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 in Queens College in downtown Chicago. Carol Myers is a coach and national facilitator based in Indianapolis. Bill and Carol have been working with the faculty in their respective states for over a year, and the assumptions made by experienced coaches as part of their facilitative process.

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 is a visual representation of some key factors that members might consider when forming and guiding their own CFGs and methods, creating warm and supportive CFGs. As our last Coaches’ Training weekend quickly approached, however, and the relationship began to dissipate as the actual truth of the matter began really sinking in: We would be expected to give, in a few short weeks, our colleagues and friends through the intricacies of Critical Friends pedagogy and protocols, creating warm and supportive 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 that exists in our CFG trainings, that hasn’t made explicit. It wasn’t enough to have participants within the training experience the “process” of becoming a collaborative learning community if faculty weren’t 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 decided to uncover my assumptions about collaborative learning community development.

Throughout history, the question has been: ‘When and why do we decide what to put into our children’s thoughts and feelings as they experience “school as something lovely” but that in our CFG trainings, this was more directly in a phone conversation with Bill Hayashi, Illinois and Carol Myers, Indiana...”

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 NSF protocols, create the underlying structure of our training experiences, continued, observed readings, and a little intuition, guide many of my decisions in supporting the development of collaborative learning communities. When I get 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 that exists in our CFG trainings, that hasn’t made explicit. It wasn’t enough to have participants within the training experience the “process” of becoming a collaborative learning community if faculty weren’t 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 decided 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 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 that 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 a group.

- Communication has to do with how we communicate with each other and how that is productive of learning.

Finally, I appreciated Cushman’s description of the thoughtful, collaborative 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 what 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 were many questionnaires that came to the teachers of 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 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 heard 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 really benefiting from the learning experiences that we are so anxious to provide. We will be looking for a teacher I can talk to…’ Students in the book are quick to point out that they’re not looking for some “pat on the back” or looking for “that delicate balance between adult authority and guidance once mixed with a healthy dose 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 many questionnaires 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.

This collection of youth publications is connecting the previously separate fields of school reform, youth development, community development, service learning, and school-to-work. We aim to open the intersection of journalism, research, and advocacy.

WKCD was founded two years ago and its substantial offerings of Student Works, Youth as Resources, and Youth in Media all speak to the success of this stated mission. Navigating around this site is like diving into a treasure chest of diverse 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 is without limit!