

Walking Our Talk: Embedding Inquiry into Our Own Practice

Practitioner inquiry is a significant focus throughout the five years of the Knowles Teaching Fellows Program. So as a program staff, we spend a lot of time and energy working to support an inquiry community within Knowles. As part of the professional development activities we design for Fellows, we regularly model important **practices and habits of mind for inquiry**, act as critical friends and coaches to Fellows' inquiry work, structure ways for Fellows to **collaborate and build a strong community to support each other in inquiry**, and scaffold opportunities for Fellows to make their inquiry public to each other—and therefore **contribute to the knowledge base for the teaching profession**.

But possibly the most important, and authentic, way that we support our inquiry community is by not just “talking the talk” but by “walking the walk”—engaging in practitioner inquiry ourselves. We see our practice (supporting teachers' professional development within the Teaching Fellows Program) as a site for inquiry. This means that from this work we identify our own problems of practice, raise important questions, systematically pursue these questions using data, generate knowledge, use that knowledge to improve our work, and make this inquiry process public to others. Like teachers, what initiates our inquiry are our own “wonderings”—our feelings that there is more to know and understand about our practice. And like teachers who engage in practitioner inquiry, we have several motivations for intentionally embedding inquiry into the work we do:

First, we're motivated to understand to what extent our program is meeting its goals. This motivation for practitioner inquiry is most like “evaluation”—but as our Research Project Manager, Jodie Galosy, **wrote in a previous blog about evaluation in a learning organization**, this kind of evaluation “has a different take than a traditional ‘did we hit the mark or not’ accountability.” This isn't a “pre- and post-test” kind of evaluation, nor does it evaluate “fixed targets and outcomes” set by someone external to our practice. Instead, we all hold ourselves accountable to consistently evaluating our practice by embedding inquiry into our program work. As Jodie wrote, “this requires regular cycles of clearly articulating the direction we want to head and why, and opening that to critical input, followed by systematic questioning of what we do, whether we are headed in the direction we intend, and how we know.” As practitioners, we think deeply about the questions we want to ask about our

program—those that matter most to us. For example, rather than asking whether Fellows have mastered a particular **inquiry practice**, we are more likely to ask: *How are Fellows' ideas of inquiry developing? To what extent do they value inquiry? What are they struggling with? What kind of support do they need?* When we plan professional development activities, we are also intentional about planning to collect artifacts that will serve as data to help us explore these questions. For example: What kinds of documents, posters, or other records will Fellows produce during a meeting that will represent their inquiry work? What kinds of field notes can help us capture Fellows' discussions? Will specific reflection prompts help us uncover Fellows' thinking? We carefully analyze this data as a team, but we also make our questions and our data public to our colleagues at Knowles who act as our critical friends and offer us their own perspectives. From this embedded inquiry process, we all come to shared understandings of how our program is meeting our goals, and implications for our team and our entire program.

Second, we're motivated to dig into problems of practice. These are issues or tensions we are noticing in our program that we need to more fully understand before we can “throw solutions” at them. This motivation for inquiry goes beyond our “are we headed in the right direction?” kinds of questions, as we stop to ask ourselves “what’s going on here?” For example, as I wrote in **a previous blog about teacher knowledge**, while Fellows consistently tell us that they value inquiry in their own practice, we’ve been perplexed by their reluctance to recognize what they learn from inquiry as “knowledge.” Recognizing this tension, we needed to stop to ask ourselves: *What is happening when Fellows tell us that they don't believe that teachers generate knowledge through inquiry? What do they mean? How can we understand this problem?* To explore a problem of practice like this one, our data shifts slightly from solely looking at Fellows' artifacts, to interrogating our own thinking and actions. What do we mean when we say that “teachers generate knowledge through inquiry”? As a team, is our thinking aligned with each other? During our activities with Fellows, in what ways are we talking about knowledge? Are our activities aligned with our goals? Are we relying on implicit messages, and do we need to embed more explicit discussions about knowledge generation? This kind of inquiry work leads us to recognize misalignments or assumptions in our work, and helps us form an inkling of what we need to shift. For example, this year we've made intentional decisions to highlight teachers' stories that *make knowledge claims*, and to explicitly discuss

how the authors came to that knowledge through inquiry.

Third, we're motivated to generate and share knowledge of practice. As a program staff, we regularly draw on knowledge that is generated through academic research to access new ideas and resources for our program. However, we also believe that the knowledge produced through academic research is open to interpretation and interrogation, and that as practitioner-inquirers, we have the capacity to theorize our practice, and to generate local knowledge that builds on and contributes to a broader knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). For example, one of the big ideas that cuts across the Teaching Fellows Program is teacher leadership. So we naturally read and explore what other researchers in education have to say about teacher leadership (i.e., York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), and we draw on various frameworks to support teacher leadership development (such as the **Teacher Leader Model Standards** and the **Teacher Leadership Competencies**). But through our work with early-career teachers, we also recognize when this kind of knowledge doesn't quite land right on our Fellows. We know that our Teaching Fellows have unique perspectives, interests, and entry-points into teacher leadership, and by exploring their ideas we believe we can "round out" what other researchers have to say. For example, reflecting on **Fellows' perspectives on teacher leadership** has led us to ask more directly: *What do Fellows mean when they talk about teacher leadership? What's important to them? How might we understand, share, and legitimize their vision?* As a team, we explore these questions in big and small ways—for example, by inviting Fellows to "talk back to the research literature" during meetings and analyzing artifacts from these discussions, and by analyzing stories that Fellows have written about their teacher leadership experiences. By interrogating the research literature, we know that we are not just "consuming" knowledge from outside researchers, but we are using inquiry to generate new knowledge that can contribute to the field. And, like teachers who inquire, we also make this knowledge public—sharing our findings at professional conferences and submitting articles for publication.

As a program staff who engages in practitioner inquiry, we strive to embed inquiry into our regular practice, motivated by a desire to understand, to improve, and to generate knowledge. Of course, we run into the same stumbling blocks as teachers who inquire—carving out time for inquiry in the day-to-day urgency of our to-do lists, uncovering our blind spots in order to ask the right questions, and

pressing ourselves to make this work public to others outside of our Knowles community. But working through these stumbling blocks means that we take inquiry seriously, and that we understand on a practical level what it means to engage in inquiry practices and to cultivate habits of mind for inquiry. Practicing what we preach is part of who we are as a learning organization, and it's part of the real work we do to support an inquiry community at Knowles.

References

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