i.e.: inquiry in education

2010

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The Critical Friends Group

A Strategy for Developing Intellectual Community in Doctoral Education

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Introduction

With the start of the twenty-first century, there has been increased attention to doctoral preparation in education and other disciplines. For example, *Educational Researcher* devoted an issue to the subject in 2001 (v. 30, n. 5), and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted a five-year project, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), in which education was one of six disciplines included in the project (also chemistry, English, history, mathematics, and neuroscience) (Golde & Walker, 2006). A key recommendation from the CID project is for doctoral programs to focus on developing intellectual communities that are knowledge-centered and multigenerational (Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008).

A key recommendation from the CID [Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate] project is for doctoral programs to focus on developing intellectual communities.

In this article I describe a graduate art education course, *Writing Critique in Art Education*, which uses the Critical Friends (CF) discussion protocol to facilitate a heterogeneous intellectual community for doctoral and master's level students. Using a practitioner inquiry methodology (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), I investigated how the use of a Critical Friends protocol influenced the development of an intellectual community in this course, and how the intellectual community supported students' growth as educational researchers, future teacher educators, and current practicing teachers. While this course is situated in an art education graduate program, the research findings can inform doctoral preparation across disciplines as it focuses on a strategy that facilitates critical dialogue in a supportive environment regardless of content area.

The Need for Critical Friends

In addition to the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), various scholars in education have identified the need to develop a professional learning community that will foster rigorous critical dialogue within a supportive environment. Writing about teacher preparation, Sonia Nieto (2000) urges teacher educators to help their students develop a community of critical friends, "peers who debate, critique, and challenge one another to go beyond their current ideas and practices" (p. 187). Suzanne Wilson (2006), writing about doctoral programs that prepare future teacher educators and educational researchers, emphasizes the need for "dissensus" and "consistent interactions with skeptical and critical others—from across various political, cultural, philosophical, and intellectual spectra" (p. 324). Richard Colwell (2005), a music educator, asserts that the purpose of criticism is to understand, not to compare or compete. Colwell regrets that the importance of criticism has recently been neglected with arts educators erring on the side of excessive and unearned praise, "In both visual arts and elementary music, teacher comments are more than 99 percent positive" (p. 79). Chris Golde, a senior scholar and research director for the CID, refers to this trend as "education's culture of affirmation, in which students may be reluctant to say anything that could be perceived as unsupportive or critical" (2007, p. 349). Colwell explains that a critical friend is one who wants the person to succeed. In his call for critical friends to support scholarly leadership in music education, Colwell characterizes this person as supportive while also objective and disinterested. "Critical comments apply not only to skills but to abilities, habits, character traits, attitudes, and more; the domain of criticism is both personal and professional" (2005, p. 79). Colwell's recognition of the need for critical friends to serve as scholarly leaders in music education relates to a major priority of the CID, which is concerned with developing doctoral students that will become "responsible stewards of their disciplines, academic citizens, and contributors to the larger society" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 139). The CID identifies intellectual communities as an important factor in that development.

Theoretical Framework

My conception of this course as an intellectual community came after I began reading about developing learning communities, which have been discussed especially in the realm of undergraduate education. The CID framework of intellectual communities as focused specifically on graduate education has been more insightful for understanding the community developed in this course and it serves as an ongoing guide for my teaching. Generally, the idea of intellectual community relates to the concept of communities of practice developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as it is a joint enterprise of mutual engagement around a shared repertoire, in this case related to teaching and research in art education (see Wenger, 1998). The theoretical framework for this project is guided by the CID's concept of intellectual communities, with the Critical Friends protocol serving as a key strategy for facilitating this community within a seminar context.

Characteristics of an Intellectual Community

The CID encapsulates its conception of intellectual community with this statement: "Indeed, the overarching characteristic of intellectual community in doctoral education (or elsewhere) is that it is knowledge-centered, and the process of knowledge building, as we know from cognitive science, is a 'fundamentally social' enterprise…(Wenger, as cited in Walker et al., 2008, p. 127). An intellectual community has four specific characteristics. It has a *shared purpose*, "a community-wide commitment to help students develop into the best scholars possible so that they, in turn, may contribute to the growth and creation of knowledge" (p. 125). It is *diverse and multigenerational*, including multiple viewpoints and healthy debate with students integrated as junior colleagues. It is *flexible and forgiving* in that it encourages risk taking and supports opportunities for experimentation. It is *respectful and generous* as the members of the intellectual community act with civility and respect and are connected through a shared aim. Members are generous by sharing opportunities, resources, and connections. "Generosity derives from the assumption that all members of the community ought to be helped to succeed, and, indeed, that other community members bear a measure of responsibility for helping foster that success" (p. 127). The intellectual community developed in the *Writing Critique in Art Education* course reflects these four characteristics, as will be elaborated upon below.

> *"… the overarching characteristic of intellectual community … is that it is knowledge-centered, and the process of knowledge building, … is a 'fundamentally social' enterprise…(Wenger, 1996, p. 3)…"*

The Critical Friends (CF) Protocol

The protocol was initially developed in 1994 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in order to facilitate collegial dialogue among K-12 teachers and school administrators (Training for Critical Friends Groups has been provided by the National School Reform Faculty at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana since 2000.). When practiced in K-12 schools, the focus of dialogue is typically around three situations: 1) peer observation; 2) refining a teaching artifact (student work, lesson plan, assessment instrument, etc.); and 3) consulting about an instructional or schooling issue. The protocol has since been adapted to higher education and community-based and nonprofit organizations. The protocol consists of six steps: 1) an overview in which the facilitator describes the focus of the session; 2) a presentation of the artifact, observation, or issue by the presenter (who is different from the facilitator) in which the presenter explains what is to be "tuned," in other words what questions or concerns should focus the feedback; 3) an opportunity for participants to ask clarifying questions of the presenter; 4) discussion of the artifact or issue during which the presenter remains silent, listening and taking

notes; 5) the presenter reflects on the feedback; and 6) the facilitator debriefs the session. Overall the session lasts 35-40 minutes. Participants are directed to give positive or "warm" feedback and constructively critical or "cool" feedback that is focused on the tuning question(s) (the presenter's questions or concerns stated to focus the feedback). It is also important that the participants give practical and actionable suggestions to accompany their feedback (For more information, visit the National School Reform Faculty website, http://www.nsrfharmony.org/faq.html#1).

The CF protocol relates to the four characteristics of an intellectual community in that the group has a *shared purpose* of helping the presenter improve their practice, whether related to teaching, research or another professional focus. The extent that the group is *diverse and multigenerational* may vary depending on context. In the writing course I am describing, the students were diverse in age, gender, and racial/ethnic background; at both the master's and doctoral levels; ranged from novice to expert art teachers; and had varied doctoral research and master's degree applied project topics. It was multigenerational in that I was a member of the community as their professor and students were at varying levels in the graduate program, with some students participating during or directly after their first semester in the graduate program, while other students were at the dissertation prospectus level. In addition, guest scholars who visited the course ranged from assistant and associate professor levels to department chair. The supportive structure of the CF protocol facilitates *flexibility and forgiveness* and the guidelines for giving and receiving feedback ensure *civility and generosity*.

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> *"…the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of study"* Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006, p. 503).
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Methodology

This study employed a practitioner inquiry methodology. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) explain this methodology as one in which "the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of study" (p. 503). In this case, I was the professor of the course and the researcher, the research site consisted of three annual summer semesters teaching the *Writing Critique in Art Education* course, and the focus of study was the practice of using the Critical Friends protocol as a strategy for developing what I consider an intellectual community in the course. The research questions for the study were: How does the use of the Critical Friends protocol influence the development of an intellectual community in this course? How does the intellectual community support students' development as educational researchers, future teacher educators, and current practicing teachers?

Participants for the study consisted primarily of the 15 graduate students who took the course from 2006-2008, and for which I received human subjects research approval from the

institutional review board. Of the 15 research participants, eight were doctoral students, one student was in the Education Specialist (EdS) program, and six were master's degree students. Some of these students had taken the course more than once. I have taught the course two additional summers, and will discuss these students' reactions to the course in general terms, as the human subjects research approval did not cover 2009-2010. In addition, three faculty colleagues who participated in the course as guest scholars offered their feedback on the course design and reflections on their experience visiting the class. Data sources included the students' final essay for the course in which they were given a prompt asking them to reflect on the role of dialogue, critique, and collaboration in the research and writing process; students' final presentations of their course project in which they were to share the progress made on their project; the guest scholars' written reflective comments; and the curricular and pedagogical artifacts from the course such as syllabi, handouts, and professor/researcher instructional reflections. While the students' reflective essays were part of their grade, and students may have felt hesitant to be too critical, I tried to address this concern by asking them to write about the role of dialogue and critique in research and not specifically about the course. The essays were analyzed through coding and categorization for emergent themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I used a priori codes represented by the characteristics of an intellectual community (e.g., "shared purpose", "multigenerational"), and emergent codes which often reflected components of the CF protocol, such as "presenter silence" and "tuning question". Other emergent codes included "diverse perspectives," "dialogue," and "critique." Content analysis was performed on guest scholar and professor/researcher reflections and students' final presentations. Trustworthiness of the data was established through process validity, that is "using appropriate and adequate research methods and inquiry processes" and dialogic validity ("monitoring analyses through critical and reflective discussion with peers") (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 510). To address dialogic validity, I asked students in the course and a guest scholar to comment on drafts of this paper, and I shared the findings with a colleague from outside of my department for critical reflection.

Creating an Intellectual Community

Course Design

A main objective of the course is to give each student an opportunity to work on a specific research or educational project of his or her design in a collaborative environment characterized by critical support from peers and individualized guidance from the professor. In addition, an important course objective is for students to gain professional experience in scholarly dialogue essential to the growth of a discipline. The Critical Friends discussion protocol provides an organizing structure for the course.

The course occurs over an intensive summer session during the month of June. The benefit of this time period is that typically students do not have other courses or full-time teaching

responsibilities that may conflict with their immersion in the process. A disadvantage to this short session is that students feel that they would benefit from a prolonged and consistent involvement in a Critical Friends group throughout their graduate studies. While I encourage students to form an ad-hoc group, conflicting work and course schedules during the regular academic year often make this difficult. This reflects what Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth consider problematic in the development of intellectual community among teachers: "Efforts to build intellectual community have historically taken place outside school walls, thus removing teacher learning from the temporal and spatial milieu of the workplace" (2001, p. 948). Since the goal of the intellectual community described here is professional development as education researchers and practitioners within the context of graduate education, Grossman et al.'s concern emphasizes the need to facilitate time and space for ongoing development of intellectual community within the university setting.

The class meets three times per week for two hours. The other two weekdays are non-attendance workdays when students have time to devote to their projects. Student projects range from developing a dissertation prospectus, exploring ideas for dissertation topics, writing the master's degree applied project, developing a literature review, and researching instructional models such as differentiated instruction and creativity strategies. Students develop a work plan outlining their project goals broken into weekly objectives, which serves as an agenda for the month. This work plan is revised at the end of the month so that students may reflect upon what they accomplished during the course. Students are required to present an artifact at least twice to a CF session. During a week in which they don't present they must submit something directly to the professor. As a result, each student receives weekly feedback either from the group or from me. The weekly deadline encourages students to be productive. A potential challenge for the course is the limited number of students that can participate each semester. The CF protocol works best with a group of 5-8 people. A class of more than 10 students will limit the number of times students can present and affect the dynamic of the CF discussion.

At the start of the course, students are given a hand out which outlines the CF protocol and gives background information on the CF process. As the group's facilitator, I adhere to the structure of the CF protocol as adapted to this course. This provides consistent expectations for the functioning of the group and a growing comfort level with the process as the course progresses. To further develop a trusting environment and promote the multigenerational quality of the class, I ask a student who has taken the course before to volunteer as presenter for the first CF group as a way to model the process. I also serve as a presenter of an artifact on the first day so that students understand that we are all in need of critical supportive feedback and that I value their ideas, knowledge, and experience.

At the end of the course students submit a reflective essay on the role of dialogue, critique, and collaboration in the research and writing process and give a final presentation on their progress in the course, which often helps students to solidify their learning. One or two guest scholars

visit the course each summer to present their work and receive feedback. I discuss the CF process with the guest scholars before they visit the class and they follow the same CF protocol as the students, serving as presenter, providing tuning questions, listening silently as the group discusses the artifact, and so on. By discussing the work of their professors, students gain authentic experience in scholarly critique and respectful professional dialogue.

Findings

How Does the Use of the Critical Friends Protocol Influence the Development of an Intellectual Community? (Research Question One)

Emergent themes from students' essays and guest scholar comments indicate that the CF protocol was essential in creating the framework that allowed for critical feedback in a supportive environment, especially the requirement that the presenter remain silent during discussion. Although numerous participants acknowledged the awkwardness of this aspect of the protocol, generally it was felt that this requirement encouraged participation from all group members and gave the presenter time to listen and reflect. For example, a guest scholar explained in his written reflective comments,

> There is something inherently unnatural about being told that you can't respond to others' feedback until a predetermined point in the "Critical Friends" process. However, allowing others to have their complete say first and then a later moment for the author's response helps to keep the process from becoming a "back-and-forth argument" or an exercise in defensiveness.

As one student wrote, "There is comfort in knowing that not only do you not have to respond immediately, but you can't. It forced me to completely focus on what was being said to me, not how I was going to reply." A significant modification I made to the CF process as developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is to allow the presenter to stay at the table with the rest of the group. In the original framework the presenter is required to sit away from the group. This seemed awkward to me and incompatible with the trusting environment I was trying to establish. Being at the table makes it easier to be silent as the presenter still feels like a part of the group. A student wrote in their final essay that it was also important that the discussion was facilitated and focused on a "tuning" question:

> A challenge for a successful and productive Critical Friends is to develop a tuning question that will foster in-depth discussion and familiarity with a wide range of literature. I appreciated seeing a variety of tuning questions and research projects, which further helped me to formulate my own questions. I found it easier to approach the research from an outsider's point of view and ask, "What would I want to know? What is confusing or needs clarity?"

Related to this, students emphasized how much they learned from other projects—not only resources and information but also different ways of thinking. Another key finding was the value of informal peer dialogue that developed outside of the CF discussions, both during and after class time. The collegiality developed in the course made several students feel less isolated as researchers and teachers and helped to establish a professional network of support for their graduate studies. This aspect of shared purpose not only relates to the CID intellectual community framework, but to Lave and Wenger's concept of shared repertoire in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). As one student commented in her written reflection:

> The class this semester has a feeling of community and cooperation that is conducive to sharing information. Even after class and over e-mail, we share ideas, thoughts, and feedback. I hope these professional relationships carry through to other semesters, and we continue to learn from each other.

Numerous students in their final reflection expressed discomfort at first with the notion of critique, but realized its value within a supportive structure, which relates to the CID's conceptualization of civility and generosity in an intellectual community.

> It is very hard for me to offer constructive criticism, and I know the more I do it, the better I will be at it. This is something I need to improve on when I communicate with my interns at the museum and with students in other classes too.

> Receiving constructive criticism is necessary for improvement, yet at times it can be difficult to hear. In a rigid environment critiques can sometimes be disheartening. However, in a safe, open classroom environment critiques can be extremely helpful in fine-tuning work and problem solving.

A guest scholar summarized her assessment of the experience presenting to the class, which reflects the multigenerational quality of an intellectual community: "I received feedback that affirmed my work in very specific ways, graduate students saw that their comments were valuable to one of their professors, and I think K-12 teachers learned a process they can adapt to their own classrooms." It is important to consider, though, how this process might persist beyond the short session of the summer course to inform participants' professional development, as was also highlighted by Grossman et al. (2001).

How Does the Intellectual Community Support Students' Development as Educational Researchers, Future Teacher Educators, and Current Practicing Teachers? (Research Question Two)

Students reflected on how much they learned about the research process by reading and commenting on other participants' work: "The discussions of other students' work have 'tuned' my work, as well. How others process their ideas, sequence their research questions, and write surveys has informed my research." Students also learned about various stages of the graduate program, such as writing and defending a prospectus, assembling a committee, writing an introduction to a thesis, and so forth. Importantly, they were also introduced to the concept of research as a lifelong endeavor, as explained by a guest scholar: "I think the most important aspect of the experience was for the graduate students to see that research interests in a particular topic continue and develop throughout one's career."

Since many of the participants are part-time graduate students and full-time teachers, students also drew on the CF process as something they could incorporate into their teaching, especially at the high school level: "I believe that the critiques of student art work may be done in similar fashion, and I am going to attempt this with my Advanced Placement students this upcoming year." In addition, instructional strategies were often shared within and outside of the CF discussions so that students gained tangible tools to bring back to their classrooms.

Relating to the multigenerational quality of the class, a student expressed in her final reflection:
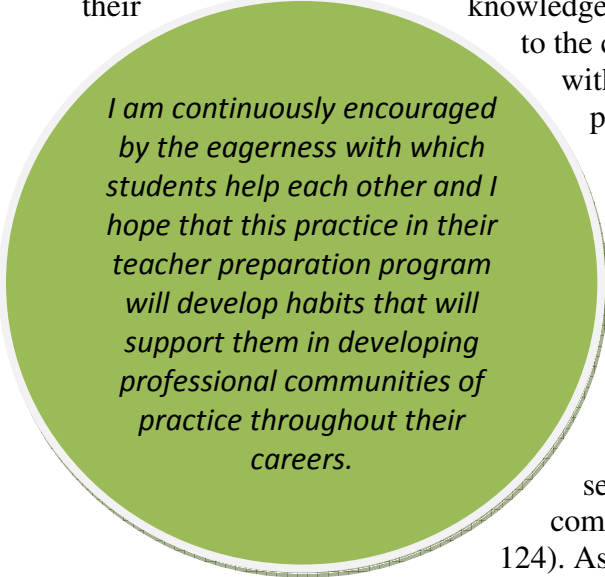
> I look to experienced teachers as mentors for those of us who have less experience in the K-12 arena and I think that the experienced teachers took this opportunity to support the inexperienced art educators by providing a sort of scaffolding of suggestions and constructive comments.

For example, experienced teachers would often share assignments and resources they had used in the classroom, such as a first day of class student inventory, prompts for visual journal entries, and so forth. This "scaffolding" was often evident in the manner in which the resources were offered, with the intent of sharing something useful as a possible alternative, and not as a declaration of how something should be done. In addition to relating to the CID characteristic of generosity in an intellectual community, this example of sharing resources reflects Lave and Wenger's conception of communities of practice in which a "shared repertoire" is a defining characteristic (Wenger, 1998).

Concluding Thoughts

Inspired by the effectiveness of this summer class in forging an intellectual community in graduate art education through the framework of the CF protocol, I have attempted to incorporate elements of the framework in other courses, both undergraduate and graduate. For example, in a methods course for teaching art at the secondary level, I ask students to bring tuning questions to their in-process critique of the curricular unit they are developing. In these in-process critiques, I hold my comments until I have given students in the class an opportunity to contribute their

ideas. I emphasize that their ideas should be concrete suggestions, such as offering resources for the presenter to consult, specific suggestions for refining an instructional strategy, or recommendations for how to work with a particular art medium. I also emphasize to students that their knowledge and experience is different than mine and of great value to the class. I am continuously encouraged by the eagerness with which students help each other and I hope that this practice in their teacher preparation program will develop habits that will support them in developing professional communities of practice throughout their careers.

I am continuously encouraged by the eagerness with which students help each other and I hope that this practice in their teacher preparation program will develop habits that will support them in developing professional communities of practice throughout their careers.

In graduate courses I ask students to present their developing research paper topics to small groups of fellow students for peer feedback. This diffuses any sense of overt competition, which can be typical in doctoral preparation. As Walker et al. explain, "Indeed, some would claim that doctoral programs are settings in which independent intellect trumps intellectual community…But our view is quite otherwise" (2008, p. 124). As is mine. By sharing research topics, students create a community of developing scholars who are looking out for them, both figuratively and literally in terms of recommending references and opportunities. I often witness students bringing in books or articles they came across for another student while researching their own topic. Discussing research topics in small groups also helps the presenter clarify their ideas when asked to articulate a thesis or research question.

Overall, teaching with the CF protocol in the summer course described in this article has influenced how I teach in all of my courses, as I recognize the value of diverse expertise, shared purpose, dialogue, and supportive critique for developing a community of practice, or intellectual community as emphasized in graduate education. The elements of the CF protocol that emerged from this research study as especially effective, such as tuning questions, presenter silence, actionable suggestions, and facilitated discussions, are easily adapted to courses in disciplines outside of art education.

Indeed, the arts and humanities have a long tradition of criticism as a part of their pedagogy and practice. The students in the writing course were all experienced with the art studio critique as well as writing critical interpretations of works of art. Bullough (2006) writes of the important role the humanities can play in fostering criticism within an interdisciplinary methodology for doctoral preparation, and calls for graduate programs to include "encounters with the humanities and to engage students from a wide range of social and intellectual backgrounds on shared and meaningful tasks" (p. 9). Using the Critical Friends protocol within an intellectual community

represents this interdisciplinarity with its valuing of targeted criticism within a collegial environment focused on meaningful educational questions.

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