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 were similar replies. “Saturation,” Alan agreed. “The work of the Citibank Fellows is the underpinning of democratic practice. It is a huge paradigm shift. The work of Thompson Fellows is uncharted territory for NSRF, but it has deepened our collective knowing.” Nancy adds. “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 looked like to working on school work was for school leaders. We recognized over and over that effective facilitation 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 the 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 when we free their minds to think in new ways. 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 nine 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 Jo and Elizabeth MacDonald wrote The Power of Protocols: an Educator’s Guide to Better Practice. The book is available at www.teacherscollegepress.com. Please contact Peggy Silva at <psilva@sprte.com> for more information. The Learning Community Tree is the element of the Learning Community that allows for the different stages of developmental growth that a learning community may go through over time.

Roots are the different learning competencies 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, 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 worry about the feedback? A 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 the same stage of development for the collective energy of the group as a whole to make 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 <chayashi@popmail.colum.edu> or Carol Myers at <cmyersindy@aol.com> to continue this conversation.

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

Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter