COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

A GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS

by FERN TAVALIN

THE TEACHER QUALITY ENHANCEMENT INITIATIVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funded by the United States Department of Education under the Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant Program to the State of Vermont and the Vermont Institute of Science, Math & Technology (VISMT).

Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant Directors
Edith Beatty, Teacher Quality Enhancement
Doug Chiappetta, Vermont Department of Education
Doug Harris, Vermont Institute for Science, Math, and Technology
Doug Walker, Vermont Department of Education

With additional funding from the State of Vermont Regional Reading Support Mini-Grant Program, the Southeast Vermont Community Learning Collaborative, and the WEB Project.

Reading Study Group Members

Chester: Charlene Leonard, Facilitator. Sarah Fonseca, Lynda Kennelly, Anne Cassels, Gary Quackenbush

Springfield Area: Marcy Backstrom, Facilitator. Stephen Moore, Susan Hall, Evie Conroy, Rae Schmertz, Carrie Wells, Vicky Hingston, Harriet McGraw.

Windham Central Supervisory Union: Tina Shakespeare, Facilitator. Joyce Berry, Marcia Wells, Sue Biolsi, Laura Robertson, Sue Neuman, Laurie Greenberg, Cynthia Sheehan.

Windham Southeast Supervisory Union: Anne Rider and Diana Mazzuchi, Facilitators. Alison Friar, Becca Fillion, Barbara Hodgdon, Trilby Whitcomb, Franklin Crisco, Irene Kreisle, Cherolyn Stimmel, Dale Morse, Jennifer Brown, Karen Saunders, Noreen Cooper.

Consultants: Fern Tavalin, Nick Boke, Amelia Stone, Pam Quinn

Research and Writing: Fern Tavalin

Editing: Susan Bonthron and Nick Boke

Layout: Susan Bonthron

© 2002 Teacher Quality Enhancement and Fern Tavalin

A GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS

by FERN TAVALIN

THE TEACHER QUALITY ENHANCEMENT INITIATIVE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS: A CASE STUDY

GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS: THE BIG PICTURE

APPENDIX I: FURTHER RESOURCES FOR FOCUSED INQUIRY

APPENDIX II: TOOLS

  Data Collection and Analysis Tools

    Background Information
    Teaching Strategies Inventory
    KWL Chart
    Looking at Work Collaboratively
    Looking at Work Collaboratively — A Completed Example

  Tools for Reflection

    Guided Journal Entry I
    Guided Journal Entry II
    Guided Journal Entry III

INTRODUCTION

Inquiry. It's one of those magic words that we hear about, seemingly difficult to incorporate given the many other expectations we have to fulfill as teachers. Yet, without asking questions, getting outside input, and carefully looking at the impact of the teaching methods we use with our students, it's hard to stay effective and to improve our practice.

After the first few months of my beginning year of teaching, I couldn't ignore what I was seeing any longer. Some of the methods I'd been taught and some of the great ideas I'd been reading about just plain didn't work! I wasn't prepared for that. I really thought that if something was written in a book, it had to be true. Because I worked in a small school, I couldn't go to the other language arts teachers at my grade level for help. There were none. So, I spent my entire budget on teacher's guides that would help me help my students to "get the most out of reading."

The next year, I changed to a new school that had two seasoned teachers at my same grade level and thought that finally I'd get the support I needed to become a better teacher. The other grade level teachers in my school used a technique for reading called *whole-class, shared-literature*. They handed me a booklet of insightful questions to ask my students at the end of each section of reading assignments and I finally felt armed to do it right. I also enrolled in a graduate course to help me learn more about teaching, now that I had a little bit of experience.

Lucky for me, the course was called "Observing the Child." It was an inquiry-based class and we brought questions about individual student learning, with accompanying work samples, to each weekly meeting. This was my first experience with inquiry-based study groups and I became instantly excited because the methods we were using as adults not only helped me improve my practice, but they also translated into powerful methods that I could use with my fifth grade students.

Our graduate class inquiry discussions were structured. Each person had a set amount of time to present and the procedures used for discourse were predictable. The conversation itself was less than predictable, though. I listened with astonishment as each person gave radically different insights, even though we were looking at the same child, or the same piece of work.

Because the adult perspectives differed substantially, I began to wonder if the students I had in my class saw things so differently, too. I adapted the adult methods for use with my students and came up with some surprising results. First, as a group, my students disliked the whole-class, shared-literature studies that I had been asked to use and their written performance reflected that. Our inquiry-based discussions helped me to understand why they were having problems, and the structure we used helped me to receive needed information in a non-threatening manner. Second, my students were capable of looking at each other's work to give productive suggestions for improvement. This lifted a huge burden from me as I was no longer the only one who had to give comments. And best yet, the fifth graders had loads of ideas about how they could better learn to read. Following their suggestions, I brought in short stories for formal reading instruction, used lots of charts, and found a visual dictionary that explained terms in text and image. When "I Love to Read Week" arrived in the spring, my fifth graders chose to celebrate with a 2 1/2 hour reading marathon. The classroom stayed silent as we explored the worlds within our books.

Over the years, I have developed methods of using an inquiry-based approach with students in grades 4–12, with adults, and as a research and evaluation technique. I've applied this to language arts, social studies, multimedia technology, the arts, and general educator professional development. With each new endeavor, I learn something more about how to improve my own practice and that invigorates me. I also have a systematic way to check whether or not the ideas and theories I am reading about actually help students to improve their learning. I read, question, and try out new ideas. Next, I look for evidence of effectiveness by interviewing students and examining their work and discussing my practice with colleagues. This inquiry loop helps me to know when to incorporate, modify, or discard new knowledge in my field.

The groundwork for inquiry in Vermont has long been fertile. Patricia Carini set an example at the Prospect School in North Bennington in the mid 1960s and the Prospect Center still offers summer institutes held each year at Bennington College. The Vermont Institute for Science, Math, and Technology has forwarded inquiry-based learning in math and science. The Vermont Writing Project fosters inquiry through writing. The WEB Project used inquiry-based approaches to develop effective uses of technology in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The Snelling Center and the Teacher Quality Enhancement initiative both sponsor statewide training for the use of Critical Friends Groups protocols (a set of structured procedures for collaborative dialogue). Vermont Reads Institute is using inquiry-based study groups as one of its strategies for improving reading in Vermont schools. Vermont Math Institute employs inquiry techniques for both teaching and learning about mathematics. We are progressively building a statewide capacity to use one of the most effective means of professional development ¾ inquiry-based colleague support.

This guide describes the recent inquiry-based experiences of five study groups that took place in the Southeast Region of Vermont. While each group developed a unique style, based on who the participants were and the questions they raised, they all used the same framework to:

a. establish a common purpose
b. formulate focusing questions
c. follow discussion procedures that address those questions
d. root their discussions in what is observable
e. use analysis and reflection to improve practice

This guide is designed for future participants and facilitators so that you can learn from our experiences. By reading it, you will gain a better picture of what an inquiry-based study group looks like, how to participate in one, how to facilitate a group of your own, and how to adapt the structure presented here to meet your own needs. Although the specific examples come from the field of literacy, these basic processes can be applied to any field.

GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS

CHESTER-ANDOVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

Written for educators interested in participating in an inquiry-based study group, this section looks at one study group and its effect on the teachers involved.

During the school year 2001–2002, the Southeast Vermont Community Learning Collaborative and the Teacher Quality Enhancement initiative sponsored five study groups in the Southeast Region of Vermont to investigate reading comprehension in grades 3–6. Each group had a different constellation of participants and slightly different purposes for convening. To foster cross-school dialog, Windham Southeast and Windham Central supervisory unions formed study groups that included teachers from many schools in their districts. The Springfield area hosted a conglomeration of educators, representing an assortment of schools, districts, and job responsibilities. Chester-Andover Elementary School formed a school-based study group that included classroom teachers and Title I teachers. Individual study groups met monthly, and the facilitators of each group also met monthly to share strategies and improve their facilitation. Fern Tavalin from the Teacher Quality Enhancement initiative and Nick Boke from the Vermont Reads Institute guided the facilitators through an inquiry process. All groups read *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3–6* by Fountas and Pinnell and used the text as a common point of departure.

This section of the *Guide to Inquiry-Based Study Groups* tells the beginning journey of the Chester-Andover Elementary School (CAES) study group. I selected the story of CAES because it portrays a school-based study group and shows how the members of a single staff can start working together in the service of student learning across a grade span. Because some of the lessons and examples from the other groups add significant information, I have included a few key points from their discoveries as well. While CAES used the book as a starting point, they read only the sections relevant to their questions about teaching practice. This focus on questions about professional practice and student learning distinguishes an inquiry process from the more traditional notion of a book group. The CAES group also brought in outside materials, as did many of the other study groups in this initiative.

CONTEXT

Based on student test results, the CAES staff identified reading comprehension as a key area for improvement and placed it as a major component in the school's action plan. Teachers noticed that the upper elementary grade students had particular problems with reading nonfiction, a fairly common situation in Vermont schools. At the same time, the upper grade teachers were either new to the school, new to teaching, or new to their grade levels. The specific needs of students and teachers provided a prime opportunity for CAES teachers to form a study group. Interview excerpts of a conversation between facilitators summarizes the CAES experience (**Figure 2-1**).

FT: Tell me a little bit about the study group.

CL: The group began by one person receiving an e-mail and telling the rest of us about it. We spread the word and five of us decided to look into it. We went down to the Putney Inn and became very excited. With a book for the base, we formed the study group.

FT: What has your approach to being a study group been?

CL: We committed to meet once a month. We follow an agenda. We have a sharing time, a dilemma, and then we leave the last part to talk about what has come up for people. That shapes our next agenda.

FT: How did what you do take shape? Is that something you knew you wanted from the outset?

CL: We all looked at our students' reading comprehension and what we were doing to teach that directly. We wanted to strengthen the areas where we didn't have something in place so children could get more meaning from their reading. Some people hadn't learned any methods for teaching comprehension strategies. They had experience with books and worksheets, but didn't know how to lead guided reading groups in their classrooms.

FT: How did you settle on comprehension as your focus?

CL: We looked at how our decoding skills were, in the children. We looked at vocabulary. People felt they had those skills. They themselves felt they were teaching the vocabulary of each topic or book. They felt the decoding skills were being taught through Title I or Special Education. We didn't go in that direction. We stayed with comprehension so we could dig deeper and help each other with those strategies.

FT: What were some of the outcomes that you saw?

CL: We saw people trying things they had never done before. They arranged literature circles in a different way. Using picture books became a new idea for fifth and sixth graders. They had thought these were only for younger children and began using them to introduce new units. We worked on prediction, text to text, text to self, text to world, making inferences. There were a lot of different strategies. We didn't work on the higher two, analysis and summaries, as much as reading responses and writing.

FT: I noticed at the last meeting I attended, that there was some pairing off and modeling going on in your group. Can you tell me m ore about that?

CL: Yes. The teachers involved in our study group were fairly new, and then there were Title I teachers with many years of experience. So we paired off, using our strengths, with the new teachers who wanted to try things. We worked together to help each other out and to coach each other.

Figure 2-1. A facilitator interview between Fern Tavalin and Charlene Leonard.

THE INITIAL MEETING

The first meeting of the CAES group set the pattern for subsequent meetings. It is important to note, however, that CAES modified its meeting structure over time — structures and procedures should be modified to meet the needs and styles of participants. Before the first meeting, participants had already identified a general area of interest — reading comprehension. The purpose of the first meeting was to figure out how to approach the topic, based on reading a common text, observing their professional practice, and looking at student work. Because the group was undecided about how they wanted to handle facilitation, I prepared an agenda in advance that would meet the goals the participants had set out for themselves and then led the first meeting. By the end of the first meeting, participants had gained a sense of what their next steps should be and were very excited by what they had discovered. They clearly saw the potential this process offers for using the expertise of colleagues so that they did not have to figure it all out by themselves. The high energy built from talking to each other at the first meeting gave them the confidence and the desire to continue.

The beginning of the first meeting was conducted in a familiar manner. Making introductions and establishing ground rules are practices common to many meetings. From there, the conversation took a new form. It was timed, structured, and strictly about their teaching practice as viewed through the lens of an existing theory (**Figure 2-2**). Many teachers are not comfortable with a structured inquiry approach at the beginning. In one person’s words, “It takes a while to warm up to.” Once participants get used to the idea of conversation being limited, focused, and timed, they find value in the structure as long as the general shape of the study group meeting is flexible and alternates from open-ended to strictly guided and back to open-ended discourse once again.

Chester-Andover Literacy Study Group
Meeting 1

Goals for the Meeting

1. Build an understanding within the group so that we see each other as resources and become active collaborators.
2. Use a tool for focused discussion that allows us to create an inventory of current practice at Chester/Andover with respect to reading comprehension in grades 3-6.
3. Determine the focus for next meeting.

3:00-3:30 Introductions and Setting of Ground Rules

Each person completed a one page survey, answering the following questions:

1. What is your current position in education?
2. What experiences do you have that you bring as a resource to this group?
3. What do you hope to learn as a result of this study group experience?

The information was quickly shared, in turn, so that the group would have an idea of the breadth of resources offered by group members. Fern collected the information to assemble a study group profile for Chester-Andover. Responses to Question 3 will be used as a "touchstone" as the group progresses, to make sure that some of the personal goals are met by the end of June.

Ground Rules
The group established the following ground rules, to be revisited after a few sessions.

1. Take notes.
2. Keep the principal "in the loop."
3. Listen fully to each other.
4. Eliminate side conversations.
5. Do the readings.
6. Attend the meetings.

3:30-4:15 Discussion about Chester/Andover teaching strategies that relate to reading comprehension

The group used a focused conversation and an inventory tool to develop a beginning inventory of teaching strategies that relate to comprehension.

4:15-4:30 Determine the focus for next meeting

Figure 2-2. Chester-Andover Literacy Study Group agenda summary.

Figure 2-3 shows the structure that CAES used to conduct their first investigation into reading comprehension. Notice that the participants have a clear focusing question, a way to begin investigating that question, a structured procedure for conversation, and a time for reflection about what has been learned. It is important to note that this chart does not show all of the strategies used at CAES. It merely represents 36 minutes of brainstorming.

CAES LITERACY STUDY GROUP
INVESTIGATION 1

Formulation of a Focusing Question

The group decided to take an overview look at comprehension among the different grade levels. What is in place? What can be added? How do you level books? What types of assessments are currently being used? What diagnostic work is in place? Next, the scope was narrowed so that the investigation could be accomplished within the time limit of the first meeting. The focusing question then became: **What are the current teaching strategies that we use at Chester-Andover to foster reading comprehension?**

Process of Investigation

Based on the focusing question, two tools were used to collect the inventory of strategies. One tool focused the conversation, and the other tool organized the inventory according to a framework provided by Fountas and Pinnell entitled “Sources of Information that Readers Use for Comprehension***,”*** p. 305***.***

Procedure for Focused Conversation

1. Brainstorming a list of:

strategies related to meaning	12 minutes
strategies related to language structure	12 minutes
strategies related to phonological and visual information	12 minutes

a. Observation and Reflection	10 minutes

What is common among the strategies across grade levels? What is in place and what is missing? What are the implications for next steps?

Inventory Tool

SOURCES OF INFORMATION THAT READERS USE		
Type of Monitoring	**Examples from Fountas and Pinnell**	**Strategies at Chester-Andover**
Meaning		
Language Structure		
Phonological and Visual Information		

Figure 2-3. Chester’s first investigation used a focused conversation aided by an inventory tool.

After creating an inventory, teachers could identify some of their existing strategies and they could see some of the gaps. This gave them an opportunity to make general statements about the specific strategies they use (**Figure 2-4**). Teachers noticed that the list included reinforcement strategies for comprehension, but few direct teaching strategies, especially with nonfiction.

COMPLETED CHESTER-ANDOVER INVENTORY
Sources of Information that Readers Use

Type of Monitoring	Examples from the Text	Teaching Strategies at Chester-Andover
Meaning The semantic or meaning system of language Imagery or visual meaning	• meaning from words • meaning across a text • meaning from varieties of text (genre) • personal sets of knowledge: life experience, literary background, and world knowledge	• story mapping with a graphic organizer • cloze activities • vocabulary based in text • keep track of number of books and types of genres • go over vocabulary before the story is read. Look it up in dictionary and use it in a sentence. • use the language of books • teach "making inferences" • identify specific reading techniques as they arise in student use so that they learn the vocabulary of reading • visualization (making a picture in the mind's eye) • read aloud and discuss vocabulary as it arises • what are the approaches to teaching reading of nonfiction?? Textbook has vocabulary identified. • use reading materials that are a few grades lower to teach strategies • find out "What do you already know?" "Where have you already gone?" "What would you like to learn?" ***Coming to Know*** is a great resource. • reading inventories
Language Structure The syntactic system of language -- the patterns or rules by which words are put together in meaningful phrases and sentences	• sentence structure • inflectional endings such as ***ing*** and ***ed*** • phrase units	• cloze activities • isolate the root or base word • direct instruction of prefixes and suffixes • combine the teaching of reading and writing • analysis from oral reading (how students break up structures, analysis of flow of common phrases.) • have students become aware of word clues for meaning (e.g. past tense) • guidelines for improving writing drafts
Phonological and Visual Information The sound system of language -- the phonemes in words The orthographic system of language -- the letters and letter clusters that make up spelling patterns	• sounds in words • distinctive features of letters • patterns of letters in words -- simple to complex • punctuation	• spelling program in grades 3-4. • grades 5-6 Megawords, a rule-based spelling program

Figure 2-4. The completed inventory that resulted from the brainstorm.

This beginning discussion laid a foundation for further work. Classroom teachers decided to pair with the Title I teachers in their study group to design some comprehension-based reading lessons in content areas such as science and social studies. This in turn became the basis for specific, individual classroom investigations teachers then reported about during the "Group Sharing" portions of their monthly study group meetings. One of the teacher participants noted that as a result of their brainstorming activity she now "looks for efficient opportunities to teach to the missing pieces."

Having experienced a successful opening meeting, the CAES group looked at the basic meeting format that I modeled for them and slightly modified the shape so that it better fit their personal characteristics. It is important to note that sound structures can be easily adapted and reshaped to meet the needs and styles of different users. By week three, the participants settled on a basic shape that allowed them to begin with a fun activity, share some individual investigations, collaborate on a common professional dilemma as presented through one person's practice, and plan for their continuing inquiry (**Figure 2-5**).

Agenda Structure for Chester Study Group

Warm-up (15 minutes)
A fun activity to get people involved with the day's discussion topic. Often based on a piece of children's literature.

Group Sharing (20 minutes)
Each member presents an individual question and method of investigation that resulted from reading the shared text and asking questions. Examples were based in both teaching practice and student work samples. Presentation only. No dialog.

Colleague Consultation (60 minutes)
Participants take turns being the one to present a question about practice at each meeting to gather insight from the group as a whole. Group collaboration and inquiry. Based on discussion, following agreed upon procedures.

Debrief and Identification of Focusing Question for Next Meeting (20 minutes)
Debrief and planning for next meeting and the work to be done in-between.

Figure 2-5. Chester's agenda structure began with a warm-up activity.

The Development of a Process Over Time

The basic meeting structure detailed above was followed over the course of a school year. As would be expected, some meetings were more productive than others. Success was highest when all participants arrived on time and came prepared. The colleague consultations that worked the best were the ones whose topics were relevant to everyone. **Figure 2-6**, a chart that was

CAES	Focusing Questions	Process for Investigation	Means of Reflection	General Comments
Meeting 1	What is reading comprehension? What are we doing at our school to teach it?	Structured Agenda Brainstorming Inventory Chart Chapter references	Looked at chart to help determine next steps Debrief of process	Nervousness. Is this inquiry process going to work for me?
Meeting 2	What strategies are important in teaching guided reading?	Book discussion Section 5 p.302-385 Selection of strategies to try	Small group discussions	Everyone jumped on board and tried a strategy!
Meeting 3	How do you reach all of your students' individual needs?	Colleague Consultation Chapter 6	Personal reflections about current practice	Integrated management "secrets" into her classroom organization
Meeting 4	How do you get students to relate text to self?	Colleague Consultation Section 21	Summarizing students' needs	Lots of dialog among participants
Meeting 5	How do you get students to transfer skills to practice?	Brainstorming Materials Sharing Chapter 5	Looking at how we integrate new ideas into practice	Sharing ideas is so helpful!
Meeting 6	How do I select an appropriate guided reading book?	Sharing of Projects Chapter 9	Looked at what we identified as our hopes for the group in the fall and compared that to what actually transpired	

Comments about the inquiry method: Lynda indicated that she liked learning from each other and trying new things. Anne liked knowing what other professionals were doing and having a common book. Gary liked working on a project with Lynda and sharing ideas. Sarah liked listening to others -- hearing their struggles and observations. Everyone joined the group for personal growth and to better their teaching for the students' benefit. Sharing documents was a nice, unexpected outcome.

Looking at professional learning: some had met their original hopes by gathering great ideas and others felt the group was a real motivator. Some learned more about teaching reading in the content areas and conducting guided reading lessons. Others enjoyed having an extension of resource people to turn to. Another revealed that students were able to see connections better and felt that book clubs were becoming more meaningful. The last member wrote about learning new ways to organize student discussion groups and about students taking on more responsibility.

Figure 2-6. A guided response journal entry.

completed by the CAES inquiry group members, provides a summary of the first six meetings and gives an idea of the types of questions the participants raised and how they framed their discussions.

Keeping Inquiry at the Forefront

Inquiry is a scary venture when compared to the normal pattern of read and learn or read and remember. No one knows how it will turn out in advance. Because of that, the predictable outcome is "learning to learn" rather than learning a specified, predetermined set of information. This means that getting something wrong or making a mistake is invaluable and a *very good* thing to have happen. We are conditioned to believe that mistakes are bad. Many of us find the idea of inquiry frightening until we get over the hump of making a mistake and discover the enjoyment that comes from improvement. I have been at this for many years and still benefit every time a study group member drops a comment to me like, "Are you assuming that you have to be perfect?"

While the CAES group entered their collaborative inquiry with few preconceived notions and, therefore, made an easy transition, it is easy to confuse inquiry-based study with traditional book discussion groups. Typical book groups gather to read a common text and learn the information together, transferring knowledge from text to self in the company of others. An inquiry group applies information, looks for results, reflects on its learning, and perhaps even challenges the validity of a text in light of contradictory results that come from their own direct experience, careful observation, and analysis (**Figure 2-7**).

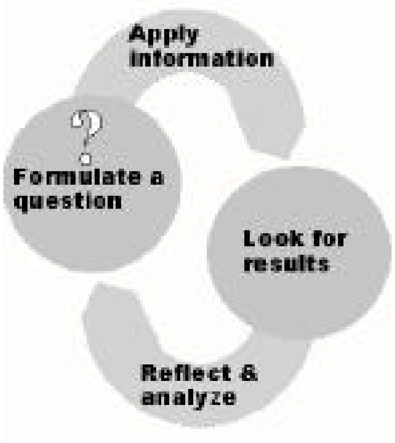

Figure 2-7. An inquiry model.

As they progressed, the CAES inquiry group took greater and greater risks and, in doing so, built a repertoire of skills and strategies. They learned from each other's successes and benefited from each other's mistakes. They invited colleagues into their classrooms to model practices and to observe them as they tried out new ideas. The collection of observations, lesson plans, and student work gave them specific items to look at during their monthly meetings. Keeping professional journals allowed them to privately track their own progress. This pattern occurred for other inquiry-based study groups in the region as well. A journal excerpt from a member of the Windham Central group is shown in **Figure 2-8**. Notice that her investigation brings the text to life by applying concepts, monitoring student performance, and reflecting on the results.

Laura Robertson
Literacy Study Group
May 2002

Of the many activities or ideas I have learned about by reading the book, dialoguing in the reading response journals stands out as a powerful way to help students connect to literature. I have been impressed by the way that my third and fourth graders have come to a deeper understanding of literature, or have stated their thoughts in unique and honest ways. Therefore, I decided to take excerpts from recent journal entries to illustrate their reflections and responses. I have corrected spelling and punctuation errors, but have not changed any of their words.

"Sometimes I thought I was sad because the boy does not have a mom or a home. It made me wonder if he was ever going to get a home. I wanted his dad to get a good job so they could get a home and his son could go to school."— boy, grade 4

"The story reminds me of when my grandmother died. Also, it reminds me of when my mom let me have the stuffed bunny that my grandmother used to have." — girl, grade 4

"This book is very interesting. I wanted to read more and more. On all of his dangerous journeys I thought he was going to die." — boy, grade 3

"I didn't feel happy when I had someone living in my house. In The Littles, they had a new family living in the house. The Littles felt better at the end because the Bigs got rid of the cat. In my case, my sister ended up leaving and I felt better." — girl, grade 4

"I felt like I was in a trapped cage when the bear was locked in the vault. If I were the bear I would have been scared when the boy picked me up because I would not know who he was. I felt nice and cozy at the end when the kid put the bear into the little girl's bed." — boy, grade 4

"I think that this book has a lesson. The lesson is not to judge people or animals by beauty. Even though Fritz was not beautiful he still had his specialties." — boy, grade 3

"Rella was a nature-loving bigfoot. She put the stems of the plants back into the ground. I thought of Rella as a kind-hearted friend of Mother Nature and a kind friend. I thought of the story an exciting tall tale. Five times I almost laughed out loud it was such a funny book!" — boy, grade 3

"I love the words in Dog Heaven by Cynthia Rylant. The words I love are 'There are kitty-cat biscuits.' Cynthia Rylant really made me think that there is a real dog heaven. I also love that dogs sleep on fluffy clouds because God turns them inside out." — girl, grade 3

Figure 2-8. Journal excerpt from a member of the Springfield study group.

Summary

Effective inquiry groups share some basic characteristics. They:

f. establish a common purpose
g. formulate focusing questions
h. follow discussion procedures that address those questions
i. root their discussions in what is observable
j. use analysis and reflection to improve practice

The CAES group decided to work together to explore how to improve student reading comprehension in their school. They selected a few related questions to pursue both as a group and individually. During each meeting, they used a focused structure to address their questions. Between meetings, the teachers tried out new ideas, kept lesson plans and student work samples, and asked peers to model and observe in their classrooms. This activity provided specific samples for each meeting that the participants could describe, that the presenting teacher could analyze, and that everyone could use as a vehicle for reflection. The CAES group used the lessons learned and insights gained to define directions for further study.

In one year, the CAES group was able to start a process for effective collaborative learning in their school. Interestingly, two of the five teachers involved will not be returning to the school next year. Even so, the remaining three are inspired to continue and the CAES faculty would like to begin a K-3 inquiry group to parallel the one begun this year. With a year's history to build from, the experienced teachers would like to use an inquiry group approach with incoming teachers as a way of coordinating curriculum, looking at student learning, and introducing effective strategies for teaching reading comprehension. In the words of one participant, "We are doing what we say we never have time to do. It's great!"

GUIDE TO INQUIRY-BASED STUDY GROUPS

THE BIG PICTURE

Written for facilitators and participants, this section examines the delicate balancing act required for effective facilitation in inquiry groups.

Inquiry processes differ from other methods of professional development in one significant way — they are fundamentally democratic. As participants and facilitators, we raise questions about practice together. The formal expert-to-learner relationship of an academic setting does not exist in an inquiry-based study group. Rather, the approach is based on mutual inquiry, focused on some guiding questions. Although each of your groups will take on local characteristics shaped by unique needs, interests, and questions, effective collaborative inquiry groups share some very important features. They:

a. establish a common purpose;
b. formulate focusing questions;
c. follow discussion procedures that address those questions;
d. root their discussions in what is observable;
e. use analysis and reflection to improve practice.

The role of the facilitator is to create an environment that fosters inquiry, keeping a pulse on the conversation so that it stays focused. This is a balancing act because you need to listen carefully and allow a discussion to breathe life while at the same time redirecting the group when it heads toward tangents. It's hard to tell sometimes whether a conversation offers important information that seems like a helpful aside, or whether the approaching conversation will become a sidetrack that derails the inquiry. I still find this to be the hardest part of my role when I am a facilitator. When you begin, make sure that you explain to the group members that you are learning, too. Ask for frequent feedback about how it's going and be comfortable in making improvements. Participants are happy to give suggestions for improvement, especially if you use their input to actually improve your style of facilitation.

Tina Shakespeare, a Windham Central Curriculum Coordinator, talked about what her first-time experience was like as she learned to set a tone of inquiry and thoughtfully guide a discussion.

> *I have learned a lot of over the last year. I am more relaxed about being quietly directive. I've learned that you don't have to stand up and lecture teachers. When you first start teaching kids, it takes a while to move beyond thinking that you have to do everything to being the person who sets things up and guides them. It's the same way working with teachers…. I found that at the beginning, I might have been too controlling. Someone in the facilitators' meeting said that her group didn't want as much facilitator direction and so I wondered whether my group felt that, too. So, at the second meeting I monitored myself to see if I was being too bossy, or whatever. I still moved things along, but I was able to keep my mouth closed when I didn't need to say anything. They ran with it and did just fine. So, I learned to be confident in my own ability to be there for a group and to be confident that the teachers will rise to the occasion….*
>
> *It's about having faith in others and in yourself that things will come out okay — which is hard to do when you are new at something. I had never really facilitated a group like that before. I've had to do workshops where you're pretty much in control, saying "here's what we are going to do and here's where we will end up." It's more about having the faith that things will come through. It reminded me of the Vermont Writing Process.*

Establishing the First Meeting Agenda

The agenda for the first meeting sets the shape and tone for subsequent meetings. The first meeting is the only time that the facilitator should carry this burden. After that, agenda planning should become a natural part of the collaborative inquiry process.

"…agenda planning should become a natural part of the collaborative inquiry process."

Regardless of what you as facilitator would like to accomplish, do not overload the first meeting agenda. Select a few simple goals that are attainable and seek input from the participants before finalizing the agenda items. It is more important for participants to believe that the agenda will be followed and time will be properly managed than it is to accomplish specific tasks. Every time I break this simple rule, I am sorry about it later!

> “In a collaborative inquiry group, the agenda is based on a focusing question and sets a structured means for investigating that question.”

A good agenda keeps things organized. To be functional, an agenda must meet the goals and interests of the participants. This means that pre-planning is necessary so the meeting really addresses the interests of the participants. Remember that in a collaborative inquiry group the agenda is based on a focusing question and sets a structured means for investigating that question. These two elements distinguish an inquiry group from other types of study groups. Having a focused question and a means of investigation tie professional discussions directly to improved practice and improved student learning. While improvement of practice can result from informal colleague conversations, such outcomes are serendipitous or random rather than intentional. A little bit of structure shapes professional discourse so that it is both productive and enjoyable.

An Agenda Tied to Goals — Facilitators’ Introductory Session

Goals for the Meeting

1. Build an understanding within the group so that we see each other as resources and become active collaborators.
2. Use one tool for holding a focused discussion about a genuine question.
3. Answer some pressing questions about the Literacy Study Group project.

2:00-2:30 Introductions

By way of general introduction, each person should come prepared to spend up to 5 minutes speaking to the questions: ***What is your current position in education? What experiences do you have in teaching reading, guiding study groups, or working with adults that you bring as a resource to this group? What do you hope to learn as a result of this experience?***

2:30-2:45 Setting Ground Rules

Brief discussion about the purpose of ground rules as applied to group discussions and the building of a short list that our group would like to use.

2:45-3:15 Practice with Structured Inquiry

We will hold a structured conversation to critique the handouts to be given at the “kick-off.”

3:15-4:00 Pressing Questions and Project Details

What are the major questions about how the Literacy Study Groups will work?

Figure 3-1. Facilitators’ introductory agenda.

As previously mentioned, I designed and led the first facilitator’s meeting (**Figure 3-1**). After that, the responsibility for setting the agenda was shared among group members and we designed a rhythm for our meetings, based on our interests and concerns. The basic shape followed the pattern shown in **Figure 3-2**, although specific items changed from meeting to meeting.

The format of this agenda allows an ebb and flow from open to highly structured, and back to completely open conversation. Setting such a rhythm provides a balance between tightly monitored conversation and free-flow discourse. Thus, a group can focus on an investigation during highly structured phases and can also explore the new ideas and directions that often emerge when a conversation is unplanned.

Agenda Structure

Opening Sharing from Study Group Meetings (15 minutes)
Come prepared to talk about which focusing question your group selected and what method of investigation you used to pursue that question.

Practice with Tools for Structured Conversation (60 minutes)
Use of an existing tool to examine a focusing question

Troubleshooting (30 minutes)
An open dialog about pressing issues that arise for facilitators

Identification of Focusing Question for Next Meeting (15 minutes)
Plans for next time serve to close the current meeting and establish specific agenda items for the next

Figure 3-2. An agenda structure for monthly facilitators' meetings.

Establishing a Tone — Introductions

In order for a group to function in a true spirit of inquiry, everyone must be learning and offering insights. This means that the group relies on shared expertise. An easy way to establish this from the beginning is to start with introductions. Even when all the members know each other, introductions are necessary because they establish each person's motivation for joining the inquiry. Responding to the three questions in **Figure 3-3** identifies where expertise lies and explains each member's purpose for participating. Ask participants to write their responses as well as sharing them verbally. If you collect the written versions and redistribute them at the middle or end of the study, participants have a structured way to reflect on what they have learned, relative to what they had originally hoped for.

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

Collect and redistribute at the middle or end of the inquiry group experience so participants can see how they are doing relative to what they had originally hoped.

What is your current position in education?

Everyone's experiences add perspective to a group inquiry, the view of the new teacher, the view of the seasoned teacher, the view of the literacy specialist. What experiences do you have that you bring as a resource to this group?

What do you hope to learn as a result of this study group experience?

Establishing a Tone — Ground Rules

Beginning with introductions gives everyone a chance to listen to an opening conversation and see how you all operate as a group. Some groups naturally take turns and each person monitors the amount of time s/he spends responding to the initial introductions. Other groups will immediately go off on tangents and hold side conversations. Some participants dominate and others are silent. From this brief opening discussion, you as facilitator have the chance to see how the group handles conversation. This provides a natural agenda transition from making introductions to establishing ground rules for group behavior.

A good set of ground rules is really the list of things about which people believe they will need the biggest reminders. Sticking to the ground rules is the responsibility of all group members and should not fall on the facilitator alone to enforce. They act as an external agreement so when someone is violating a ground rule, any group member can simply refer to the list without assigning blame (**Figure 3-4**).

Ground Rules

a. Begin on time and end on time.
b. If you can’t come on time, let someone know.
c. Everyone helps to keep to the pace set.
d. Be respectful of others.
e. Everyone comes prepared.
f. Everyone participates.
g. Everyone stays focused on the question at hand.
h. Be mindful not to interrupt.
i. Be comfortable in not knowing and in asking questions.

Figure 3-4. Ground rules developed by literacy facilitators for their monthly meetings.

It is important to look at rules to decide whether they are realistic and whether they help your group to function. In this example, our group had difficulty arriving on time. Revisiting the ground rules allowed us to change the start time. A re-examination of the rules became an opportunity to set more realistic hours rather than an occasion to chastise late arrivers.

Ground rules provide helpful guidelines for keeping conversations open, respectful, and meaningful. Effective ground rules are particular to the needs of the group at hand. That means that each group should form its own ground rules rather than borrowing a set that is predetermined. The rules should be kept to the minimum set that will really help your group to function. When taking down suggestions for ground rules, be sure to use the words exactly as given by the group members, rather than rewriting guidelines for the sake of proper grammar. Remind everyone that the guidelines will be revised after a few meetings. Doing it this way sends a direct message that it is okay to draft and redraft. Post ground rules in a prominent place so that the group is reminded of the agreements it has formed. Then, remember to revisit them. That second review is the time to correct grammar and change rules, if necessary. Even this simple process of establishing ground rules mirrors the ideas of inquiry: establish a purpose (effective rules for conversation), agree to some procedures (the guidelines), test them out (give the rules a few weeks of trial), and revise from experience and reflection.

Staying Focused

Because teachers rarely have time to get together and talk about their practice, keeping an inquiry focused is the most difficult part of a facilitator’s job. When discussions get too far off the track, some participants enjoy it and others become frustrated. When discussions are too rigidly timed, they become stilted and disingenuous. The balancing act is one that you will have to learn through trial and error. You will also have to readjust your sense of timing with each new group. Knowing how to match your discussion procedures to your purpose for holding a conversation helps!

Procedures for managing discussions (also called *discussion tools*, or *discussion protocols*) are used to identify ways to hold conversations so that they stay focused and are rooted in concrete examples. These concrete examples can be lesson plans, student work samples, videotapes, or conceptual frameworks about teaching, learning, and literacy. Referencing examples provides a common experience so that group dialog can move away from individual ideas, beliefs, or experiences and head toward something that is visible and shared.

While engaging in collaborative inquiry, the focusing question shapes the discussion and has to be of interest to all participants. This is what creates the sense of mutual learning that energizes members and sustains conversations over time. Often, new study groups will generate long lists of questions and will try to “answer” them all, much in the same way that teachers prepare packets of student questions to guide literature studies. This type of question making is not conducive to genuine inquiry. Genuine inquiry requires an in-depth and sustained look at something by starting with a hunch, collecting some information, examining the information, and then improving on the hunch by continued application and investigation.

Establishing a focusing question is the beginning step to knowing which existing discussion tool to use or whether to develop a new one. The previous section describes how the CAES study group formed because upper grade teachers looked at student test results and saw that, as a group, their students had difficulty with reading comprehension, especially non-fiction. So reading comprehension became the general theme for their study group. Their opening question was “What are we already doing to teach comprehension?” The participants decided to take an inventory of current practice.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION THAT READERS USE		
Type of Monitoring ***The three types of monitoring for comprehension are constructs of Fountas and Pinnell. Each is defined.***	**Examples from Fountas and Pinnell** ***Along with a definition, specific examples from the book are given.***	**Strategies at Chester Andover** *Because there are categories, definitions, and examples, the CAES teachers can make a list using comparable terms to mean similar activities. Preparing an inventory in this way keeps similar concepts together and therefore makes them easier to analyze.*
Meaning		
Language Structure		
Phonological and Visual Information		

Figure 3-5. The Chester study group's reading comprehension data collection tool.

As facilitator, my job was to look at their focusing question and identify a structured means of holding a conversation that would help us get at what we wanted to learn. In this case, the short-term question was "What is our current practice?" The overriding question and focus of the yearlong inquiry was "How can we improve students' reading comprehension, especially of non-fiction?" Simply starting with a list of what's already being done would have been too broad an exercise to identify what further steps to take. Instead, I built an inventory tool that would help us list current practices in light of the text we were reading (**Figure 3-5**).

Reviewing both the short and long-term goals, I thought we needed to be able to take an inventory in a way that would allow us to analyze the results according to a theory of reading comprehension. Using a theory gives a structure for analysis. Especially in the field of education, where ideas about effectiveness constantly change, educators must test and challenge their constructs as they observe the actual impact on students. In this case, we based our discussion on the ideas of Fountas and Pinnell because it was the book selected. There is nothing sacred about this particular

"Especially in the field of education, where ideas about effectiveness constantly change, educators must test and challenge their constructs as they observe the actual impact on students."

text as opposed to another. The text is simply a lens through which to look at practice. In any inquiry group, the participants need to continuously assess whether or not the frameworks they are using are useful and apply to their students.

GENERIC ELEMENTS FOR MANAGING A DISCUSSION

1. Specify the purpose
2. Identify steps to take that will address the purpose
3. Root the discussion in observable data that relates to the purpose
4. Include a reflective component at the end so that the purpose (or focusing question) is then further clarified
5. End with a debrief of the process that collects suggestions for further improvements to the discussion strategy.

Figure 3-6. Five elements that keep a discussion on track.

There are many discussion procedures available for education groups and for other organizations as well. The most complete selection that I have found so far has been compiled by the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs in a book entitled *The Art of Focused Conversation*. Two other references that apply specifically to educational discourse are *Assessing Student Learning* and *Looking Together at Student Work*. Details about these references and others can be found in the bibliography. **Figure 3-6** shows the important elements that characterize structured discussions. **Figure 3-7** shows an example of a well-managed discussion that happened in the Chester Andover study group. In this example, the group first used a brainstorm to generate a list of strategies (the data), which they then analyzed using a structure for comparison based on the text.

Example of a Well-Managed Discussion

Specifies the Purpose

What current teaching strategies do we use at Chester Andover to foster reading comprehension?

Identifies Discussion Procedures

Brainstorm list of strategies related to meaning	12 minutes
Brainstorm list of strategies related to language structure	12 minutes
Brainstorm list of strategies related to phonological and visual information	12 minutes
Synthesize Information	10 minutes

What is common among the strategies across grade levels? What is in place and what is missing?

Roots the Discussion in Observable Data

In this case the data is generated during the meeting and then used to form next steps. Sometimes the data is prepared in advance and brought to a meeting. Examples of observable data include: inventory charts, lesson plans, classroom observations, student work samples, video clips, written statements about professional dilemmas.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION THAT READERS USE

Type of Monitoring	Examples from Fountas and Pinnell	Strategies at Chester Andover
Meaning		
Language Structure		
Phonological and Visual Information		

Includes a Reflective Component

The final 10 minutes of the discussion allow time to analyze the data that has been generated

Allows for a Debrief

Once the inventory was completed and observations about reading comprehension strategies at CAES made, the group talked about implications and next steps for the inquiry group.

Figure 3-7. In this discussion, the group generated its own data by brainstorming lists of strategies.

Keeping Professional Journals

Time to reflect is critical for making sense of the inquiry process both from the standpoint of facilitator and from the standpoint of a teacher-practitioner. Things don’t always work out as planned. This is especially true with group inquiry. If a group is genuinely exploring new turf, then events will take many twists and turns. The facilitator is not “in control.” Rather, the facilitator is the person who has agreed to take responsibility for some of the organizational aspects of the inquiry. Likewise, as a teacher who explores new ideas, your lessons may not go exactly as planned. Learning from experiences that work out well and from experiences that seem to “flop” produces the knowledge that leads to improvement of practice. Keeping a professional journal allows participants to track their own progress.

Journal Entry
Fern Tavalin
January 2002

Having gone through such smooth sailing at December’s meeting, with a nice balance between free flow and structured conversation, the January meeting was like participating in a train wreck. The meeting place was cancelled at the last minute, and so I had to scramble to find another location. Against my better judgement, I settled on the Putney Inn, thinking that the familiarity of location would compensate for the overly casual atmosphere.

There was no place to hang our ground rules and I was concerned about that because two new people were joining. When there are visible ground rules it is easy for me to point to them and to remind the group that everyone is responsible for keeping them. Then, anyone can refer to a ground rule when the group gets off-track.

As the meeting went along, we got further and further away from our planned agenda. It was hard for me to tell whether this was a healthy departure or whether my facilitator’s judgement was just plain off. I tried to bring the discussion back to the agenda with some gentle reminders to our guest by asking that he comment on our questions, rather than discussing his own most pressing issues regarding literacy. A few gentle reminders led to a curt directive that loosely translated into a polite version of “Could you please shut up!” As soon as I said that, I was struck by a distant memory of a friend telling me that when I spoke bluntly it made her scared. Sort of like, “If she talks that way to him, when will it be my turn?” Remembering that comment made me feel worse. Because no one else in the group was redirecting the visitor’s comments, I decided it was my concern alone, and dropped the issue. Still, I left feeling really disappointed that we had not had a chance to “do some real business.”

Playing the role of facilitator is very difficult, especially using these methods. Asking “real” or “genuine” questions and finding a way to understand them better, in a focused manner, using collaborative inquiry and relevant reading is not always easy. I think the other study group facilitators recognize this as well. Some have made comments at meetings about how their study groups do not like the feel of structure while others have asked for more guidance to develop those structures.

Learning how to create a structure for productive discourse was supposed to be the focus of 1/2 of our meeting time in January. I had prepared examples of two tools, hoping that one of them might be relevant to the questions raised in the “check-in.” Instead of practicing with one of the tools, I ran out of time and handed them out quickly — something every good teacher knows not to do! As a result, one of the handouts made no sense to the other facilitators and they discarded it as irrelevant.

This interchange also brings up the issue of how to handle guests. I wonder if other study group leaders have had trouble successfully integrating guests into group meetings.

Figure 3-8. A free-form entry in Fern’s journal.

Free-Flow versus Guided Journal Entries

Journals vary in content and length, depending upon an individual’s questions and the purpose for writing. Free-flow journal entries allow for emotive responses. An emotional response sometimes indicates a need to probe. **Figure 3-8** is one of my own journal entries, made after what felt like an especially challenging meeting where the agenda was not followed. The other participants were pleased with the meeting and I was sorely disappointed. The entry highlights some of the tensions that exist between staying focused and allowing for open-ended discussions to occur.

Because I was the only one who felt the meeting had been derailed, it forced me to look at my expectations for the group, versus the group's expectations for itself. Discussion purpose and locus of control are two issues that frequently surface during loosely defined discourse and both of those issues show up in my remarks as I struggle to get my thoughts out and grapple with the facilitator tension "to guide or to follow." While it is important to realize that good things can come from free-flowing conversation, inquiry-based study groups are attempting to break new ground in terms of systematic, collaborative investigation.

> "Formally collecting data also helps to move reflection from emotional reaction to careful examination and analysis."

Sometimes it is helpful to ask study group members to prepare a guided journal entry. Doing so gathers information about a common topic from a variety of perspectives. Formally collecting data also helps to move reflection from emotional reaction to careful examination and analysis. The reflection format shown in **Figure 3-9** is a generic form that reinforces the principles outlined in this guide. I developed it originally so that I could make sense of my own progress as a facilitator. When I shared it with other facilitators in the literacy study groups, they found it helpful to use as well.

	Focusing Question	**Process for Investigation**	**Means of Reflection**	**Added Comments**
Meeting Date				
General Comments (what is noticed beyond the frame that has been provided):				

Figure 3-9. A guided response form.

Notice that, even though there is a common structure provided, the form allows for observations that extend beyond the lens presented. Remember that even with requests for a guided response, it's important to leave space for observations that go "outside the box."

Here is the completed form I used to analyze my own practice after I made the free-flow journal entry in Figure 3-8. Notice how the tone changed with the use of an analytic structure. Once I saw that my initial reaction was distorted by an emotional reaction to an event taken out of context, I regained confidence in myself and in the inquiry process.

Facilitators Meetings	**Focusing Questions**	**Process for Investigation**	**Means of Reflection**	**General Comments**
Meeting 1 10/17/01	What are we doing? How are we going to do it?	Agenda Tuning Protocol	Meeting debrief.	From the TQE point of view, each meeting will have a specific focus that leads into an overarching research question about the place of Study Groups in professional growth and development. See Research Agenda for details.
Meeting 2 11/27/01	How is it going so far?	Agenda	Meeting Debrief.	During the final half hour, the group decided to use meeting time for 3 purposes: a. sharing what happens in each study group b. gaining information about what tools exist that help facilitate focused discussion c. troubleshooting facilitator issues
Meeting 3 1/10/02	What are some available tools?	Agenda Student Work Protocol Colleague Consultation	No reflection at meeting. Extensive online dialog between facilitator and guest. Journal entries.	The meeting went "off track" almost immediately and never regained its original focus. No tools were used to facilitate conversation, although they were distributed. Having this experience opened up the question, "What is the balance between focused and open-ended discussion?" It also raised a question about what is the purpose of study groups and what can be expected, given the time frame that we all have.
Meeting 4 2/27/02	How can we use a tool to look at student work that lets us examine evidence of what is meant by expanded meaning?	Agenda Student Work Protocol	Debrief of discussion regarding student work and the impact of using a pre-defined lens.	The process of discussion that we used mirrored, on an adult level, the discourse held by the students in the video clips. It also leads nicely into our next meeting's focus, "What is the balance between structured and open discourse?" (Figure continues to next page)

Long Term Research Focus	What is the role of Study Groups for Professional Development in general and for literacy in specific?	Collection and Analysis of the following data: 1) Description of Study Group participants and their purpose for meeting. (Questionnaire distributed at first meeting.) 2) Meeting Notes from each study group plus facilitators' meetings. 3) Tools used to focus discussion 4) Journal entries (where appropriate 5) Interviews with facilitators 6) Questionnaire to study group participants 7) Data collection from discussions at end-of-year gathering	Analysis will be distributed to participants for response and to outside readers for reaction. This information will be used to fine-tune the end report.	5 study groups have been formed, representing a variety of participants with multiple purposes. This affords the opportunity to look at the nature and characteristics of several different types of study groups. WCSU and WSESU represent teachers from many schools, lead or monitored by their district curriculum coordinators. The curriculum coordinators gain first-hand experience with running study groups while the teachers focus on literacy. Chester is comprised of new-to-their grade level classroom teachers who wish to learn from the school's reading specialists. Springfield is a conglomeration of people from different districts, many of whom have a variety of job responsibilities that range from direct classroom instruction to provision of support services.

General Comments (what is noticed beyond the frame that has been provided):

Filling out this chart made me realize that the meeting that I thought I did such a bad job facilitating was only our third contact. Getting off-track is often a good thing when it happens early on. It creates a dissonance that often leads to clarity of purpose and better understanding. If an inquiry is conducted in a genuine manner, all participants learn. The third meeting was a huge learning experience for me! It brought up questions about what lies outside of the frame imposed at the beginning of the study groups and opened my thinking to consider the value of open discussion. Rather than feeling inadequate, as I did right after the meeting ended, I am really excited to find out more. I wonder what the difference is between conducting groups with highly experienced teachers and conducting groups with new teachers who want to learn specific information that will lead to immediate improvement of practice and increased student learning. I have also noticed that there is a lot of sharing in the each study group from which other groups can benefit. I wonder, given our schedules, how we can devise a format to better share some of the rich details. I suppose that some of this sharing will come as a next step, once our information is gathered and distributed. I have to keep reminding myself that this is our first time.

Figure 3-10. Fern's guided response entry.

Figuring Out Where You Are, What You're Learning, and Where to Go Next

As work with the facilitators continued, I was still caught in a professional dilemma. On the one hand, I could see that many of the facilitators were not using focused discussion procedures with their study groups, which is critical to connecting the information from the text to improvement of professional practice and student learning. On the other, I felt that I needed to learn more about the value of free-flow conversation and why it held so much appeal. In the midst of all this personal questioning, Nick Boke from Vermont Reads Institute came to the facilitators' meeting with a related professional dilemma of his own. VRI wanted teacher input to help improve the design of their next initiative. In that context, he asked the group to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of structured discourse and open-ended conversation.

Listening to the conversation was a real eye-opener for me! The discussion about Nick’s dilemma clarified many of my own questions. From listening, I learned that there is a lot of confusion between Book Groups and Inquiry Groups, confounded because both models use the text as a point of departure. The new facilitators finally felt the power of focused conversation. In a follow-up interview, Marcy Backstrom from the Springfield group described the conversation about Nick’s dilemma as a real “ah-ha moment.” Nick taught all of us something in his debrief when he noted that our discussion had actually gone off-track for a while. We had all been so engaged in what we were learning that we hadn’t noticed.

This single session had given us clarity, provided a sense of mutual learning, and pointed us to the next step. Even better, the transcript of the discussion gave us a concrete source of data from which to talk about where and if our conversation had actually digressed. **Figure 3-11** shows the procedure we used for discussing Nick’s dilemma.

The Dilemma Discussion Procedure

Literacy Study Group
Facilitators' Meeting
April 3, 2002

Today's Protocol*

1)	Description of Dilemma (10 minutes)	
2)	Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)	Questions that get at factual information
3)	Probing Questions (5 minutes)	Questions that probe for deeper meaning
4)	Group Discussion (15 minutes)	Happens without Nick's participation
5)	Nick Comments (5 minutes)	
6)	Debrief (5 minutes)	

Ground Rules

1. Stay focused on Nick's question.
2. Make comments that are specific, rather than general.
3. "Share the air."

* Adapted from the National School Reform Faculty Program of the Coalition of Essential Schools. November 2000 revision by Gene Thompson-Grove.

Today's Dilemma

The Vermont Reads Institute is looking at a multi-level design for helping to improve reading in Vermont schools. We are considering the use of a study group approach for some of our work. Study groups vary a lot in structure and purpose, depending upon whom the participants are and what they wish to accomplish.

Book Group Model — Members read a common text and ask questions related to the text. Members pose many questions. There is a sharing of teaching practice. The goal is to read and learn information.

Inquiry Group Model — Members identify specific student needs and use a common text for ideas about how to approach the identified needs. The members then take actions that are recorded so that they can use concrete evidence to look at the effectiveness of the new practices in light of what the text says. This investigation may lead to confirmation of the theory in the text, or it may contradict what has been written.

The members of the Literacy Study Group have had experiences with both approaches. We would like to learn from your concrete lessons as we move forward. Can you help me understand the benefits and drawbacks to each of these models? We would like to use a mix of both, but want to get a better understanding of what to use when.

Figure 3-11. Nick's dilemma.

Accountability: Making It Work

If you look back to the agenda for the first facilitators' meeting in Figure 3-1, you'll notice that the last 45 minutes were devoted to pressing questions. All of the pressing questions related in one way or another to accountability. Questions dealt with issues like: *How much time will we* *have to spend? How many re-licensing credits will be awarded? How will we know that people are doing what they are supposed to?*

We answered these questions together and I suggest that you do the same with your groups at the first meeting. I placed the “pressing questions” at the end of the agenda instead of at the beginning so that we would have a chance to do some learning together before making accountability decisions. It is crucial to establish the accountability guidelines by the end of the initial meeting, though. And once set, you should stick to them. If you find that it would have been better to do something a different way, use this discovery as information for next time, rather than changing the rules mid-stream.

Establishing expectations together gives the group a functional product by the end of the first meeting and allows you, as the facilitator, to show that the inquiry group will really be a cooperative effort. We set the expectations shown in **Figure 3-12** for our literacy study groups.

LITERACY STUDY GROUPS

Expectations for study group members:

1. The groups will meet for at least 20 hours, including the “kick-off.”
2. Everyone needs to read the text.
3. Everyone needs to keep a journal.
4. Everyone needs to attend the meetings.

In exchange, participants will receive:

1. the book
2. two re-licensing credits
3. $350 stipend to be paid in the spring

Figure 3-12: Expectations for the literacy study groups.

Notice that within these guidelines plenty of decisions remain to be made at the local study group level. Answers to questions like when the groups will meet, how long each session will last, whether the journals will be public or private are dependent upon local characteristics. Whether journals are public or private is especially controversial. A private journal usually contains more sensitive and frank information that is helpful to the individual, but may not be appropriate to share. A public journal is written with an outside audience in mind and is more frequently prepared as an act of compliance for someone else. Some study groups find it liberating to be able to keep journals exclusively for themselves while others ask for their journals to be made public because they know that writing for an outside audience is what will ensure that the journal is kept. Whichever decision is made (I personally prefer a compromise of asking for private journals that contain a few facilitator direct-entries that will be made public), it should be clearly established at the first meeting.

Stipends for the Southeast Region study group members were funded by a Vermont Department of Education grant. Giving stipends or re-licensing credit brings up another accountability issue — *What happens if someone does not put out a full effort?* One creative way to get at the issue of level of participation is to base stipend amounts on a combination of preparation and attendance. For example, in a situation that offers a $350 stipend you can allocate $100 to preparation and then pay $25 per session for 10 sessions. Regardless of how you go about it, remember that this question should be addressed and answered at the first meeting. It will save everyone problems later.

Facilitators have to be accountable as well. We are responsible for note taking and record keeping in addition to general organizational tasks. Keeping notes is a really important piece of learning in an inquiry group. Meeting notes give you concrete references as you wonder what has been accomplished and where you should go next.

Until this point, the accountability discussion has been based on the external motivator of a reward — money or re-licensing credit. In effective inquiry groups, the real motivating factor is our sense of accountability to our students. If the inquiry process is working, seeing improved student performance and gaining confidence in our ability to encourage and sustain growth in ourselves will dwarf money and credits as motivating factors.

Conclusion

The facilitator’s portion of this guide presents the major aspects of running an inquiry group. I used examples from a common facilitator’s tension — that of providing too much or too little structure — to illustrate the major ideas.

The remaining pages will leave you with a quick reference that highlights and summarizes the nuts and bolts of facilitating an inquiry-based study group. An appendix also provides references for further study and an assortment of discussion tools to add to your repertoire.

6 STEPS TO EFFECTIVE FACILITATION:

A FACILITATOR'S QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

1 Remember that COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY GROUPS:

- establish a common purpose;
- formulate focusing questions;
- follow discussion procedures that address those questions;
- root their discussions in what is observable; and
- use analysis and reflection to improve practice.

2 Establish a COLLABORATIVE TONE by:

- fostering mutual learning
- setting and following ground rules
- determining accountability expectations together

3 Make EXPECTATIONS clear at the beginning by considering guidelines for:

- meeting attendance and participation
- advanced preparation
- record keeping

4 Stay focused by using PROCEDURES FOR MANAGING DISCUSSION that:

- specify the purpose;
- identify steps to take that will address that purpose;
- root the discussion in observable data that relates to the purpose;
- include a reflective component at the end so that the purpose (or focusing question) is further clarified; and
- end with a debrief of the process that collects suggestions for further improvement to the procedure.

5 Establish a BALANCE between:

- structured discussion; and
- open dialogue.

6 Emphasize REFLECTION and ANALYSIS by:

- having members keep a professional journal
- using concrete examples to engage in discussions about effectiveness
- using meeting notes to examine the group's progress and to set future directions

APPENDIX I: FURTHER RESOURCES FOR FOCUSED INQUIRY

APPENDIX II: TOOLS

Data Collection and Analysis Tools

Background Information
Teaching Strategies Inventory
KWL Chart 41
Looking at Work Collaboratively
Looking at Work Collaboratively — A Completed Example

Tools for Reflection

Guided Journal Entry I
Guided Journal Entry II
Guided Journal Entry III

APPENDIX I: FURTHER RESOURCES FOR FOCUSED INQUIRY

Books

The Art of Focused Conversation edited by Brian Stanfield for the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs.

Lays a foundation for the theory and practice of holding focused conversations and gives 100 examples of types of conversations that lead to accessing different kinds of group wisdom in the workplace.

Assessing Student Learning edited by David Allen.

Collection of educational experiences that use student work as the reference point for collaborative discussions about student learning and teacher practice.

Looking Together at Student Work by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara Schieffelin Powell.

A companion guide to *Assessing Student Learning.*

From Another Angle edited by Margaret Himley with Patricia F. Carini

A discussion about Prospect Center's descriptive processes for looking at the child with chapters that exemplify those processes.

Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach by Jane Vella.

Tells Jane Vella's personal experiences as she learns about the power of dialogue. Provides examples and exercises for readers.

Whole-Faculty Study Groups by Carelene U. Murphy and Dale W. Lick.

Describes the steps that can be taken to engage a whole faculty in studying and learning together to address identified needs in a school

Writing to Grow: Keeping a Personal-Professional Journal by Mary Louise Holly.

Provides practical tips for teachers who want to improve their teaching, with example entries.

Vermont-Based Centers

PROSPECT ARCHIVES AND CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH is a wide-ranging network of people interested in schools, learning, and works. They are committed to observation and description as the ground for teaching and inquiry. Now a membership organization, Prospect began as a school for children in 1965. It includes an archive comprising longitudinal collections of the art, writing and other works by individual children, totaling about 250,000 pieces; part of this has been published. The archive informs Prospect's view of children's growth over time. *

Prospect Center ♦ PO Box 328 ♦ North Bennington, VT 05257-0326 ♦ phone: 802-442-8333 ♦
fax: 802-442-8444 ♦ e-mail: prospect@sover.net

* Introductory text from the Prospect Center web site: http://www.prospectcenter.org

VERMONT CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP is a local chapter of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). NSRF focuses on developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in restructuring schools — all in support of increased student achievement. NSRF offers intensive professional development to educators from pre-K to post secondary looking to initiate or extend adult professional collaboration. Begun in the fall of 1995 as a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the program now resides at the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana.**

Vermont Contacts
Margaret MacLean ♦ P.O. Box 271 ♦ Peacham, VT 05852 ♦ phone: 802-592-3513 ♦ e-mail:
margmaclean@netscape.net

Edorah Frazer ♦ 463 Ten Stones Circle ♦ Charlotte, VT 05445 ♦ phone: 425-4937 ♦
edorah@aol.com

** Introductory text from the NSRF web site: http://www.nsrfharmony.org/

APPENDIX II: TOOLS

Data Collection and Analysis Tools:
Background Information

Name ______________________________ *Study Group* ______________________

What is your current position in education?

Everyone's experiences add perspective to a group inquiry: the view of the new teacher, the view of the seasoned teacher, the view of the literacy specialist. What experiences do you have that you bring as a resource to this group?

What do you hope to learn as a result of this study group experience?

Inventory of Teaching Strategies

Learning Concept (Example: Reading Comprehension)	**Definition**	**Teaching Strategies at My School**
Learning Component 1 (Example: Meaning)		
Learning Component 2 (Example: Language Structure)		
Learning Component 3 (Example: Phonological Information)		

KWL CHART TO GENERATE GROUP DATA

What do we do now to teach literacy or literature?	What did we learn or want to change after reading text?	What do we need in order to make those changes?

Distributed by Anne Rider to the WSESU Study Group 11/13/01

Looking at Work Collaboratively

Today's Purpose

1.
2.

Today's Discussion Procedures

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Data Collection and Analysis Tool

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">OBSERVATIONS</td></tr>
<tr><td>What do you see?</td><td colspan="3"></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">How do your observations relate to:</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Analytical Observations:

Debrief Comments:

Looking at Work Collaboratively — Example

Looking at Video Clips of Students at Work
to Identify Signs of Deeper Meaning

Today's Purpose

j. to review a student discussion to examine evidence related to Strategies for Expanding Meaning
k. to adapt this method to other types of discussions of student work

Today's Discussion Procedures

6. Introduce the tool and its purpose (5 minutes)
7. Review video clip of student discussion (8 minutes)
8. In turn, describe what is observed (15 minutes)
9. Categorize observations in terms of Connecting, Summarizing, Analyzing (10 minutes)
10. Debrief of discussion about student work and expanding meaning (5 minutes)

Data Collection and Analysis Tool

OBSERVING A VIDEO CLIP			
What do you see?			
How do your observations relate to:			
	Connecting	**Summarizing**	**Analyzing**

These discussion procedures were developed by Fern Tavalin for the SE Vermont Literacy Facilitators meeting on 2/27/02. The intent was to use an observation tool to explore the benefits and limitations of establishing a lens to identify student performance. The practice of observing before categorizing is meant to build a set of expanding observations based on the variety of perspective represented in the group. During the debrief, participants noted that, although a lens can be helpful, it does not always bring out the most relevant features of the student work at hand. This is further compounded when various reading frameworks use identical terms to convey different meanings. In this case, some of the reading specialists took issue with the Fountas and Pinnell definitions of "connecting," "summarizing," and "analyzing." They felt that the student discourse represented in-depth understanding, although it did not meet the literal criteria set out by the authors. This discovery represents an experience-based "double check" of information presented in a text.

During the debrief, people noted that they increased their own knowledge based on each other's comments. What others said shaped or reshaped their individual thinking. As one person noted, "Through discussion, ideas may be modified." Parallels between our adult conversation and the one held by the students in the videotape were noted. The group also raised the issue of assessment and how to show the value of conversation.

Guided Journal Entry 1
Meant to find out how things are going in general and to learn if support is needed.

What have you taken away from our meetings that you find of value?

What are some suggestions you have for improving our future meetings?

What kinds of support would like to have in order to apply what you are learning to your classroom practice?

Guided Journal Entry 2
To be used as a way of reflecting on whether the collaboration is working well.

Four elements make collaborative inquiry effective. Responses to the questions below will help you find out whether your inquiry group is functioning well.

1. Collaborative discussion widens the perspective taken on any issue and therefore expands the understanding of its participants.

What did you learn about the topic focus through participating in this consultation? (If you feel like you didn't learn anything, please say so!)

2. Looking closely at one thing yields understanding about another.

In what way did this inquiry session help you to think more about your own practice? (If it didn't, please say so!)

3. Structured discourse provides a sense of safety and a feeling of productivity by establishing boundaries for the conversation (time limits, shared participation, ground rules, etc.)

In what ways did the structure advance or impede your willingness to participate, your sense of safety, and your feeling of productive discourse?

4. Collaborative discussion is sustained through mutual learning.

What are some things that you learned or some ways in which your own thinking was sparked as a result of this inquiry session?

Guided Journal Entry 3

Used to keep track of inquiry sessions over time.

	Focusing Question	Discussion Procedures	Type of Data Used	Means of Reflection	General Comments
Meeting 1					
Meeting 2					
Meeting 3					

General Comments (what is noticed beyond the frame that has been provided):