP programs are just a few examples. Most of these improvements are research-based, and all can help make schools better places for kids, and each one has their advocates. However, each of these changes could be considered “technical” or “first order” because they do not necessarily require shifts in the way adults in schools think about and enact their work.

School reinvention is different. The reinvention of schools might be considered “adaptive” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), “Discourse II” (Eubanks et al., 1994), or “second order” (Cuban & Usdan, 2002) work. School reinvention asks educators to not only adopt a new program or approach, but also to rethink what it means to be a teacher, and to challenge closely held assumptions about schools, ourselves, and our students. School reinvention rethinks fundamental aspects of schooling such as the use of time, how students are grouped for instruction, who students are or what it means to be a teacher.

While the work of both school improvement and school reinvention require adult learning, it is important to understand that school reinvention requires adults to understand their learning experiences in different and more complicated ways than does school improvement. Moreover, school reinvention necessarily builds on school improvement. In the next section we adopt the categories of adult development from Constructive Developmental Theory and use them to describe three developmentally different ways that adults collectively construct meaning in schools. We call these School Improvement Type 1, School Improvement Type 2, and School Reinvention.

Figure 3 details the relationship between these three concepts, which are also developmental and build upon one another.

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**Figure 3**

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Adult Learning and School Change

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In thinking about the different meanings educators make, especially around school change, it is important to remember that instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring knowers understand school change very differently from each other. Instrumental knowers are most comfortable when they learn concrete processes and programs, which are plentiful in schools. Learning a specific model about guided reading, or a way to teach inquiry-based science or a particular form of writing across the curriculum can improve a teacher’s practice. Instrumental knowers are most at ease with School Improvement Type 1, which is very much “technical” (Heifetz et al., 2009) learning.

However, when educators attempt to put their new learning about formative assessment or differentiated instruction or guided reading or writing across the curriculum into practice, the limits of instrumental knowing become apparent. An instrumental approach helps teachers learn about a new practice or strategy, but not necessarily how to flexibly or deeply integrate that new practice into their classroom, grade level, and school. Instrumental learning alone does not readily alter the practice of a grade level, team, department, school or district. Learning a new practice, as opposed to learning about a new practice, requires discussion, feedback from colleagues, classroom learning experiments, and collaborative work (Biancarosa et al., 2010; A. Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1997; A. S. Bryk, 2010; Daly, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The instrumental knower’s attraction to learning a specific strategy or concrete procedure can be a good place to begin adult learning, but the instrumental approach tells teachers very little about how a specific practice should look in their own classrooms, with their own students, in their own schools. Eventually issues of coherence and context limit the effects of an instrumental approach to learning (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

Socializing knowers are more comfortable with the learning that addresses issues of context and coherence because they are reflective, collaborative, and can look beyond the context of their own classroom. The socializing knower’s approach to school improvement (School Improvement Type 2) is very much about improving the practice of teams, departments, schools, and districts—not just the practice of individual teachers. This approach encourages teachers to learn from one another, be reflective, consider other perspectives, and build a shared understanding of teaching and learning that takes their own context into account. However, educators engaged in the socializing approach of School Improvement Type 2 can find it difficult to ask the “hard questions about purposes and possibilities” of the group to which they belong and about which they care so much (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 252) . The socializing approach, which can avoid questions that challenge the purpose of schooling, equitable educational practice, or the taken-for-granted norms, values, and practices that define our schools, can support school improvement, but it stops short of school reinvention.

Self-authoring knowers are more comfortable challenging their own (and others’) deeply held beliefs about practice, context, and the coherence of their vision of teaching and learning. Self-authoring
knowers, for example, are able to ask, “What is the purpose of the journey that children take through our schools?” The self-authoring knower wonders whether schools are designed to reinvent or reproduce our society. They can ask why so many students are pushed out of our schools. The self-authoring approach challenges educators to think not only about the challenges that so many of our students face, but also about the context of privilege in which many White, middle-class educators work. The self-authoring approach asks educators, for example, to think about the difference that race, privilege, and class make in individual and schoolwide practice.

The learning that will not only improve schools but also reinvent them can be described as self-authoring (Breidenstein et al., 2012). The work of reinventing schools is directly connected to uncomfortable conversations about unequal, unproductive practices and conditions in districts, schools, and classrooms (Singleton & Linton, 2006). A self-authoring approach asks educators to tolerate the ambiguity and complexity that come with asking challenging questions about the purpose of schools, the nature of equitable practice, the impact of context, and the implications of coherence. In such an approach there are no specific answers or concrete processes that would appease instrumental learners. It is “adaptive” (Heifetz et al., 2009), “Discourse II” (Eubanks et al., 1994) and “second order” (Cuban, 2003). Nor would the answers to adaptive questions be quickly or easily found in the group, as the socializing learner would like. A self-authoring approach requires all of the skills of instrumental and socializing learning, plus a willingness to expect and accept conflict, and the ability to, at times, stand in opposition to the group. These are characteristics of self-authoring knowers and of the learning needed to reinvent schools (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

Figure 4 suggests that each more challenging stage of school improvement/reinvention requires adults in schools to understand their context in increasingly complicated, demanding ways. We talk about this in greater detail in Framework #4 below, where we make the case that these ways of learning might be usefully collapsed into a continuum from “informational” to “transformational” learning.
Framework # 4: Transformational Learning

Ideally, school improvement and reinvention are driven not by what and how the adults in a school learn but by what students need. However, educators at different stages of adult development are likely to conceptualize “what students need” very differently from one another. Naturally, the more capacity educators have for complex learning, the more capacity the school has for change, improvement, and reinvention (Argyris, 1999; Senge, 2006). However, if adults in a school (including those in positions of formal authority) are predominantly instrumental knowers then it seems unlikely they will be able to immediately engage in the self-authoring learning approach needed to reinvent the school or even address issues of coherency and context. In order to reinvent schools, most adults need to learn to construct meaning in unfamiliar, more complicated and challenging ways. The literature on adult learning calls this learning how to learn in more complicated ways “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformative (or transformational) learning is the learning that adults need to move from one stage of adult development to another, to adopt different and more complicated and challenging ways of making meaning.

Transformational learning theory makes a distinction between informational and transformational learning. Informational learning is the learning that increases what we know. But not who we are or how we understand our world.

Changes in one’s fund of knowledge, one’s confidence as a learner, one’s self perception as a learner, one’s motives in learning, one’s self esteem—these are all potentially important kinds of changes, all desirable, all worthy of teachers thinking about how to facilitate them. But it is possible for any or all of these changes to take place without any transformation because they could all occur within the existing form or frame of reference. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 51)

Transformational learning is different. It is learning that changes not only what we know, but also how we know what we know, and even who we are. Mezirow (2000) explains,

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted references (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open emotionally, capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experiences of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and taking an action decision based on the resulting insight (p. 7).
Informational and transformational learning can be seen as ends of a learning continuum, and all learning experiences can be found somewhere along this continuum. Many learning experiences in schools are valuable but also informational because while they might improve our practice, they do not surface or question the hidden assumptions underneath that practice. It is only when a learning experience is pulled towards the transformational end of the continuum does the possibility of surfacing, facing, questioning, and challenging fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions arise.

Figure 5 summarizes the informational/transformational learning continuum.

Figure 5.

Transformational learning is the learning that happens as adults move from instrumental to socializing to self-authoring knowers. Informational learning is valuable learning, but it does not change our stage of adult development, who we are, or how we make meaning of the world. Kegan (1982, 1994) suggests that although how adults make meaning is developmental, not all adults continue to develop. The movement from instrumental to socializing to self-authoring and beyond is not inevitable. Many adults are comfortable being instrumental knowers and live and work in places in which this way of knowing serves them well. The same can be said for socializing or self-authoring knowers.

Reflective Discourse

Transformational Learning Theory suggests that the engine that propels transformational (as opposed to informational) learning is *reflective discourse*. “Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads towards clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11). Reflective discourse is the engine that drives the transformational learning that moves adults to more complicated ways of knowing and equips them for the adaptive work needed to reinvent schools.

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Reflective discourse that leads to transformational learning is a complicated learning event that, like CFGs, is always enacted over a significant period of time in very complex contexts. Mezirow states:

Feelings of trust, solidarity, security and empathy are essential preconditions for full participation in discourse. Discourse is not based on winning arguments; it centrally involves finding agreement, welcoming difference, “trying on” other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicitly in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12).

Transformational Learning Theory also holds that the goal of any transformational learning is to “guide more useful, more justified action.” “Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons, justifying these assumptions, and making an action based on the resulting insight ” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Transformational learning not only demands questioning assumptions, managing anxiety and challenging comfortable habits of mind, it also demands actions—changes in practice based on new, more useful ways of thinking. A CFG can be helpfully thought of as a “holding environment” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 155), which supports reflective discourse and holds its members accountable to put the learning from that discourse into practice.

Figure 6 suggests that the engine that moves adults from informational learning to transformational learning is reflective discourse.

**Critical Friends Groups (CFGs): The Not So Simple Idea**
Having explored the theoretical and research underpinnings of the more complex story of CFGs, we now return to a revised description of the purposes and processes of CFGs. As described above, CFGs are structures that support adult learning in schools. They are groups of educators who meet regularly with the goal of improving teaching and learning. They are characterized by: (1) skilled facilitation, and (2) the use of protocols to guide adult learning.

More broadly, however, a Critical Friends Group is a particular form of learning community designed to provide the focus and structure needed to support the learning of adults who understand the world very differently from one another (instrumental, socializing, self authoring, etc.). CFGs can support educators at every place along the continuum of adult development. For instrumental knowers, a CFG might help them learn new strategies or implement new curriculum. For socializing knowers the learning might be focused on improving practice in a particular context by receiving feedback on lesson plans, aligning curriculum, or developing common assessments. For self-authoring knowers the learning might center on issues of equitable educational practice.

However, a CFG that supports a particular stage of adult development is different from a CFG that moves adults from one stage of adult development to another. **Informational CFGs** can deepen practice, add to a teacher’s repertoire, increase knowledge, expand skills, and improve a school. *Informational CFGs* support informational knowers becoming better informational knowers, and socializing knowers becoming better socializing knowers. However, *informational CFGs* do not transform instrumental knowers into socializing knowers or socializing knowers into self-authoring knowers.

**Transformational CFGs**, on the other hand, challenge educators to not only deepen their practice, but also to question the basis of that practice, to surface and explore the hidden assumptions that sustain that practice. These CFGs, at their best, hold out the possibility of adult development, of helping educators make meaning of their practice, and the context in which it is situated, in progressively more complex and demanding ways.

Just like individuals at a particular stage of development might adopt different learning stances depending on context, CFGs sometimes operate as *Informational CFGs*, other times as *Transformational CFGs*. Again, these are ends of a continuum along which groups travel back and forth. However, it is possible—and perhaps not even unusual—for a CFG to persistently act as an *Informational CFG* and move very little along the continuum of school improvement/transformation and adult development. CFGs, and indeed all groups, are developmental (Ballock, 2007). Some grow and continue to challenge themselves; many do not. Some find ways to overcome the natural tendency of groups to find comfortable easy places to be. Some do not.

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Figure 7 suggests that CFGs can act in ways that support informational or transformational learning. The difference between these two is the degree to which the CFG is characterized by reflective discourse.

The degree to which CFGs act as Transformational CFGs depends on the degree to which they intentionally and persistently engage in reflective discourse to guide action.

Informational CFGs do not automatically move educators, groups, or schools from one version of school improvement to another; although, they do help educators become better at the version of school improvement that they are working on. Informational CFGs do not support adult development. Only Transformational CFGs can do that.

Figure 8 describes the different ways that Informational CFGs and Transformational CFGs function and the results that can be expected from each.
Toward a General Theory of Critical Friends Groups

February 2014

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Critical Friends Groups: What, So What, Now What?

What?

Situating the Critical Friends Group concept in the broader theoretical frameworks of adult development, organizational culture, school change, and transformational learning confirms what many facilitators and coaches already understand: That the CFG concept, whose simplicity and elegance first attracts educators (and funders, school leaders, and researchers for that matter) becomes a very complicated notion when enacted in a real schools, with real teachers. Situating the CFG concept in this larger framework suggests that CFGs are not only about helping adults learn (the simple idea) but can also be about helping adults develop, to become more complex knowers, and to understand the world in more sophisticated, nuanced ways. Moreover, analysis suggests that for schools to improve beyond the most instrumental ways of learning and working, and particularly for them to reinvent themselves, then adults in schools need to become more complex knowers. They need to learn to understand their experiences in ways that allow them to resist easy answers, expose and explore hidden assumptions, and accept the ambiguity of persistently taking up adaptive work. CFGs that are informational help educators learn new programs, processes, and specific practices. CFGs that are transformational help educators become the more complex thinkers and knowers needed to reinvent schools.

So what?

School leaders can tell teachers (or themselves) that they need to be socializing knowers or even self authoring knowers because school improvement and school reinvention demands that educators understand their work in complex ways. However, telling a teacher they need to be a more complex knower is no more likely to make them such a knower than telling a first grader that they need to read a Harry Potter novel or a second grader that they have to prove the Pythagorean theorem. Telling is not teaching, and adults in schools, just like first and second graders, need to have the opportunity to develop and practice complex skills.

CFGs are important because they open the door to the adult learning (Informational CFGs) and adult development (Transformational CFGs) that school improvement and school reinvention require. They offer an important answer to the question of how effective schoolwide professional communities could be created (A. S. Bryk, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; F. Newmann & Whelage, 1995).

Now what?

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Reframing CFGs as both informational and transformational sheds light on the complexity of what at first seemed to be a simple idea. However, this reframing also raises important questions for practitioners and researchers. A very short list might include:

- How and when does an informational CFG become transformational?
- What facilitator/coaching moves support informational learning? Which support transformational learning? When are each appropriately used?
- What is the difference between facilitating adult learning and coaching it? How are they same?
- How are protocols experienced, understood, and adapted by different adult knowers?
- What is the connection between a leader’s way of knowing and the learning that takes place in a school? How does formal leadership support or hinder transformational learning?
- How does a facilitator/coach effectively work with adult learners at very different stages of development, who make meaning of the world quite differently?
- Is transformational learning (and the reinvention of schools) always the best goal?

These are just a few of the questions that this General Theory raises, once the concept of CFGs is situated in the larger body of research and theory. Hopefully this more complicated way of understanding and knowing about CFGs will not only generate new questions and dilemmas for both practitioners and researchers, but it will also challenge all of us to model the very best of transformational CFGs: to expose and explore our fundamental assumptions about CFGs; to resist easy, obvious answers; and to hold on to the ambiguity needed to dig deeper. Lots to do.
References


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