

# NSRF's Living History A Conversation with Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

When asked about the evolution of the National School Reform Faculty, Nancy Mohr laughed. "Gene Thompson-Grove has always said that the organization started at our kitchen table, while others recall a conversation in a basement room of a Chicago hotel, but the roots of this organization are deeply embedded in the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform." Nancy, the Director of NSRF New York, and her husband Alan Dichter, Local Instructional Supervisor—Region 9, both point to the Citibank initiative as pivotal in provoking sustained discussion of what it means to be a leader.

Nancy recalls, "During its first year, Citibank Fellows (principals from around the country who came to Providence in the summer to become part of a learning community) taught for a month at Brown Summer High School. Principals selected to be Thompson Fellows

The principals were still in residence for only one week, in contrast to the teachers who were there for several weeks. The design of the program continued to promote the notion that principals were the experts in the instructional process. And, in keeping with the hierarchical underpinnings, principals stayed in air-conditioned hotel rooms during their one-week residency, while teachers lived in dormitories.

"All of this led, however, to powerful new learning. We accepted that school leaders play different roles in schools. We began to ask how we could be genuinely useful. We saw that effective facilitation could elevate conversations within a school community. Leaders who are skilled facilitators stimulate intellectual engagement."

Alan agrees. "The work of the Citibank program focused on instructional practice, not organizational change. As we recognized the value that school leaders could add, we began

to train individuals in leadership and facilitation strategies. The earliest incarnation of this training was through Critical Friends Groups; however, those of us engaged in leadership development began to ask what the equivalent to looking at student work was for school leaders. We recognized over and over that effective facilitation

facilitator endorsement."

When asked to state their vision for the future of NSRF, Alan and Nancy had similar replies. "Saturation," Alan stated. "The presence of the organization lends credibility to the work. We need to identify potential leaders and facilitators and train them in habits of discussion and reflection."

Nancy agrees with Alan's thoughts about saturation. "Process, process, process—the whole idea of structures to think and to do. We need to forge connections in our work. By involving school leaders in intellectual engagement, we free their minds to think in new ways. We need to value the talk more than the skill level. It is imperative to make everyone an insider in the conversation."

That is happening in the NSRF work in New York City and in the State of Washington. For the past two years, a group of us have been working in Seattle with coaches from schools who have received money from the Gates Foundation. Time is a resource that cannot be shortchanged, and two years is not a long time. But by making the investment to engage in the intellectually rigorous work of forming small learning communities, we provided time and professional development resources that allowed people to engage in new learning, and time to 'chew on' ideas. Consequently, we now have ninety new schools on the trajectory for completing their work. This was previously uncharted territory for NSRF, but it has been deeply satisfying to be part of such a huge paradigm shift.

Facilitation is the intellectual underpinning of democratic practice. It is constantly scary, and always edgy, but it transforms and transcends, and provides mechanisms for using our minds well. ■

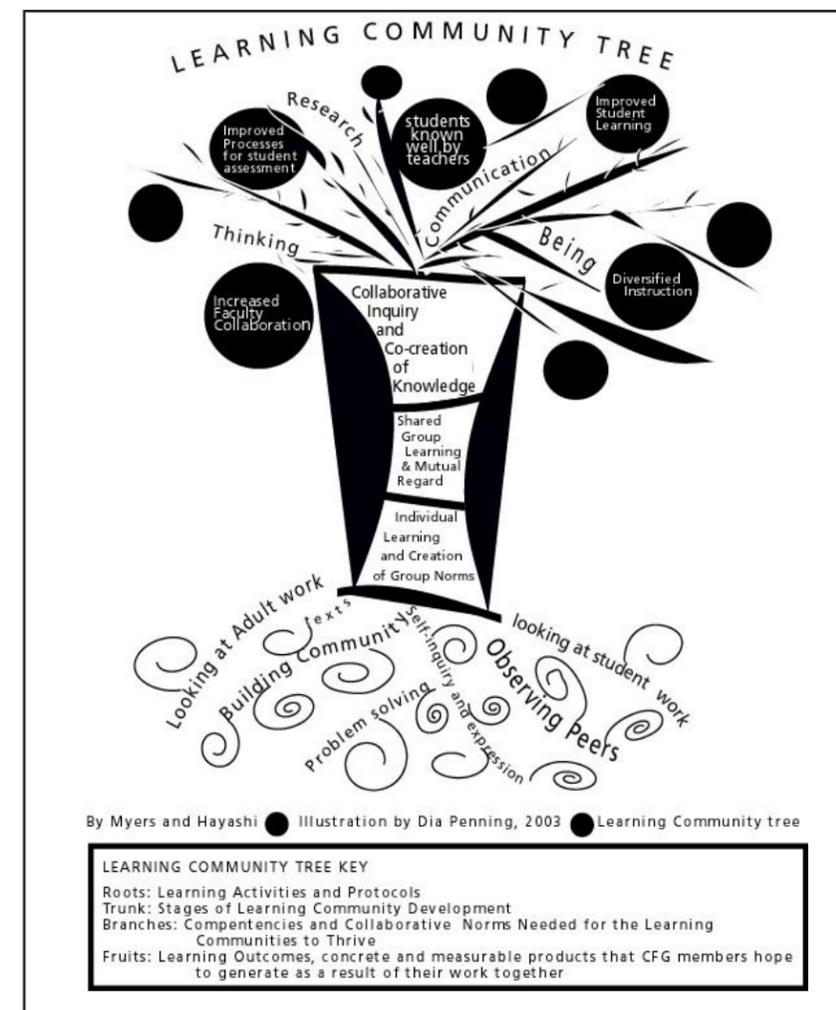
Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter and co-authors Joe and Elizabeth MacDonald wrote *The Power of Protocols: an Educator's Guide to Better Practice*. The book is available at [www.teacherscollegepress.com](http://www.teacherscollegepress.com). Contact Peggy Silva at [<psilva@sprise.com>](mailto:psilva@sprise.com)



Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter

attended the program for a week and provided a typical hierarchical model of top-down observations. Feedback led to serious changes the following summer during my term as a Thompson Fellow. There was a conscious effort to make the program more amenable to all involved. A more laissez-faire philosophy was in place. Teachers and principals were paired to co-teach in a democratic fashion. Tensions simmered, then erupted, as inherent flaws surfaced.

enhances the dynamic in many settings. Over time, the questions and the learning evolved into concrete standards for facilitators. Building capacity for this work means training people, endorsing their acquisition of skills, and providing support. We teach leaders how to use a variety of protocols to enhance leadership mandates. We have learned that more significant change comes from ongoing support. Our web site ([www.nsrfnny.org](http://www.nsrfnny.org)) lists the process for



By Myers and Hayashi • Illustration by Dia Penning, 2003 • Learning Community tree

**LEARNING COMMUNITY TREE KEY**  
 Roots: Learning Activities and Protocols  
 Trunk: Stages of Learning Community Development  
 Branches: Competencies and Collaborative Norms Needed for the Learning Communities to Thrive  
 Fruits: Learning Outcomes, concrete and measurable products that CFG members hope to generate as a result of their work together

one another. It involves the skills of listening, giving feedback, and also self-expression. Without the communication competency, no real dialogue or authentic sharing can happen.

- *Research/Inquiry* has to do with gathering data and new knowledge to deepen and broaden our knowing. It involves the skills of observation and description, data collection and analysis, and contextual reading to broaden our understanding base.

**Evolving Trunk** is the element of the Learning Community Tree represents the different stages of developmental growth that a learning community may go through over time.

**Roots** are the different learning activities we can incorporate into our CFGs to help structure our meetings, develop the skills that will nurture our competencies, and generate the fruit, which are our learning outcomes. They include learning from: building community; self-inquiry and expression; texts; problem solving; looking at student and adult work; and observing peers.

We believe that where a group is, based largely on where they are in their internalization of the different learning competencies, *Thinking, Being, Communication and Research*, will affect the choice of Root learning activities as well as the success of a particular tool: protocol, activity or process. For example, is your group

ready to handle peer visitation or do they need more practice in observation, description and in giving feedback? Is the Text-based Seminar an appropriate choice for your meeting or does there need to be more practice in thinking skills, particularly in asking questions and considering multiple perspectives? We believe that where the group is as a whole, along with the needs of individual members, affects the successful outcome of a CFG design. The "rings" of growth, starting with an individual member's growth and the creation of group norms, grow toward collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of new knowledge.

Once your group has formed and agreed upon the outcomes or fruits you wish to produce, it is very helpful to consider where your CFG might be along this Evolving Trunk. It is not simply a matter of judgment and standards but rather an acknowledgment of where your group is and what supports are needed for its growth and well-being at this time.

The graphic's descriptors represent some principles we've observed in our practice with Learning Communities that seem generally applicable. At the same time, we've noticed that all members of a group need not be at a particular stage of development for the collective energy of the group as a whole to have made the transition to a higher level. Staying in touch with "critical mass" of any group can be helpful in terms of knowing how to bring individuals on board, or when and how to move forward with certain protocols. ■

Please contact Bill Hayashi at [<whayashi@popmail.colum.edu>](mailto:whayashi@popmail.colum.edu) or Carol Myers at [<cmyersindy@aol.com>](mailto:cmyersindy@aol.com) to continue this conversation.

They began making their thinking public at the Winter Meeting and have already incorporated the feedback they received from other coaches at their Open Space session.