

The Knowles Coaching Partnership Program: A Question and Answer Session

Introduction

The Knowles Teacher Initiative believes that teachers are the primary agents of educational improvement. One way Knowles supports teachers in improving education is by equipping them to coach one another. The Knowles Coaching Partnership Program partners Teaching Fellows (who are in their first five years of teaching) with Senior Fellow coaches (who are more experienced classroom teachers), for one school year. The partnership uses coaching to support and address the specific needs of individual teachers. At the start of the school year, the pair determines a focus and makes a plan to complete at least two coaching cycles, each of which includes planning, observation, and reflection.

In this post, [Kristin Germinario Mongelli](#) (Senior Fellow coach) and [Jacque Kutvirt](#) (2018 Teaching Fellow coachee) reflect on their process within the structure of the Knowles Coaching Partnership Program. Jacque determined a focus and then met virtually with Kristin every few weeks to further the work. Here they detail parts of their reflections, growth and unexpected outcomes from the year-long coaching relationship and process. They brainstormed the following questions together as a way to guide their reflections and support them in sharing their different perspectives of this experience.

What has coaching taught you about your practice? About your students? About yourself?

Kristin: Coaching is entirely about building relationships, and over the past two years as an instructional coach in my district and as a Senior Fellow coach at Knowles, I have developed a better understanding of how to foster productive and supportive relationships. In the words of Susan Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations*, “The conversation is the relationship.” All too often, we become isolated in our classrooms, our departments, our schools, or our communities. Having a simple conversation can lead to a shift in perspective or reflection on our current professional practice. Coaches have the unique role of being able to establish relationships and begin conversations that lead educators to dig deeper and go farther than they could have imagined.

As a Knowles coach, I was excited to dive into the coaching process, especially

with another Knowles Fellow. My coachee, Jacque, and I worked towards learning more about supporting collaborative group work in the classroom. The role of the instructional coach is different compared to school administrators or education consultants, because the coach is non-evaluative and not an expert. As the coach, my goal is to support the teacher in deepening their understanding, and to promote reflective habits of mind through conversation. A coach can take on the role of a consultant or collaborator as needed, but the primary focus is to carefully guide and support the teacher/coachee.

Jacque: When I began my Knowles coaching adventure, I decided that I wanted support in how I teach and/ or use group work in my instruction. My classes are (mostly) heterogeneously grouped and have a wide range of skill levels and specific background knowledge, which can be overwhelming. Maybe this is how many classrooms feel, but as a new teacher, I was wondering a lot about how to break down patterns of student identities around learning. For example, x student is a 'good' student and y student is a 'struggling' student. My school is also very small (~100 per grade), so these identities seemed deeply ingrained over the time that each of my students spent in class together. I wondered if I could structure group work in a way that perhaps could disrupt that pattern. I wondered if I could provide an experience where a 'struggling' student could regularly feel successful. I wondered how I could set up group work to position students to be able to support each other in many different ways. My thinking was that a deliberate focus on students supporting each other and students taking on leadership roles in group work were ways that I could work towards these goals.

In what ways has the coaching process had an impact on you? On your community at school? With your other colleagues?

Kristin: When I learned my coachee was interested in learning more about supporting students with group work, my hope was to help her grow in her practice through reflection and also through providing resources that would meet her needs based on her classroom context. When we first started meeting, it was important for me to find out about Jacque's needs in her classroom, and her school context. Based on her needs, we began our work by researching types of group-worthy¹ tasks and investigating different structures and procedures that support productive group work in the science classroom, such as group roles and team building norms.

During one of our coaching conversations, Jacque identified a sticking point she noticed—that often when working in groups, students tend to fall into familiar patterns of behavior. She also noticed that there tends to be a hierarchy of status that develops in the group once those patterns of behavior emerge, leaving some students to disengage with the task. Once Jacque raised this point, I thought of **Complex Instruction (CI)**, and I brought it up as something Jacque might like to try. Through CI, teachers thoughtfully select skills, behaviors, and ways of thinking about understanding content that students exhibit during the task, and highlight this for students as they work. For instance, the teacher might say “It was very smart² when you used patterns to draw conclusions” to a student who exhibited this skill. In this way, teachers work to equalize status differences, which leads to more equitable learning in the classroom.

In order to explain this strategy to Jacque, I had to push myself to reflect on the main purpose of the CI strategy, and the different ways Jacque might choose to implement this strategy. A coach needs to consider the classroom context of the coachee and understand that strategies will need to be modified and implemented differently in each teacher’s classroom, because each school and group of students has different needs and dynamics. By having this conversation with Jacque, it helped me hold myself more accountable for using CI. Working with Jacque on implementing CI strategies has also pushed me to be a better educator and utilize this strategy more in my own classroom. I also was able to offer advice by sharing some of my successes and failures with my use of CI over the past few years in my classroom, which allowed Jacque to avoid possible pitfalls and to determine the best way she might use the strategy with her students.

Jacque: Working with Kristin has impacted my practice in many ways. As with many things my first year teaching, I went forth thinking “well, this is probably a good idea—but I have no idea what my intended outcome is!” Kristin and I have been through a few cycles of trying new tools and discussing the observed effects. We started with POGILs (**Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning**) as group-worthy tasks, and used POGIL roles to provide a structure for students to engage with the task. My students were (and still are) resistant. I got clear feedback from some students that this felt juvenile. Despite that feedback, I tried to stick with it—making tweaks—all the while providing justification that working together is an “important skill for their futures.”

It was hard to keep going given this type of feedback. A few weeks after the first few times we did POGILs with roles, one of my students said something that stood out to me as particularly important. We used a “fishbowl discussion” format in which students formed a circle (the fishbowl) and the entire faculty of our school on the outside of the circle observing. The group of students inside the fishbowl were sharing a wide range of experiences in hopes to increase understanding between students and teachers and ultimately support a path towards a more equitable school culture and structure. During this discussion, various students brought up that they noticed patterns in the ways that teachers grouped them in class. One student shared that they noticed teachers would group them in ways that make it seem clear who was supposed to be the leader and who was supposed to be supported or helped by that leader. When I heard that, I thought “that’s definitely what I used to do!”

After this was said, another student brought up that it felt different in my class where I assigned roles. She indicated that the assigning of roles meant that it didn’t matter who you were, you had to step up and be the ‘group manager’ that day or the ‘recorder’ (she was referencing the POGIL roles I had been assigning to my students).

These statements felt, to me, like a confirmation that students are acutely aware of the role a teacher can play in both perpetuating learner perceptions and also ways that teachers can break down these learner perceptions. I was grateful that in that moment, there was a time and space created where I was able to hear those perspectives from my students.

What was unexpected about the process? About the outcomes?

Kristin: The Knowles Teaching Fellowship helped me to become a teacher leader, fostering my skills of reflection and collaboration, and using these dispositions to enact positive change in schools. To be a teacher leader, a teacher does not need an official job title. Change can be enacted through relationships, conversations, and dedication. Therefore, I was naturally drawn to the instructional coaching position because I saw the positive impact it could have on schools through supporting staff and students. When a teacher is given the official title and position of coach, issues of perceived status will inevitably come up, especially when working with other teachers who have not been given that title. After experience as both a teacher and an instructional coach, I think it is important for

the coach to reflect on what this status means and how it may be leveraged in a positive light. As the coach, you choose how status plays out in the relationship by making the conversation more of a partnership (collaborative coaching), more reflective (cognitive coaching), or more guiding (consulting coaching). It is very important for the coach to reflect on the role of status in the coaching relationship and determine the best way to develop teacher trust and support teacher growth and student learning.

All of our most powerful growth as educators stems from conversations, and coaching is the ultimate conversation. I think it is very important that every teacher gets the opportunity to experience both being a coachee and a coach at least once throughout their teaching career. Being coached provides teachers with new perspectives and resources, and helps them learn about themselves and their own practice through reflection. Being a coach allows teachers to apply their understanding of instructional strategies to different subject areas and within different school contexts. As an instructional coach, I have learned so much more about good teaching strategies and practices that cross all content areas. I have learned how to truly be a good listener, and how to form respectful and meaningful professional relationships. As a classroom teacher, I have transferred these coaching skills into my classroom and I am a much more mindful educator. Also, I have improved my ability to communicate and build professional relationships with my students. Educational progress thrives through collaboration and the reflective process, and coaching is the fulcrum that supports this work.

Jacque: As a new teacher, I feel that I am inventing everything as I go and that I need help with (almost) everything. When I began my Fellowship as a brand new Knowles Fellow, I did not hesitate one bit to sign up for a Knowles coach. In my mind, a coach was absolutely something that I wanted out of the Fellowship. But again, with the many unknowns of first year teaching, I did not know what I wanted to get out of the coaching process. After almost a year Kristin has supported me in trying a lot of different group work strategies, including using POGIL roles, creating a team draft, and defining different purposes of the group depending on task. I am committed to continuing this work on how to structure groups and collaboration in my classroom.

But the unexpected learning is perhaps more important. I did not expect that working on group work structure would lead to a deeper understanding of learner

status in my classroom. What does it mean to 'be smart' in my classroom? Who is invited (explicitly or implicitly) to be a leader in my classroom? What are concrete teacher moves I can do to break down these patterns?

Ultimately, I have been challenged and fueled by this critical friendship. I've been challenged to examine how my teacher moves can perpetuate possibly harmful patterns that learners have about their ability to succeed. And, I've been fueled to continue to work towards a classroom where my teacher moves can act as a catalyst for students to push back on those patterns, and may even change the perception they have of themselves as a learner.

Conclusion

The Coaching Partnership Program sets up Fellows to develop a critical friendship, engage in practitioner inquiry, and ultimately generate knowledge that guides them in future decisions and actions. In her [2018 blog post](#), Knowles Associate Director for the Teaching Fellows Program Roseanne Rostock encourages teachers to *value the knowledge we generate together*. "Rethinking what they thought they knew? Finding new ways to approach teaching practice? Identifying and addressing important problems of practice? This IS knowledge. This is a kind of local knowledge that only teachers can generate through inquiry, and it's this kind of knowledge that matters most to teachers and their students."

The Knowles Academy offers a course, [Implementing Teacher Coaching to Improve Classroom Practice and Student Learning](#), designed to support administrators and teacher leaders who aim to provide instructional coaching to other teachers. Teachers learn the same strategies and tools that Kristin used to coach Jacque. Through an introductory four-day, in-person workshop and ongoing coaching, this course helps school leaders provide coaching experiences to support teachers in setting goals, innovating, and improving their practice. Participants become more closely acquainted with three coaching stances: Cognitive, Collaborative, and Consulting. Using these stances as a framework, participants develop specific coaching plans for a wide variety of teachers, from novice to veteran and from struggling to successful. Visit the Knowles website to [register](#) for the course or to learn more.

¹Problems and challenges that are complex, that students cannot solve individually, and that have multiple ways for students to access the content and skills and engage with the task.

² One aspect of CI is reclaiming the use of the word “smart” and using it when describing the actions of students.