

Celebrating All Forms of Teacher Leadership

From September 2017 to June 2018, one or more members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative community will write a blog post each month exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in their growth and learning. In this post, Senior Fellow Becky Van Tassell shares why it's important to highlight the myriad of ways teachers can improve education in their classrooms and beyond.

This year, members of the Knowles Teaching Initiative community will be exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in our growth and learning. We at Knowles know that learning is a messy process, with failure and mistakes being a requirement for growth. But that aspect of our development as students and professionals isn't often made public. This year, we are going to embrace that vulnerability and share stories that tell the whole story, not just celebrate the ultimate success.

In my first three years in the classroom, I dabbled with both formal and informal leadership roles. I started a 3-Minute Observation club with my peers, became department coordinator, and lead a workshop on incorporating food science into biology and chemistry classrooms. These various pursuits were interesting, challenging, and lead to far more engagement with my colleagues than would have happened otherwise. In my fourth year, I started over at a new school, where I lead a workshop. In my fifth year, I took on another formal role as department coordinator (same name, different school, different role!), coordinating pedagogy conversations for the department. I took on almost all of these activities because of who I am, but also because of the challenge Knowles presents to us to act as teacher leaders.

When I type that resume-list of “leadership activities,” it sounds impressive—but that isn’t the whole story. I may have done those things, but not everything was an overwhelming success. In fact, my last role—the most challenging, and probably the most important—came with some intractable problems that made progress painful, glacial, and practically nonexistent. But you wouldn’t hear that story unless you asked.

During our fifth-year work as Knowles Teaching Fellows, our cohort agreed that teacher leadership didn’t have to come with a formal role or title. But then, can everything count? Is being an excellent teacher and serving as a model for others enough? Is a willingness to have a conversation and share your knowledge with a peer sufficient to count as leadership? If an inadvertent comment has influence, should it still count? Or does intention matter?

Throughout this journey to define teacher leadership for myself and figure out what type of leader I want to be, I’ve thought about how Knowles—the institution—has influenced and molded me into the leader I am. I also have wondered at times whether the Knowles community, and the different experiences I had in the intimate setting of our inquiry groups, versus our cohort, and the larger community, introduced competing ideas about teacher leadership that have hindered my ability to define teacher leadership for myself.

In more intimate settings, there seemed to be room for many different types of leadership, space to grapple with the realities of what it means to be early-career teachers and decide for ourselves how we wanted to approach leadership in our contexts. However, in public spaces (like whole group gatherings at the annual Knowles Summer Meeting) and on social media—communications that were meant to showcase the work of Fellows—there seemed to be a tendency to only highlight the large-scale and ambitious projects undertaken by Fellows.

The experiences we have as Fellows have a substantial and profound impact on the type of teachers we become. The feelings we have as members of this impressive community matter. The impressions we get when presented with other’s accomplishments matter. After returning home from practically every meeting, I would need to debrief with my husband and be reminded that what I was doing was interesting, challenging and important work. I always felt that the work that other Fellows were doing was more profound, ambitious . . . you get the picture.

This was especially true after each Knowles Summer Meeting. I remember “highlight reels” shown during lunch: presentations that progressed through Fellow after Fellow celebrating huge projects, international travel, and district-wide curriculum work. Many posters showcased work that was incredible and impressive—work that in retrospect was clearly accomplished through many years of effort and mixed results, but the end product was shiny and at the time, more than a little intimidating. As a beginning teacher, and a member of this impressive community, I was left feeling like I wasn’t doing enough. Other Fellows seemed to be doing larger scale projects that were much grander in scope than what I felt capable of. Now, I am involved in these large-scale projects, and I still feel this way sometimes! What was presented as teacher leadership during our cohort meetings felt different than the picture of teacher leadership showcased at summer meetings. In encouraging us to act as leaders in our context, Knowles staff encouraged us to challenge our assumptions, start small, and form relationships with our colleagues. But in public spaces and large gatherings, the accomplishments that were made public in our community were far from small.

This mixed messaging was problematic for me as I tried to build my identity as a teacher leader; I felt pulled in two directions, one which felt impossible but ideal, the other manageable, meaningful, unimpressive and unworthy of other’s attention or interest. I felt like the messaging in our cohort meetings was somehow permissive, or subversive, when the true institutional drive was for us to be spectacular. Because the only things we saw showcased for the whole community were large-scale, it sent the message that that was the real type of teacher and teacher leader Knowles valued.

This tension isn’t unique to me either. I have had countless conversations that reflect this mixed messaging and the pressure newer Fellows feel when confronted by the accomplishments of other Fellows. The culture we have created within Knowles pushes us to step outside our comfort zone and find ways to lead in our contexts. We set a high standard for each other. Throughout the Fellowship, we see many different examples in different contexts about what teacher leadership is and what it looks like. It challenges us to think about our own identity and our own goals as teacher leaders. Sometimes though, it is hard to keep sight of what we know is right for us as individuals, especially when we hope to meet the expectations of an organization that has done so much for us.

We need all sorts of teacher leaders: those who reach out to each other, build trust, build community, and build up those around us. It isn't about us. It isn't about our accomplishments. It's about how we enable the accomplishments of others in meeting the needs of students every day. This work is messy, full of missteps, failed attempts, and mediocre results. And that is the part we need to acknowledge and celebrate in addition to the glossy version of the end product.

I am thrilled that this year, Knowles will be celebrating and making public how Knowles Fellows are acting in small but meaningful ways to improve education for students across the country. I know we are doing powerful work that isn't acknowledged, publicized, or even recognized as valuable. Let's hear your voices. Let's raise each other up.