Chapter 3

“Critical Friendship” and Sustainable Change: Creating Liminal Spaces to Experience Discomfort Together

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this chapter will be to describe the theory and practice of critical friendship in teacher professional development, paying special attention to the ways in which participants in small professional learning communities (PLCs) create spaces in which to experience discomfort together for the purpose of sustaining their own transformation as practitioners. Using protocols (prescribed turn-taking mechanisms) as social processes to negotiate and then arrive at explicitly named norms and agreements, PLCs that use critical friendship as their goal aim to create the conditions for personal and communal transformation of both their members and their institutional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Opening the Door

Susan’s House

Every few years I have a recurring dream that is so compelling I literally walk around in a fog the following day as I wonder about its implications for my life. In the dream, I am walking around in the small house that has been my home for more than 22 years and as I walk, I discover doors I did not know existed. In the dream, I open the doors only to find whole rooms I had simply overlooked or somehow forgotten all these years. I am delighted to see spaces that would allow my family to play, work and rest more creatively than we are able to now in our modest home. I begin to re-imagine where I will put furniture, how I could create a quiet study for myself, places where we could joyfully and graciously share our home with friends and neighbors.
As I dream, I feel my heart quicken and a new energy fire my creative spirits and inevitably, this is where I awaken. For a split second, I forget that it was only a dream, and I am briefly suspended in that moment of possibility. Even as I realize I am back to the reality of my unpretentious home, even as I rise and go about my day, I am consumed by the meaning of the dream. What is my subconscious mind trying to tell me? What does the dream mean? While it is true that there are not new rooms waiting to be found in my house, I begin to wonder: what unexplored spaces might be waiting for me in my life, in my work, in my teaching practice?

Just as in Susan’s dream, there are spaces of almost limitless possibility for teachers to explore together. At different points in our teaching careers, both of us opened a door and quite unexpectedly stepped into a space we had not suspected existed: the space of critical friendship. What we found in that space revolutionized our teaching, our professional relationships, our friendships, our parenting of our own children and our individual understandings of ourselves. We have experienced this space in small groups of educators which we first encountered under the name “Critical Friends Groups,” but our exploration of critical friendship extends beyond the boundaries of these groups. In that sense, the group processes and “social technologies” we practice in these groups, serve not only to bond the group’s members to one another, but serve to create a commitment to one another and one another’s students that invites us to dive deeply to those places in ourselves that we rarely visit, places where our assumptions live and rest unexamined, protecting us from whatever forces might (dis)integrate us.

In critical friendship, we have been able to open ourselves to one another as professionals in ways we could not imagine – our groups aim to become places in which we can critically examine instructional decisions to surface assumptions that influence instructional design. Indeed, the longer we work with one another using the lens of critical friendship, the more deeply we enter into what Zembylas and Boler (2002) refer to as a pedagogy of discomfort:

...[a] pedagogy of discomfort creates the spaces to move beyond inquiry as an individualized process and raises issues of collective accountability by exploring the possibilities to embrace discomfort, establish alliances and come out of this process enriched with new emotional discursive practices. (Zembylas & Boler, 2002, Patriotism Interrupted section, para. 18)

What Zembylas and Boler describe can be transferred into our classrooms only after we invite our colleagues to share that space of discomfort with us, where we thoughtfully examine our students’ responses to our assignments, tests, and assessments. We literally teach one another how to improve as teachers using our students’ work and observations of one another. This chapter, then, is about how we foster and sustain critical friendship in professional learning communities as a pedagogy of discomfort that supports our learning as educators.

The Beginning of the Journey

We first met at a breakout workshop during a teaching conference in 2003. Susan recalls a scene that calls to mind her recurring dream. She approached the room, the door opened and a man with a friendly, bearded face grinned and said, “Come in.”

Stepping through this doorway and accepting this invitation into a new space proved to be life-altering. The experience of that week revolutionized her and the group’s understandings of teaching, of learning, and of collaborating with colleagues. Their minds were delighted by the
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