

Sitting Together at the Piano Bench

It's not how you change others, but how you
represent the possibility of change

by Ross Peterson-Veatch

Enthusiastic, but Anxious

Each January, a meeting of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) enables educators to hone skills and deepen conversations they have experienced in coaches' seminars sponsored by NSRF Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). Working in small groups, we use highly structured protocols to examine examples of our students' work and our own "teacher" work, e.g., lesson plans, assignments, and assessments. We discuss how all members of a CFG must commit themselves to other members' success as much as to their own; how their commitment cannot be the responsibility of the coach alone; and how the process creates a model of a functioning learning community.

At the end of a recent meeting, the members of our group were enthusiastic, but also anxious. We wanted to bottle the great seminar feeling and take it home, but even after nearly twelve hours of discussing our work, many questions remained: How could we earn the confidence of teachers in our buildings? How could we get them to engage in real collaboration? Could we curb the impact of resistance and negativity? Could we foster critical and reflective practice in our buildings? How, in effect, could we change things for the better?

Lessons from Learning to Play the Piano

As I listened to our conversations, I recalled sitting on the piano bench in my living room and helping my six-year-old with his piano exercises. By breaking down his assigned songs into phrases, the exercises help him recognize how patterns progress in the songs. Practicing the phrases was not proving difficult for him, but playing each song as a whole was.

To demonstrate what was involved, I played the simple arrangement of "Ode to Joy" in his book. He asked, "How do you do that?" and I showed him the relationship between the exercises and the song as a whole. I remained next to him on the bench while he tried to play the phrases together straight to the end of the song.

He couldn't play the entire piece perfectly right away. He kicked and screamed and told me over and over, "I can't do it"—even though he

was making progress. Still, I remained on the bench with him. I had seen him play the exercises without frustration (and after all, he had volunteered for lessons in the first place). The issue, thus, was that he did not *believe* he could play the song. Soon he was close enough to “see” that he could put it all together, and he began to believe it. After another week of practice, he could play the song perfectly.

Hearing me play the song had not been enough for my son. He had to dispel his doubts and believe that *he* could play the song. As uncomfortable as our time on the bench had been, in the end he seemed transformed: confident, proud, and secure in the knowledge that he could move on to more complicated pieces. He had felt supported because someone committed to his success sat with him while he struggled through the challenge.

For me, the episode on the piano bench symbolizes the hard work undertaken in our seminar groups. Much as my son accepted the challenges of piano lessons and my coaching, similar challenges had transformed us: the possibility of transformation proved to be the key to addressing our anxieties about taking the new learning home. We moved from “How can I take this back to others?” or “How can I hold on to it?” to a frame of mind and of spirit in which we could ask, “How can I show others in concrete ways that it is possible to be different?” and “Whose help do I need to figure that out?”

Understanding CFGs in the Context of Transformation

The work of Jack Mezirow, an adult-learning theorist, provides a theoretical structure for my understanding of CFGs’ transformative effects. Mezirow presents successful adult learning—“transformative learning”—as a transformation of perspective that leads to a change in action.

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (*Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* [Jossey-Bass, 1991], p. 167)

In the context of professional development for educators, Mezirow’s theory suggests that substantive or lasting changes in professional practice depend on some means of becoming “critically aware” of our assumptions and how they affect our choices, some means of changing our habits and expectations, and some forum for exploring how to act

on new understandings. Mezirow's theory supports my idea of how transformation works and helps me structure my work as a CFG coach. His theory also suggests that transformative learning possesses a logic that informs my understanding of how to focus on supporting others' transformations. As a CFG coach, I see this work in the following sequence: perceiving, imagining, believing, knowing, seeing, and then engaging in considered action.

Thus, successful CFG work supports me in changing the way I do my job by carefully examining the "place where I live": that is, I must *perceive* the world I live in—the possibilities and limits of my professional environment—before I can *imagine* that world transformed. I first must get a real sense of my own experience at the piano bench, so to speak. What are the patterns in the songs I'm trying to play? What are the patterns in the songs I expect my students to play? Do I say "I can't" if I can't play perfectly? Who is to blame when my playing sounds terrible?

Only then can I *imagine* how that environment can be different. To transform my own teaching and support my colleagues in transforming theirs, then—like my son practicing his exercises in order to *believe* he can play the song—I must *imagine* a "new world" in my classroom and *believe* I can bring it into being before I *know* it can be done and *see* how it is to be done.

The challenge is that I must do it *for* myself—yet I cannot do it *by* myself. I need critical friends to help me reach that point. They can help me answer difficult questions and hold me accountable for truthful answers. I need their reassurance that my performance was not off the mark because of who I am, only because of choices I made, and they must not let me off the hook when I'm not truthful with myself. Critical friends remain on the piano bench with me until I can play the song all the way through. They are "critical" not only in the sense of offering constructive criticism, but also in the sense that they are essential for my growth as an educator.

Bringing Home the New Learning

In our CFG, away from the distractions of our daily lives, we created a space in which truth could be spoken and heard, real consideration for one another shown and seen, and real connections to one another born and fostered. In the end we all felt a desire to change our worlds for the better, a sense of urgency for change in others: "If only I could convince my colleagues at home" or "Maybe if we try this new protocol I learned. . . ."

Bringing the new learning home, though, is not so much about making others better teachers or persuading them to change: it is, instead,

about showing them that the world they have been experiencing is not the only one in existence. I could not give my son the ability to play a song merely by showing him that it is possible; likewise, I cannot give my colleagues the “how-to’s” of self-transformation simply by sharing a few new protocols. To arrive at considered actions, I must begin by paying close attention to how protocols support me in being different—how they change my perspective. As we experience these transformative professional interactions, reflecting critically on them with each other is crucial—not so we can transform others, but so that we might hear the patterns of our own songs and decide for ourselves the order in which we should play them.

Understanding and applying the elements of transformation are, for me, the keys to reaching my goals as a CFG coach. A clear sense of our own power to foster change by changing ourselves will help us imagine a new professional world; believe that it could be; know that it can be; see how it will be; and then act to make it happen for our students.

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