

It's Time to Reconsider How We Value Teachers' Work



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 blog post, Knowles Senior Fellow Kirstin Milks reflects on lasting lessons that were imparted by two of her high school teachers.

In the eight years I've been a high school teacher, my little family has grown by two little people. Recently, my spouse and I were looking over the journals we're keeping for our kids, and I experienced the temporal vertigo familiar to adults who have watched children grow in their family. N's first steps do, indeed, feel like they

were only yesterday, and I'm sure T started talking a mere eyeblink ago. "I thought it was just a cliché," I moaned as my spouse laughed.

That dizzy experience of time has stayed with me, and I've found myself thinking about how our culture approaches time in the education of our young people—and how that approach connects to the ways we measure and value the work that teachers do.

I didn't recognize the most valuable learning from my high school education until I started managing the learning of others as a teacher. Mr. Rice and Dr. Danahert, my 11th and 12th grade English teachers, ran their courses as seminars. We students sat in desks arranged in horseshoes in both rooms, and it was our voices and experiences that shaped each class. I know now both teachers were skilled, thoughtful facilitators and coaches, modeling for us how to ground our analyses in text and value each other's insight, but largely the work and skill of what they were doing was hidden to me.

Even though I didn't appreciate the hard work that my teachers must have done to develop their practices, my friends and I knew those classes had a feeling we didn't get anywhere else. We didn't always agree with our English teachers, but we almost always felt respected and heard by them.

Starting my own classroom teaching practice was the first time I had ever managed groups of people myself, and I soon started making variants of the "teacher moves" I had experienced in those English classes 15 years before. Today, my students still work largely in small groups. While they work, I work to scaffold and model the ways I hope they will converse and learn together—and I carefully listen to them think aloud.

It's an unusual classroom structure at my high school, and sometimes there are bumps in the road, but group-worthy tasks and conversations are at the core of why my classroom is a place of powerful learning for both me and my students. Based on my evaluations, these tasks and conversations also serve my goal of giving students the same experience I had in high school of being simultaneously challenged and respected.

Here's where time comes in: if you had asked 18-year-old me what was good about the work my high school teachers did, there's no way I would have mentioned those English classes. Not understanding the skill and effort that went into teaching them, I would have told you if pressed that it was my peers who made those classes intellectually rigorous and interesting.

As an adult, however, I can look back and articulate the stance Mr. Rice and Dr. Danaher modeled for me thusly: structuring others' work in ways that build agency, connection, and safety is deeply humane and can yield tremendous learning. When I was in high school, I had no idea how important this stance was for helping people learn how to learn—or what an intellectual pursuit teaching like this must have been for my teachers.

But now I know. And I've been teaching long enough that I can ask my own former students what they now feel was important in their schooling. Even just a few years out of high school, their answers vary quite a bit from those I collected in year-end surveys when they were my students, and they're often clearly textured by what happened after they left my school.

It's only by telling our own stories, then looking back, that many of us are able to see the aspects of our schooling—and our lives—that have yielded deep value and insight. And building and revising our own stories is one of the most pivotal things we do to grow into vibrant, thoughtful, powerful adults.

And yet the work and value of teachers and schools are judged by the work our students do today, right now, on a very narrow set of tasks. We sometimes try to use limited "value-added" assessments that position teachers against teachers, and sometimes we follow students a few years after graduation, but we always collect data in numbers: the number of questions correct, the number of college graduates, the number of those employed. Or we videotape one day of classrooms across the country, score each recording against a rubric, and, in doing so, rank classrooms nationwide based on that one day.

Such data can be useful—and cause for celebration! But they mask the effect of the teacher or coach who regularly counsels students through difficult times, helps children get the mental health help they need, or regularly reaches out to families. They mask the disparity of resources and privilege our students experience, often without providing inroads to directly addressing their causes.

And they mask the lifelong change one adult can generate for a young person through the power of everyday interactions. The time window of learning's leverage extends far beyond the one year a student sits in a teacher's classroom.

It's time for us to consider the stories people have to tell about their own schooling as a data source, parallel to the sorts of numeric data I've described, for evaluating teacher and school efficacy. One way to do this, brought elegantly to my attention by Lisa Delpit in her book *Other People's Children* (2006), is to collect and reflect on the stories that families and community members tell about their own communities and educational structures. A similar mindset led the curriculum development department in my school district to engage community stakeholders and family members in an evaluation process for potential new materials. But even smaller-scale inquiry that relies on community feedback would be useful to teachers and evaluators.

Our culture also needs to place more value on the stories of teachers and their learning. Such stories provide a window into the complexity and richness of knowledge that teachers develop and employ in their daily teaching practice. Dr. Danaher and Mr. Rice held knowledge that, if I had been able to access their stories of developing it, could have fast-forwarded my students and me through several awkward and frustrating moments early in my teaching career. The editorial staff of *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, the Knowles journal, is passionate about helping teachers create and share stories of their growth and learning with those involved in education as well as the general public.

Finally, we need to continue to celebrate the roles that individual teachers play in the development of young people—not as teaching superheroes, but as professionals dedicated to helping our society raise our youngsters, in order to combat the narrative that all teachers are entitled, lazy, and lack knowledge.

I hope you find ways to share your own celebratory stories of the teachers who changed your life—particularly if you only realized the change long after graduation.

Reference

Delpit, L. D. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.