

# The Trees are Lovely, But Where is the Forest?

Bill Hayashi, Illinois and Carol Myers, Indiana

**B**ill Hayashi is the director of a program for seniors at Columbia College in downtown Chicago. Carol Myers is a coach and national facilitator based in Indianapolis. Bill and Carol have been working together to uncover the assumptions made by experienced coaches as part of their facilitative process.

Bill Hayashi writes:

This past summer, eleven of us participated enthusiastically in a Critical Friends Group facilitated by Carol Myers, the members of which would eventually become the initiating cadre of coaches for Senior Seminar faculty CFGs. As our last Coaches' Training weekend quickly approached, however, the honeymoon phase of the relationship began to dissipate as the actual truth of the matter began really sinking in: *We would be expected to guide, in a few short weeks, our colleagues and friends through the intricacies of Critical Friends pedagogy and protocols, creating warm and effective faculty learning communities, and then invite our associates to take these same CFG protocols and methods into their classrooms to inspire and empower their students.* That's when the questions and the panic set in: "How exactly do we decide what to put into our CFG meetings? What do we talk about first?" "Do we use readings or just start with norms and community builders? If we do use readings, which protocol do we choose?" "What about warm and cool feedback?" At about the same time, we received yet another heavy binder from Harmony School and NSRF containing yet more new and wonderful protocols, as well as a thick packet of additional readings to instruct and uplift us all.

Overload and meltdown kicked in big time! "How do we structure our first meeting?" "Which protocols do we use, when and why?" "What exactly is the purpose of Critical Friends Groups anyway?" "There are so many trees, I

can't really see the forest!" That's when one astute faculty member nailed it quite succinctly: "You know, I feel like I have this toolbox filled with all these wonderful tools, but I'm not exactly sure what we're building nor what each tool is supposed to be used for." That's when I dropped my cool and e-mailed Carol.

Carol Myers writes:

As a facilitator of group work, I have operated with a growing set of assumptions about how collaborative learning groups develop. These assumptions, along with NSRF experiences, continued observations, readings, and a little intuition, guide many of my decisions in supporting the development of collaborative learning communities. When I got Bill's e-mail, and even more directly in a phone conversation with him and several other distraught faculty members, I began to see that these synthesizing assumptions existed primarily in my own head and weren't necessarily clear and apparent to others. (Imagine that!) Bill sensed that I had an understanding of how to go about creating and developing collaborative learning communities but that in our CFG trainings, this was not made explicit. It wasn't enough to have participants within the training experience the "process" of becoming a learning community, if faculty were to be instrumental in assisting others in forming and guiding their own CFGs, they needed to understand the overall structure and processes of how these learning communities come into being. Bill was tenacious in wanting to understand the larger context of learning community development. He wanted to see a conceptual framework and seminar design that would help faculty establish a context for making decisions within their CFGs that would lead to ever evolving and stronger groups. Challenged by Bill in this way, I tried to uncover my assumptions about collaborative learning community development.

The Collaborative Learning Tree map in the illustration represents our thinking to date. We are sharing this graphic and its description for feedback so that we can co-construct an accurate description of the coaching process.

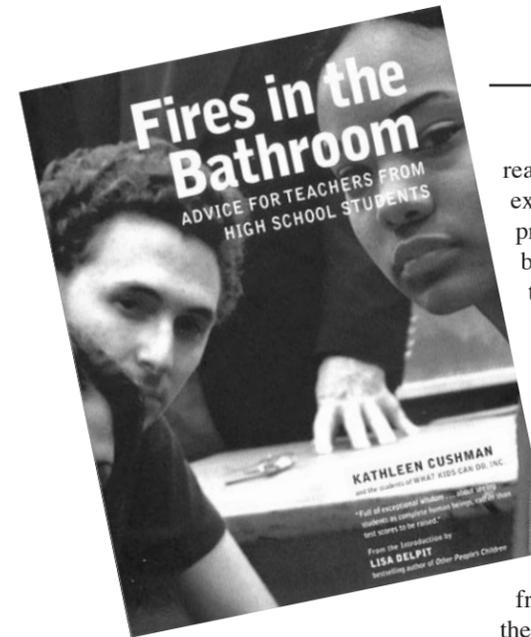
The Collaborative Learning Tree map is a visual representation of some key factors that members might consider when designing their groups and action plans. The Collaborative Learning Tree suggests that the over-riding purpose of CFGs is to create supportive, adult learning communities that in turn are translated into learning communities that support all of our students.

In our visual you'll find the following:

**Fruits**, which represent the specific learning outcomes and the concrete and measurable products that a CFG hopes to generate as a result of its ongoing meetings. These can include more general outcomes, such as greater collaboration among faculty to strengthen pedagogy or more thoughtful assessment of student work.

**Branches** are the competencies or collaborative norms that need to be internalized to grow and support the "fruits." We have identified four main branches/competencies needed to produce healthy, tasty fruit (measurable objectives). These are competencies in *Thinking, Being, Communication, and Research*.

- *Thinking/Questioning* has to do with thinking and questioning skills as well as the ability to consider different perspectives and identify differing assumptions.
- *Being/Action* has to do with how we are together: what needs to happen for there to be trust and accountability within the group. The skills we have identified here include openness and receptivity, caring and support, and focus and commitment.
- *Communication* has to do with how well we communicate with



**F**ires in the Bathroom is a must-read for everyone concerned about our children and our schools. If you're beginning to plan your program for the fall, read this book! If you're on a committee charged with rewriting the student handbook, read this book! If you're a parent or an administrator trying to understand our children's thoughts and feelings as they experience "school as something done to them, not by them," read this book, and share it with your students and children!

The title of this just published collection of student voices comes from an Oakland teenager, who asks, "What's a teacher to do when she's trying to be nice and they're setting fires in the bathroom?" According to this book, one of the first things we can all do is listen carefully. We can begin by really getting to know our students, their interests, their lives, their hopes and their dreams. We can stop assuming we know them and spend more of our time learning from and with them.

In this book we hear that our kids want to know about us too. They want to know where we went to school, our other job experiences, and why we became teachers. They're hungry for connections between adults and young people, because these connections can make the difference between anonymously drifting through school and

# Fires in the Bathroom

A Book Review – Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

really benefiting from the learning experiences that we are so anxious to provide. In the words of one girl, "I been looking for a teacher I can talk to..." Students in the book are quick to point out that they're not looking for phony friendships, they are looking for "that delicate balance between adult authority and guidance mixed with a healthy measure of flexibility." Cushman and her co-authors don't just state all the students' desires, they supply us with user-

friendly tools that can help jump-start the process of achieving them. There are sample questionnaires that can be used the first week of school, and there are outlines for contracts that can be used to start conversations about the expectations or norms that will be set for your school or classroom community. There are reflective activities that can be used by individual teachers, or as part of a group. These activities ask us to unpack our expectations for our students — from the high achieving to those that are struggling — but most importantly, the charts and activities ask us for evidence to support our assumptions.

The book goes on to talk about group work, grading, text choice, and the creation of a culture of success, among other things, and it does it all from the student side of the aisle. There are no easy answers in these pages, but there is a wealth of information that can be put to immediate use as we look for the solutions and approaches that apply to our individual situations.

In addition to all of the useful material in the book, there was much that made me smile. In particular, I enjoyed the students' depictions of the student "types" found in typical classrooms. Their list included the "eye-roller" and the "hand-waver," and their descriptions transported me back to my own days as a high school student!

Finally, I appreciated Cushman's description of the thoughtful, collab-

orative process that was used in formulating the questions and collecting the students' responses. As someone who is focused on student voice, I often feel that I'm missing the mark when I visit schools and sit down with focus groups. Reading this account has pushed my thinking and will alter my approach this week as I revisit my schools. Treat yourself to this powerful new tool! ■

Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students by Kathleen Cushman and the students of What Kids Can Do, Inc.

To order, visit your local bookseller, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), or visit What Kids Can Do at [www.whatkidscando.org](http://www.whatkidscando.org). Contact Debbie Bambino at [<dbambino@earthlink.net>](mailto:dbambino@earthlink.net)

What Kids Can Do  
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**I**ntegral to WKCD's mission is connecting the previously separate fields of school reform, youth development, community development, service learning, and school-to-work. We aim to stand, as well, at the intersection of journalism, research, and advocacy.

WKCD was founded two years ago and its substantial offerings of *Student Work*, *Youth as Resources*, and *Youth in Media* all speak to the successful realization of its stated mission. Navigating around this site is like diving into a treasure chest of ideas for work with students in our schools, or with our broader communities.

I was especially intrigued by the "Writing with a Reason" offerings. This collection of youth publications that serve a public purpose has something that will help you connect with even the most reluctant of your student writers.

But don't just visit the site for ideas, visit with an eye to the future contributions your own students can make. This site's value as a jumping-off point for building the links between students and adults interested in educational reform are without limit! ■