

Learning From Small Victories, Mistakes and Failures

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, Nicole Gillespie and Heather Buskirk introduce the theme our second annual blog challenge and why it was chosen.

We—as a Knowles Senior Fellow and Trustee (Heather) and the Executive Director (Nicole)—are excited to announce the launch of our second annual blog challenge. This year, our theme is learning from small victories, mistakes and failures.

Last year, **our blog challenge focused on the topic of teachers as the primary agents of educational improvement**. We read a lot of great writing, from a lot of different perspectives. Although it may seem like this year's topic is drastically different, the depth, nuance and diversity of thought we saw last year leads directly to this year's blog challenge.

At the Knowles Teacher Initiative, we are focused on supporting beginning high school math and science teachers to become highly skilled teachers and leaders in the profession. There has been a lot written about good teaching and teacher leadership on this blog, from a lot of different perspectives. What's clear is that good teaching is not monolithic; it can and does look radically different depending on the teacher, the context, the content, and, of course, the students. Similarly, teacher leadership is not just one thing. However, we are clear that the one thing it *cannot* be is the “lone hero” one sees in movies, who somehow single-handedly saves students and schools while putting his or her colleagues in their rightful places. But even after all this writing and thinking, our efforts as a community to clarify what good teaching and teacher leadership look like are still evolving. And

some of our struggle comes from the messages we receive—from each other, from the media, from policy-makers, colleagues, parents and students.

At the Knowles Teacher Initiative, we take a great deal of pride in the accomplishments of our Fellows. We choose to celebrate Fellows' accomplishments publicly via our website, social media, press releases, at meetings, etc., in part as a way to create new public narratives about who teaches, why and how. But what we choose to celebrate publicly also sends messages privately to the community, and sometimes those messages aren't the ones we want to send.

For example, every year at the summer meeting, we do what we call a "Branching Out" ceremony to celebrate fifth-year Teaching Fellows becoming Senior Fellows and all the ways they will branch out professionally and personally going forward. As the Executive Director, Nicole speaks briefly about each Fellow in the cohort, giving a summary of where and what they teach, some highlights from their years in the Fellowship, and their accomplishments as teachers and leaders. Every year, the list of accomplishments is extremely impressive. And although many Fellows tell us how proud and inspired they are to learn of their colleagues successes, each year we also hear from Fellows who are left feeling daunted, intimidated or somehow "less than." As an organization, we want to acknowledge, celebrate and share Fellows accomplishments and successes, but we also don't want to send the message that the kinds of awards, formal leadership positions and other accolades that are easy to read off from a podium are the only things that really matter.

We also hear from Fellows that focusing on these "shining moments" of a teacher's career mischaracterizes the critically important, difficult and meaningful work of teaching. And more importantly, it misses the point about how teachers most effectively learn and grow.

Heather was reminded of this last week when she ran into a former colleague, a special education teacher named Mr. R., who reminded her of a conversation they had her first year. She was teaching a conceptual physics class, which although small in numbers, had several students receiving special education services. Most of those students were on Mr. R.'s caseload, so when the class quickly got completely out of her control, she went to him asking, "What do I do with these kids?"

Hearing these words relayed back to her made her heart sink and transported her back into the shoes of the naive teacher who was clueless about engaging learners who did not fit her traditional image of physics students. She realizes now she was unintentionally alienating those students by not meeting them where they were and failing to provide the support they needed to learn. They, of course, responded by finding other things to entertain and engage themselves, including making her feel the same sense of inadequacy she was imposing on them through her misdirected teaching. Her attempts to control her students and classroom created power struggles, which she had lost the instant they began.

Thirteen years later, she finds herself working—by choice—in an alternative high school where many of the students were sent because of their behaviors in their home school district. Many of these kids are over-age and under-credited, and facing a myriad of challenges outside of school, including drugs, trauma, abuse, homelessness, and more. While she recognizes that she still doesn't have all of the answers, she now knows a lot more about working with challenging students. But she didn't get here overnight. Her path started more than a decade ago, when she asked Mr. R. for help.

As a Senior Fellow, experienced teacher and Knowles Trustee, Heather feels she has learned many important lessons as a member of the Knowles community, but to her, the most important is how to face her own struggles. Admittedly, it takes a certain amount of confidence to stand up in front of a classroom and be in charge of a room full of teenagers. It takes even more guts to put aside our own egos aside and admit we still have much to learn.

So our goal for this blog challenge is to shine a light on those uncelebrated, unglamorous, and sometimes heartbreaking moments of teaching and leadership that constitute the realities of teachers' lives and professional growth. As always, we know we will learn a great deal from listening to the voices of our community members and are looking forward to seeing what emerges. We hope you'll join us in the conversation.