Building a Process for Teachers' Collaborative Reflection

Courtney Glazer, Lynda Abbott, & Judi Harris
University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

Collaborative reflection sessions provide designated periods of time for groups of teachers to discuss with one another issues they face while performing their professional duties. The intent of these sessions is for participating teachers to help one another identify and resolve their own job-related issues, as well as to provide general support, advice, and ideas for one another. Reflection groups operating in these ways engage in an authentic form of professional development--their collaboration is organized by teachers for the benefit of teachers who want to work together to find ways to improve their classroom and professional practices.

Collaborative reflection should involve a facilitator, whose primary purpose is to see to it that teachers’ group discussions are productive and that the experience is rewarding. The facilitator is responsible for helping to establish and maintain a "safe" and accepting atmosphere for the group's meetings, keeping the group's discussion focused on productive investigation of professional issues or challenges the group members want to discuss. The facilitator should also ensure that all members are equitably treated in terms of their issues being addressed and their opinions being aired. The facilitator, as the name implies, should be dedicated to making this process easy for the group members--although being a good facilitator is often not an easy task. The facilitator should be there to help: to serve the group members' needs and to help them learn about what they know, not to tell the group what the facilitator thinks he or she knows.

On the following pages, a recommended process for organizing and conducting this kind of collaborative reflection group for teachers is described. The quotations embedded in these descriptions are comments from group members in a teachers' collaborative reflection group pilot which was exploring the nature and process of productive professional reflection for teachers.
BEFORE SESSIONS BEGIN

Logistical Planning for Reflection Sessions

Setting aside time for reflection requires some preliminary logistical planning and decisions. For example, basic determinations that need to be made before reflection sessions begin include designating a space for the group members to meet, a scheduled time, and a group of participants limited to 6-8 members. Meetings will probably be of approximately one hour in length, and each group would continue to meet throughout at least one full semester, or half an academic year. (With a semester being approximately 18 weeks, this would result in nine group meetings, if the group meets once every two weeks).

Several strategies might be used to encourage participants' full commitment to collaborative reflection with the group. For example, the total number of meetings should be determined when the group is first formed so that participants are fully aware of the length and extent of their commitment to the group. Participants would not need to do any formal preparation work before meeting with other group members. Rather, they would be thinking about professional challenges they are facing which they would like to bring up and discuss with the group.

Recruitment of Group Members

Participants in this reflective process should all come from the faculty at a single campus. Why? (1) Having members from a single campus makes it easier for members to meet with one another. (2) Closer relationships among members, which often result from group sessions of this type, will be of greater benefit to faculty members who work together in a single school.

Recruitment to interest and encourage volunteers could occur with an entire school's faculty in attendance. This recruitment session should emphasize the nature of the types of interactions and activities that occur during reflection meetings so that teachers know that this is “not just another thing” in which they are being asked to participate. The recruitment effort should also outline expectations and procedures that will structure the reflection meetings and should
convey to all faculty members that, as one reflection group member described, “It’s a matter of being not afraid to speak . . . of being open.” Faculty members may also be given the opportunity to try out the reflection process by attending one or two introductory sessions before committing to group participation for a full semester. These “trial sessions” would happen only at the beginning of a semester. After the first session or two, the membership should be fixed so that participants can bond more closely within each group and so that the “group can keep going instead of catching people up.”

**The Facilitator's Role in the Reflective Group**

Each reflection group must have at least one facilitator leading it. The facilitator should be trustworthy, empathetic, and have had teaching experience. One reflection group teacher described this need for teaching experience as helping the group to see the facilitator as a colleague: “Someone else that has been in the same kind of a place as we have has the same kind of a bond. I would feel comfortable with that.”

Facilitators should be trained in methods to facilitate reflective groups’ discussions. They should be sure not to come to the group offering answers or evaluative judgments, although at times they may take on the role of advocate for group members.

The facilitators’ role in the group should include:

1. Keeping the group on track, focusing on the needs of the group and the issues that the group members want to discuss.
2. Making sure that the conversation is balanced among group members, such as by seeing that an individual member's needs are being met when the group is reflecting on his or her issue or handling “conversation hogs” graciously. For example,

   If the topic is primarily one person’s or a couple of people’s burning issue, the facilitator needs to really be aware and make sure that they’re feeling comfortable with the direction it’s going.
3. Ensuring that the group operates as an accepting and "safe" environment in which teachers can freely explore professional practice issues with their peers.

The facilitator’s motivation to work with a reflection group should be a desire to learn what group members know, and a desire to help participants benefit by discussing and discovering their own ideas about how to improve their professional practice. The facilitator may benefit from the opportunity to learn or hone his or her own skills of facilitation, which is a task that -- when done well -- is generally not very easy. In addition, the facilitator may be benefiting from leading the group if s/he is also conducting related research. A university researcher focusing on literacy, for example, may choose to facilitate a teacher reflection group in order to find out what teacher-members think about literacy and teaching.

The facilitator must be sure to allow topics for discussion to emerge authentically from group members. The duty of the facilitator to support and facilitate group members’ reflection should take precedence over the facilitator's personal or professional (e.g., research) interests. Reflection group members should feel that the discussion belongs to them, or, as one pilot group member said, “I realize that [the facilitators, as researchers, are] getting something out of [facilitating the sessions] but [they]’re also having me walk away feeling like I got something out of it too.”

A facilitator should be an outsider. This person would preferably come from a university or other institution of higher learning, but may also come from another school district or even another school within the same district. However, the facilitator must not be an administrator, or someone in an official supervisory position.

**Administrators' Roles in Relation to the Reflective Group**

The facilitator cannot be a part of the district’s or school’s administrative staff, because group members may perceive an administrator as having a hidden agenda that is threatening to teachers. For example, although the pilot reflection group’s members described their own school’s administrators as very supportive and very
well-regarded by the teaching faculty, one member commented that administrators have a different outlook than teachers. Administrators wouldn’t work well as facilitators because “I just wouldn’t feel like they had my best interests at heart.”

Administrators -- however sympathetic, enlightened, or well-intentioned -- are teachers' job supervisors. Thus, it is almost impossible for a group of teachers to feel completely comfortable discussing issues related to their teaching, especially in areas of practice about which they feel that they need guidance or help, in front of the people who write their job reviews. Rather than take the risk of short-circuiting a reflection group's discussions, it is better to simply make a blanket rule, from the outset, that no administrators or supervisors can be group members or facilitators. Administrators will simply need to recognize that the specific purpose of the teachers' group reflection is for the group members to discuss ways to improve their teaching practice -- or, in other words, to act responsibly as dedicated professionals.

An administrator who supports teachers participating in a group like this is empowering them to identify those issues that need consideration, and perhaps change, and go ahead and work on those issues, and then decide how and when to make those changes in the classroom.

Administrators who want to make this opportunity for reflection available to teachers, using this process, should be willing to trust that whatever the teachers need from reflection, they are going to be able to find without the administrators' assistance. The point of reflection group sessions is to encourage teachers to take on the role and responsibility of acting as professionals to improve their professional practice. Accountability in the usual administrative sense does not really apply to this kind of professional self-development. The benefits of such self-directed, job-related learning may or may not be specifically mirrored, subsequently measurable, or observable in any teacher's classroom behavior. As one teacher expressed,

The only way you're going to develop it is if you own it. ... [A] principal would expect that whatever change would happen would be explicit, when in reality, what's happened to me in this group is that it's been more internal. It's been more implicit. ... [even though] I have changed in real positive ways [that affect] my teaching.
Administrators should not expect that participating in this -- or any other professional development session, for that matter -- necessarily will or should result in teachers' behavioral change in the classroom. It is within the purview of each teacher, as a professional, to determine when, how, and if that will happen.

**Planning Facilitation for the Reflective Group**

The facilitator, as previously described, should be an outsider--preferably from a university or other institution of higher learning--a researcher or a faculty member from another school. This outside facilitator may first serve as the group’s initial leader, then as a trainer and advisor for other, "insider" facilitators. The fact that the facilitator is an outsider may increase participants' commitment to attendance, making members feel a deeper obligation to show up for meetings since the facilitator has made the effort to come in each time from outside the school. In addition, the facilitator being an outsider may help members to stay on track, such as by helping to maintain focus on issues larger than that day's events at that specific school.

One or more group members might later serve as facilitators. These insiders should not be the initial group facilitators, as this could cause discomfort among group members.

I personally can’t think of anyone on this campus [who could, at this moment, serve as a facilitator] – I would just always be apprehensive about everything I said . . .It's not that I don’t trust [them]. I think that I would even feel like they’d watch me differently.

An insider could assume the role of facilitator after training and after he or she has bonded with others as a true member of the group. For an insider to be able to act as the facilitator is an important step if teachers’ reflection groups are to be self-sustaining.

I would feel good about it – ‘Hey, that school did it and they feel the same way we do, and that district did it and they feel the same way we do.’ Then it grows, and there’s strength in that.
Having an insider take the responsibility and the role of facilitator also sends an important message to outsiders that the reflection groups are teacher-based and that members feel their benefits are valuable.

What I like about teachers doing the [facilitating] is that it proves -- if we go into other schools doing this kind of thing -- we're helping each other prove this is necessary.

Use of insiders as facilitators also promotes the very empowering notion that teachers can solve their own problems.

It sounds like such an ideal -- you don’t have to go outside to find your answers. That whole empowerment deal . . . it would be wonderful if we were empowered to solve these things. That to me is the ultimate.

As each group demonstrates its readiness to take over its own leadership, the bulk of the facilitation could shift from outsider to insider. During the first period of facilitation, the outsider-facilitator would “provide modeling and scaffolding” to the insiders learning to lead the group. According to one plan, the outsider-facilitator would select an insider who has emerged as a leader in the group or who has expressed an interest in facilitation. When the outsider-facilitator perceives the group as ready, he or she would shift responsibility for facilitation to the insider. How long each of these stages toward self-governance would take depends upon the nature of each group's interactions and preferences. As one pilot group member said, “I don’t know if you could actually put a time on it. Some groups you may find [an insider to take over] within weeks and others may never have one.”

In an alternate plan, a group member would express an interest in becoming the facilitator and, with the approval of the group, practice or train for that role during early sessions. The outsider could remain with the group in an advisory capacity for as long as the group deems necessary, checking on the group’s progress, and facilitating meetings when necessary. Inside-facilitators' roles could also be rotated, so that each group member would facilitate one or more meetings. By rotating this role, no single group member is given more power or authority within the group.
PROCEDURES DURING REFLECTIVE GROUP SESSIONS

Ground Rules for the Reflective Group

For members to participate with an acceptable level of trust, motivation, and effectiveness, each group must operate according to some "ground rules." It is important for these “guidelines to be shared” by all members, perhaps through a written agreement or commitment statement written by each member. Group members should respect the confidentiality of the group’s discussions. They should pledge that what’s talked about here stays here and if you violate that, you’re out of the group . . . I think you do bring up things that are very personal and that’s part of the benefit . . . if you’re willing to take that risk.

Group members must agree that each of them should “be you speaking as yourself – as individuals.” Additionally, members must agree not to bring up issues from the past unless they are pertinent to a present challenge. They need to remember that “last year was last year” and should avoid conversations that begin with anecdotes other members can’t really share, such as “at my old school ....” Members must agree to participate in the discussions, cooperate with one another, and be respectful and considerate towards other members and the facilitator. Yet they should expect to be able and willing to disagree with one another, as part of a healthy and helpful discussion of professional issues, without becoming disagreeable.

Venting vs. Complaining

At times the group’s reflections may feel more like "venting." The meaning of venting in this context relates to an individual’s need to give vent to, or release, vexing thoughts and emotions. Venting should be distinguished from complaining, which is defined here, as having a persistent, non-productive, bad attitude. As one member described the difference,

Venting is okay but complaining is not. . . Venting is ‘let’s get it out and put it on the table so we can move on.’ Complaining is ... griping.
A transition period should be scheduled to help teachers prepare, cognitively and emotionally, for reflection and discussion. For example, each meeting might begin with a short time for venting which could help teachers to transition from their busy school day to the focused frame of mind conducive to productive group reflection. As one pilot group member said,

We need some sort of a transition period between where you came from and where you want to be in the reflection.

A time for transition can serve participants by helping them engage as active members in the reflections that follow.

I think if you’re not given that . . . opportunity to do some of that [transitioning] in the beginning, then it’s harder to be an active participant.

A transition period might also help teachers get the most benefit out of the ensuing reflections.

When my learning process has been the most beneficial has been when I come into a group . . . when I’ve been given time to come in and . . . there’s been a little bit of time allotted to do a little venting.

As the pilot teachers emphasized, reflection session may contain some venting, but the session should primarily be focused on “effective discourse, not just complaining.”

**Topics of Discussion**

Participants should avoid those topics that relate in narrow ways to only one person’s situation. For example, a member who is frustrated with Johnny's behavior in class that day should not just relate a list of those difficulties, which may not be fully understood by group members, and may be perceived as non-productive complaining about specific difficulties.

Instead, a group member might share the situation in a manner more useful to the group by explaining it as an example of what the perceived problem is. For instance, instead of one child's behavior being described, a more productive approach might be to explore how to handle a hyperactive child during independent
work, or how to cope with a child who needs remedial reading attention. Members should aim to generalize their challenges in ways that will be relevant to all members. For example, “rather than me talking about Johnny, maybe we could reflect on classroom management skills.” By maintaining this focus on shared, issue-related topics, participants may avoid unproductive complaining.

If you’re just ...complaining about something that only pertains to you, then that is not going to be necessarily productive to the group . . . There needs to be something [done to prevent it]-- or I can see ... where the group would get bogged down on just [complaining].

The facilitator will need to sense when the group is stymied, and should assist refocusing in a manner and on topics that lead to more productive reflections. For example, the facilitator may suggest, to a teacher talking about specific problems with Johnny, "Could you perhaps characterize the type of problem that you think Johnny presents in your classroom? Other members might be better able to offer some suggestions."

**Procedure for Beginning Discussion**

At the beginning of each reflection meeting, members will brainstorm a list of challenges that they are currently facing and issues that they would like to discuss. Following this brainstorming and listing of issues, the facilitator will work with members to group together challenges that could be discussed together, and then to prioritize this list. The brainstorming and prioritizing of issues should take approximately 10 – 15 minutes. This process will “give a lot of flexibility” to the group’s reflections, since it will help to focus the discussion on topics of immediate interest and concern to members.

The group’s reflections would then focus on helping members with the challenges currently being experienced, thus serving all, from the novice to the experienced teacher. Since some challenges are bigger than others, an incremental approach can be used. As one teacher stated, “If I can’t take care of the longer-term problem, then help me with the shorter-term [problem] that I have right now.”
Since not every issue discussed will affect every group member, the group’s commitment to one another will serve as motivation to participate in all reflections taking place. As one teacher pointed out,

'It would also be more of a give-and-share/give-and-take, where it’s like 'Retention [in grade] is not really a problem of mine, but you guys were here [to help me] with my problem, so I would feel like I still owe it to you to come back [and contribute to the discussion] when we talk about retention.'

The reflection that follows the brainstorming and prioritizing of specific discussion possibilities should be “structured only in the fact that the facilitator will redirect you ... if you are totally off on a tangent.” If a particular challenge demands more time, or if the group does not have time to discuss a prioritized issue, members are free to add it to the list during the next meeting.

**Facilitating During Discussion**

During discussion, the facilitator should generally let the group members have the floor. The facilitator should also:

- Help guide the group gently back to the topic if one member seems to have gone off on a tangent that seems not to be of sufficient interest to the other group members to pursue in depth. (Sample facilitator comment to someone other than the person who has been holding the floor: "Let’s go back just a bit. Sue, did you feel that we covered the issue that you brought up completely? You mentioned (topic); what do you others think about that issue?")

- Ask follow-up or clarifying questions when necessary, such as to guide the group back on topic or to clarify somewhat diffuse discussion of an issue. (Sample facilitator comment: "Correct me if I’m not getting this right, John, but I think I hear you saying that you see a problem with the way that you're being asked to handle decisions about having your students retained in grade. Could you explain that issue a bit more for the group?")

- Note how specific issues seem to be connected in a pattern, and when appropriate, clarify this connection with the group. (Sample comment: "It seems to me that I'm hearing everyone talk about a connection between problems..."
between covering the curriculum topics and the standardized testing requirements. Is that right? And if so, what do you all think about that relationship?

- Try to see that all members get as much "air-time" as they prefer. (Although some members may prefer to listen more than speak, their contributions to the group should be valued as much as the more garrulous members.)
- Actively value, appreciate, and support the group's self-directed learning by helping the group and its individual members discuss issues that affect them.

  In general, the facilitator should show -- verbally as well as with body language -- respect for and interest in learning from the teachers. Facilitators should be in the group because they are eager to learn what the teachers think about their practice. They should refrain from telling what they think they know about teaching or about the participating members.

**Closure**

  Each meeting should end with a 5-minute closure activity, led by the facilitator. This might consist of a summary or a wrapping-up of issues discussed, and might include suggestions for ideas that participants may want to think about or try out before the next meeting. In summarizing, however, the facilitator should take care not to sound as if he or she is judging, evaluating, or criticizing the discussion of issues by the group members. Instead, the purpose of the closure should be to clarify, condense, and/or summarize issues explored so that the meeting can be brought to a recognizably appropriate stopping point.
OUTCOMES OF GROUP REFLECTION

Rewards for Participants

Collaborative reflection, done in the ways we have described, may not only afford participants intrinsic rewards, but may also provide practical solutions to real-life classroom problems. As one group participant stated:

You need the mental health release during your reflection, but at the same time there’s a reason for this frustration. [You] get other people’s views and input and advice and you get to contemplate with them other ways to solve these problems. It’s doing double duty. It’s not just, ‘Wow, I had a bad day.’ It’s ‘I have this problem and I’m just not dealing with it very well.’ You’re releasing; you’re talking – but yet we talked about getting an answer to your problem.

By having a supportive and sympathetic group of colleagues helping them identify and address relevant issues and challenges, teachers may feel more energized and be more effective in their classrooms. They may also sustain better attitudes about the professional challenges they face.

In addition to enjoying the intrinsic rewards of reflection, teachers should have the opportunity to earn extrinsic rewards. These rewards could consist of in-service credit, credit toward a graduate degree, stipends, or compensatory time given for the time spent reflecting with the group. These extrinsic rewards provide recognition for the teachers’ efforts and also demonstrate that teachers’ time is valuable. In addition, extrinsic rewards are a very important way to show the value of reflection groups to outsiders.

Accountability and Record-Keeping

Teachers are generally expected to account for their time. As one pilot group member mentioned:

I can see from an administrator’s point of view ... I know that [our principal is] really into accountability. That if she’s going to invest money in you . . . that there’s some product or there is something for you to share and pass along or something that goes toward other staff members or toward your students directly.
There is a problem inherent in conceptualizing accountability in this way, though. Since the benefits of reflection are so personal and idiosyncratic, most accountability practices used in schools today are inappropriate for use with reflection groups. As a reflection group member commented, “It’s not going to affect each person the same way.” For that reason, group members will need to decide what kinds of accountability evidence, both private and public, they want to provide in conjunction with their work.

One such record, which should remain private within the group, is a notebook of minutes taken during each group meeting. Volunteers will need to agree to take notes of what was discussed. The minutes help the members because, as one teacher suggested, “there’s just some validity to transcribing [the meeting notes]. It gives some credibility.” These minutes will then be placed in a notebook and in a secure place, available for review only to group members. These minutes can then be used to keep track of recurring topics “so you don’t keep backtracking.” Additionally, each group member can choose to review the minutes as a record of accomplishments “to make you aware that [the group] is being productive.”

Individual group members’ personal changes constitute another form of accountability evidence. This evidence will be perceived privately unless the teacher wishes to make his or her changes public. Administrators who want to encourage teachers to take part in a collaborative reflection group should not expect subsequent specific, measurable behavioral change in the classroom. Because of the private nature of personal change, expectations for measuring the outcomes of reflection in the classroom are inappropriate.

To come back and to watch me to see if I’m acting different or have me stand in front of the faculty to tell them what I’m getting out of it is violating my privacy and the whole purpose for me. If we did that to begin with, we wouldn’t be setting up these sessions anyway, we’d already be sharing.

Instead, administrators should “respect the fact that you’ve changed.” Without question, a teacher’s individual reactions to the reflection group “shouldn’t have any bearing on [their] job.”
In addition to the private evidence provided to group members, certain group statistics can offer public evidence of the benefits of reflection. Specifically, attendance rates are one indicator of participation.

I think if a principal will be patient enough just to sit back and see, they would possibly recognize that the program or whatever it is had benefits by the people who continue to attend. If I'm not getting anything out of it, I'm probably not going to participate in it a second time.

Also, increasing numbers of active and wait-listed group members, discussion of the group's activities outside of meetings, or favorable comments from non-members can point to perceptions of benefit from participation. As one group member noted, if teachers see increasing attendance they might think, “They started off with nine and now there’s 25 wanting to do it – there must be something [beneficial] going on.”

Ultimately, because the reflection process is so very internal, public evidence of individual change must be in the form of a self-report. Any outsider or administrator looking for evidence that the reflection group meetings have been beneficial for an individual teacher must do so by “taking it [at the teacher's] word.” Each individual participant could choose to verbalize what he or she felt were the benefits of participating in the reflection group.

For example, a questionnaire containing open-ended, non-threatening questions could be created to help participants report on their experiences. Group members might respond to the following types of open-ended questions: What did you gain? Did the semester’s worth of sessions meet your expectations? What would you do differently? Would you recommend this experience to others? Has this experience positively affected your teaching? Your relations with colleagues? If so, in which ways? Asking group members to provide this evaluation data both formatively and summatively would not be unusual. As one group member said,

It wouldn't be unusual for me to fill out [a questionnaire]. I've done it at every workshop I've been to. It wouldn't be weird at the end of every [meeting], if I've been given time.
Conclusion

Collaborative reflection sessions can be an effective, empowering approach to helping teachers to improve their practice as professionals, and discover and develop their unique professional stances. Group reflection is, in fact, a way for teachers to be able to join learning with teaching, since it is a good example of learners working with one another collaboratively and cooperatively to resolve problems and address issues that arise during the typical school day.