
KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN ACTION LEADERSHIP



**The Courage to Build: Getting Started with
Knowledge Building as Whole-School Effort**

Written by Karen Dobbie

Bringing IDEAS to life!

5.4 THE COURAGE TO BUILD: GETTING STARTED WITH KNOWLEDGE BUILDING AS WHOLE-SCHOOL EFFORT

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INTRODUCTION

Karen Dobbie is presently a Student Achievement Officer with the Ministry of Education, on secondment from the Halton Catholic District School Board where she was an elementary school principal for 13 years. This case study explores the leadership journey she took with her teachers in order to explore the possibilities that Knowledge Building had to offer their school community.

STARTING WITH THE KB PRINCIPLES

Student engagement and a true sense of a love of learning within a supportive community is what I wanted to see most for all my students. These aspirations led me to focus on how we could engage students in the following Knowledge Building Principles:

Epistemic Agency: Students are given a voice and choice in their learning and allowed to engage in learning about what truly matters to them.

Community Knowledge, Collective Responsibility: A strong sense of community is established in order to value, support, and build on to one another's knowledge.

What was one of your greatest challenges?

In the beginning, this journey seemed quite a daunting task that might never gain traction. It seemed like an uphill battle. However, the productive struggles led us to our greatest accomplishment: student engagement. Student voice was honoured and we had truly shifted directions and allowed students to drive their learning. Epistemic Agency has taken root and was beginning to grow.

KB PROVOCATION: WHAT SPARKED OUR JOURNEY IN KNOWLEDGE BUILDING?

After being introduced to the pedagogy of Knowledge Building and Knowledge Creation and the practical application of the Knowledge Forum software at the 2013 Fall LSA Symposium, I found myself asking: How do I get my school to move in this direction? How does this relate to both my school improvement plan and my Board's improvement plan? It became very clear that Knowledge Building and the use of Knowledge Forum software supported and aligned beautifully with our goals at both school and board level around 21st century teaching and learning. We want to be able to equip all of our students with the ability to:

- work collaboratively and learn with and from one another
- share and think critically

- have a voice in their learning
- be creative and innovative
- be problem solvers

These are the skills that will enable our students to be successful in the world today.

As the LSA Lead for my board at the time, the challenge that quickly became apparent to me was how do we layer and unfold the pieces of Knowledge Building in order to spread this work, not just at my own school, but also among our principals and vice principals through our Principal Learning Teams, and eventually throughout the district. At the time this seemed like quite a daunting task!

Knowledge Building sounds great and I believe this is inherently good for all our students, but the challenge really lies in convincing others to share in this belief.

Move 1: Teacher Champion

At the school level, it is imperative that as an administrator you find a teacher who is willing to take on new challenges, someone who has a growth mindset, who won't give up when things get difficult and who, in the end, will be the champion of Knowledge Building. For me, that teacher was my Grade 5 Teacher, Jason Frenza, who was the school program team leader for the junior division.

Taking on the pedagogy of Knowledge Building is difficult and challenging for some of our most creative and innovative teachers. My teachers who were engaged with Knowledge Building had no difficulties telling me that it was one of the hardest things they had ever done in their teaching career. We know that when we engage our students in Knowledge Building, ultimately, we are letting our students take charge of their learning. For some teachers and — let's be honest — for some administrators, this is a very frightening situation.

However, once you overcome this initial fear and witness the learning and engagement taking place in the classroom, the teachers and administrators will tell you that you won't turn back. You will stick with Knowledge Building despite all the trials and tribulations.

Choosing your champion is crucial to the success of the spread throughout your school. Obviously, you want the champion to be a teacher whom other teachers respect; someone whom others will be open to learning from and with. Despite the challenges teachers have faced and are still facing today, what is always unanimous is that the learning taking place in their classrooms is much more meaningful, and the thinking and learning is going much deeper than what the classroom teacher would have accomplished with their students if they had followed a typical teacher directed unit of study.

Move 2: Co-Learning Stance

Having a teacher champion is one thing, but teachers need to know that you, as the administrator, are learning alongside them and that you are supporting them. One of the biggest challenges teachers struggle with is time. There never seems to be enough hours in the day. When you as the administrator are involved and learning with your teachers, you know what they are struggling with and you can give them permission to be flexible on the journey. One of my teachers was concerned with how long this process of Knowledge Building was taking. However, what kept this teacher motivated was that she saw firsthand that the students were engaged in their learning and learning from others; they were going deeper with their thinking and were asking rich questions and making meaningful connections to their everyday life. So, in the end, the extra time spent on the learning taking place in this teacher's classroom was well worth it, despite all the stress and worry.

What surprised us?

Parent engagement flourished as students went home excited to share their latest theories, questions, and wonderings around the dinner table. Through the use of the Knowledge Forum, parents were able to experience firsthand how their child was embracing this new way of thinking and learning!

Move 3: Scaling Up with Knowledge Building Capacity Building Sessions

At the school level, teachers explored and shared their innovative Knowledge Building practices at lunch-and-learn sessions and monthly divisional meetings. The honest sharing between colleagues allowed teachers to learn from one another and provided supports for those who were starting to play with Knowledge Building in their classrooms. Teachers were able to build their self-efficacy and see the value in this new way of teaching.

With the support of our Superintendents, we invited administrators and teachers to come as a team to three capacity building sessions on Knowledge Building that allowed both the teacher and administrator to engage in the learning together and formulate a plan to take their learning back to their home schools and spread the work at the school level.

Our three capacity building sessions took place over a course of 15 weeks. After each session, each school team went back to their schools charged with ideas and Knowledge Building practices to explore with their students. At each subsequent session, opportunities to each school team were given to share both their success and their productive struggles with their Knowledge Building journey.

Aha! Moment

Student and teacher efficacy increased as student thinking became visible in the classroom. The fears that took hold originally quickly began to dissipate as students immersed themselves in Knowledge Building and were excited to continue this new way of learning.

We explored together through each capacity building session the following questions:

- **Session One:** What does Knowledge Building look like in the classroom?
- **Session Two:** How does the Knowledge Forum provide a space where student ideas can live, grow, and develop organically?
- **Session Three:** How do we create Knowledge Building communities?

When we work together and share knowledge and engage in learning from one another, everyone achieves more. The professional learning networks for teachers, administrators, and superintendents are essential if you want to provide support and assist with scaling up.

To schools and districts embarking on this journey, my advice to you is to explore the possibilities that Knowledge Building has to offer. Take a risk and see where your questions, theories, and wonderings take you! The possibilities are endless.

Deepest Learning

Once you create supports and a culture built on trust and honesty, the 12 Principles of Knowledge Building will take root and flourish in your KB Community.

Collective responsibility for idea improvement will become an everyday practice that will always lead to rich and meaningful learning for your entire community.