
KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN ACTION LEADERSHIP



**Knowledge Building — Growing Good Pedagogy
in a Co-Learning and Leading Stance**

Written by Audrey Hensen

Bringing IDEAS to life!

5.1 KNOWLEDGE BUILDING: GROWING GOOD PEDAGOGY IN A CO-LEARNING AND LEADING STANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Audrey Hensen is currently an Education Officer with the Ministry of Education on secondment from The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board, where she is an Administrator. This case study examines the leadership journey she traveled to initiate Knowledge Building in her K-8 schools, and support her teachers as they pursued in the implementation of new pedagogies to engage their students in deep learning.

KB PRINCIPLES – THE DRAW

The two principles that drew me to Knowledge Building were the concepts of **Democratizing Knowledge**, and **Idea Diversity** (Scardamalia, 2002). As a former Literacy Improvement Teacher I had worked extensively with teachers in their classrooms - and was determined to find ways to reach all students, to honor and unlock their thinking. Factors at play for me were student engagement and supporting underachieving/struggling students.

What is one of your deepest learnings?

Working with these two KB principles, requires taking a learning stance and understand that students always getting the 'right' answer is antithetical to nascent learning, inclusion, the exploration of ideas, student confidence, and students' perceptions of themselves as competent, valued learners.

Once students were engaged, how could we ensure that all felt valued for their thinking and their contributions to the collective wisdom of the group? As an administrator, I was looking at spread, depth and sustainability of this type of work in my school.

Democratizing Knowledge: All students are legitimate contributors to the shared goals of the classroom; all have a sense of ownership of knowledge advances achieved by the group. All are empowered to engage in knowledge innovation.

Idea Diversity: Different ideas create a dynamic environment in which contrasts, competition, and complementarity of ideas is evident, creating a rich environment for ideas to evolve into new and more refined forms.

KB PROVOCATION

Building upon current practice

Working with Denis Maika (Student Achievement Officer - Ministry of Education) led me to Knowledge Building. The foundational nature of the principles were universal and dovetailed quite naturally with pedagogies staff were working on, namely: Collaborative Inquiry, Gradual Release of Responsibility, and Rotman School Of Management's - Integrative and Design Thinking. Enhancing student's Critical Thinking skills was foremost in our minds and one of the school's and board's foci.

As a school leader, building teacher capacity and sense of efficacy was foremost in my mind – and Knowledge Building seemed to provide the right kind of entry point for a teacher seeking to deepen the learning of their students.

Equity and inclusion were also part of the plan. An invitational, natural way to reach our struggling or disenchanted students, instilling interest in learning and taking advantage of their natural curiosity was essential. Eliciting the thinking and voices of those who remained silent in classrooms was imperative. Getting teachers the right tools to do so was the starting point.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING IDEA IMPROVEMENT

Move 1: Knowing Your Staff

I believe that to take care of the needs of the students in your building, you have to also take care of the needs of your staff. Teachers need to be respected for their professional judgment, and inspired to act upon their passion for teaching. The Knowledge Building Principles were focused, yet open enough to meet the varied approaches and strengths of the teachers at my school as we developed our community of co-learners.

Our Knowledge Building journey started with many conversations and questions. As a leader, I shared my wonderings informally, and sought out the views and understandings of staff members about how students learned. How might we more successfully include the voices of students? How could we unearth a variety of alternative viewpoints and perspectives, pushing our students to outside-of-the-box thinking? What could help us push Collaborative Inquiry into developing new thinking?

The school's Directions Team included divisional leaders, who had helped drive the school's vision with staff input from the primary, junior and intermediate levels. These leaders co-led the development of the School Improvement Plan.

Looking at Knowledge Building and how it might help facilitate our shared goals to develop critical thinking skills in our students gave us an entry point. We had many questions and began the journey by reading information and taking a 'field trip' to the Dr. Erik Jackman Institute of Child Study in Toronto.

Debriefing about what we had seen and what parts of Knowledge Building practice resonated with each staff member attending was critical. This information was shared with other staff members during divisional meetings.

The team we formed naturally began its own Collaborative Inquiry - and we were developing our own KB understanding together in order to explore practical applications of its principles.

To allow good work to blossom, I had to ensure that we had a Professional Development structure that was flexible and responsive to the needs of the teachers in the building. I also had to leave room for risk-taking, innovation and creativity- sharing success and clunker moments!

Move 2: Stepping In

Providing teachers with differentiated support, in response to whatever transpires in ongoing conversations and classrooms is important. Because teachers were doing the important work in their classrooms, they, in essence, were also leading my learning – turning theory into practice. Readiness to ‘jump in’ varied. Some teachers were merely curious, and others willing to read about the 12 Knowledge Building Principles. Each teacher with whom I worked saw themselves as addressing one or more of the principles in some form. Conversations and time were needed to allow the thinking to percolate and bubble up into practice. Innovation in practice emerged, as each teacher personalized their Knowledge Building practice. Each step in our co-learning was celebrated and shared within the team. I acted as a cheerleader and sounding board and added my own wonderings to the differing journeys. Common planning time and getting out of their way to allow teachers to take risks and try new ways of teaching was essential.

Move 3: Getting Traction/Scaling for Growth

For those teachers who dove more deeply into Knowledge Building, I aligned resources with their priorities, and worked to provide opportunities and resources needed to develop their practice. I looked for informal and formal ways to provide them with leadership opportunities to share and showcase their learning and the work of their students.

Developing a web of support for these teachers was important. The connections they made to a wider Knowledge Building community invigorated their practice. I facilitated their involvement in Knowledge Building webinars and Knowledge Forum training sessions with Dr. Monica Resendes and Ministry Student Achievement Officer Elaine Hine. Inviting school support staff, and like-minded teachers from other schools, as well as those who were just dipping their toes in, helped to begin to scale the growth of practice in the school. Investing in technology assisted with just-in-time classroom research and learning. Support and training from others legitimized our work. Staff told me that they felt invested in and valued. Assessing our students’ growth became a topic of discussion, helping us to measure our success.

To encourage spread, I sought out ways to leverage the enthusiasm and leadership of these early adopters to build capacity within the school and paid attention to staffing and scheduling. Ultimately, these teachers moved their knowledge beyond their classrooms and gave workshops

to others on staff, staff workshops at the system level, and shared their work provincially. Their webs and leadership grew and spread!!

IMPACT ON CLASSROOM

I was awestruck by the power of the Knowledge Building practice. Students in these classrooms were energized. They spoke about their learnings and explorations in depth and with passion. Students were not just being fed a curriculum, they were uncovering and stretching curricula – and going deeper into the learning than they had previously. Teachers relayed stories about going beyond the curriculum while covering multiple expectations in authentic ways. Students' learning deepened as they invested in it through authentic inquiry. Questioning, research, sharing knowledge and seeking out new thinking became the norm.

What surprised you?

Students – rather than trying to get the 'right' answer – were asking questions. Not being in pursuit of 'getting it right' freed up real learning and provided a forum for more voices to be heard.

What was one "Aha!" moment?

The inclusive nature of Knowledge Building work created entry points for informed discussion. Each student could bring something to the table. Different ways of showing learning made for opportunities for differentiated assessment.

One very exciting outcome was the confidence it seemed to build in students as they became 'authorities' on new learnings. This work helped students engage and think more critically, and at times, transformed into a belief in self, and a greater sense of belonging in the classroom.

The transformative nature of the Knowledge Building work on the classroom dynamics served as a springboard to other conversations pertaining to Growth Mindset and Experiential Learning amongst the teachers.

REFLECTIONS

The greatest challenge in doing this type of co-learning, is 'not knowing' where it will end up in a society that is always looking for accountability. Trusting staff to take the ball and run with new learning signals to professionals that they are trusted and that their work matters. Learning through this process was an organic and energizing experience. It took place differently according to situations and inclinations of staff, as the KB principles were used in classrooms, to cover a variety of curriculum expectations.

Igniting enthusiasm in others for their work becomes possible when their work is seen as valuable – and that was true for both staff and their students. Investing in staff and then providing reflection time boosted collegiality provided a shared purpose and a sense of being respected. Co-developing a shared purpose – putting our kids at the center of all we do – can be a very powerful motivator for change at the school level.

What struck me the most was the added benefit of optimism and hope in the classrooms I saw digging into work using the Knowledge Building Principles. Knowledge Building has served as a wonderful launching pad for continuous teacher, student, and administrator growth.

REFERENCES

Scardamalia, M. (2002). Collective cognitive responsibility for the advancement of knowledge. In B. Smith (Eds.), *Liberal education in a knowledge society* (pp. 76–98). Chicago: Open Court.