



Now on Teacher Voice

Process, Process, Process: Transcript

Hosted and produced by Brittany Franckowiak, this podcast was featured in the Spring 2019 issue of *Kaleidoscope*. Transcription by Kirstin Milks.

Teachers know a lot about teaching. That may sound obvious, but many teachers spend a lot of their professional time listening to people who aren't teachers share ideas about teaching. Teachers don't often have opportunities to articulate and make public professional knowledge they build every day.

Welcome to Teacher Voice, the podcast dedicated to bringing you stories by teachers about teaching. My name is Brittany Franckowiak. I teach high school biology in Maryland, and I'm a Senior Fellow with the Knowles Teacher Initiative. I'm also an associate editor with *Kaleidoscope*, the official journal of Knowles.

As part of the Knowles Teaching Fellows Program, early-career math and science teachers work in small groups to inquire into their teaching practice and school context. They frame a question, collect data, engage in collaborative analysis, and reflect.

This inquiry work creates a structure that allows Fellows to track, and make sense of, the knowledge they generate about teaching in their contexts. And, importantly, it allows that knowledge to be shared with other teachers.

When Becky Van Tassell engaged with with her inquiry group as a Teaching Fellow, she was particularly interested in the dynamics of teacher collaboration in her local context. She tried creating a new structure for teacher collaboration at her school.

For a while, it went well. And then her administration got involved.

Becky watched, frustrated, as the collaborative dynamics started to shift. All the while, she worked closely with her Knowles inquiry partners, sharing her data and reflections. Eventually, Becky captured the experience in an article called "The Trouble with Top-Down," which appeared in the journal *Educational Leadership* in May of 2014.

Becky is now a Senior Fellow and an editor-in-chief here at *Kaleidoscope*. [Knowles] Teaching Fellows read her article as part of their learning about inquiry and teacher leadership. I remember reading it as part of my own Fellowship experience. It's really a brilliant piece: it's thoughtful, professional, and relevant. When I read it, I immediately appreciated parallels between Becky's experience and my own teaching context.

And I immediately thought that I'd never be able to generate knowledge that useful or put together an article of that quality. I still remember thinking, "That's teacher-leadership. And I can't do that."

As an early-career teacher, my reaction to Becky's article was not unique. Rick Barlow and Angela Lou are two of our newest associate editors at *Kaleidoscope*, and they're both recent Senior Fellows at Knowles. We'll hear them reflect on their experience of reading Becky's article and their thoughts on the relationship between teacher leadership and storytelling.

(2:17) **Rick:** I remember reading this article and having two distinct feelings. The first feeling was: the article was really good. It resonated with me because it reminded me of something I was going through at my own school. So that was the first feeling: wow, this appeals to me for a lot of reasons.

And then the second thing I remember feeling after I read the article was: how did this person write something so good? I really felt like my writing -- I like to write, and even when I read this a couple of years ago, I wrote, often, but I didn't feel like the caliber of my writing was anywhere near what I saw in this article. I just felt like the author was super-thoughtful and was also a really good writer, but, beyond that, I felt like they had a very unique perspective on a teaching dilemma.

And I felt like their spin on this dilemma was so unique that I wouldn't even consider writing something like this. It just felt really original, and fresh, and the right level of provocative to explore this dilemma that the writer was having.

(3:40) **Brittany.** Angela, can you reflect a little bit on what it was like as an early-career teacher to be presented with this polished, published article and given it, really, as an example of what teacher leadership could look like and what teacher storytelling might look like. How did you react to that at that point in your career and as a Knowles Fellow?

(4:05) **Angela.** Yeah, absolutely. I think there's definitely, thinking back, a barrier, to that, to think: Gosh, when I am in my first year or second year in the Knowles Fellowship and looking at these very polished pieces, especially in this very glossy magazine, it definitely feels like that's somewhere that I might privately say to myself, "Maybe one day, but it's really not something that I can do today, or even the next year." But it's something definitely to aspire to because it's somewhere where I'm not there yet.

So, for sure, there's this feeling of: those people, those are the rock stars. And me? I'm just going to try to survive. And I'm barely keeping my head up over the water just trying to teach, much less write and publish something.

(5:14) **Brittany.** We do have the author here with us. Becky, can you tell us what it was like to put this article together and what the journey of writing and publishing this story was like for you?

(5:26) **Becky.** I wrote this article at the end of a three-year inquiry experience where I was working with a team of 10 other teachers in this very supportive practitioner inquiry environment.

And my particular inquiry question centered around teacher collaboration and how that worked in my context. Over those three years, we did a lot of different work with different types of writing for

learning, where we were writing to produce data, we were writing to make sense of that data, we were writing in response to each other's data.

And so the writing I had done up to that point was really a lot of writing for my own sense-making. And as a result, the first draft of this that I wrote, when it came time to tell the story of what I'd learned in my inquiry project, the first thing I wrote was pretty raw and not well-tuned to the audience that I was trying to reach. The article itself was burning with the frustration that I'd felt having lived this experience.

(6:50) **Brittany.** That surprises me because the published piece, the version that I remember reading early in my Knowles Fellowship -- I certainly wouldn't characterize it as emotional. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about how you moved from that initial emotional reaction to the dilemma you were inquiring into to this final published product that really has quite a different tone.

(7:18) **Becky.** The way that the story really took shape and started to even make more sense to me was after I'd had lots of feedback from many different thinking partners. In doing that, I think I actually --

I learned, even more, about that context and developed some different lenses that I could use to look at that context, not in an completely impartial way, but in a less emotionally fraught way that let me see some of the structural things that were impacting the movements of the characters in that context. And those lenses I would not have had access to if I hadn't had those other people to talk with.

As I went through different drafts and rewriting, I was able to change that tone from that original outraged tone to language that was going to let me describe what had happened in a way that was generous to everyone and that allowed me to reframe it so that even the people who I was writing about in the story could read it and not feel attacked or feel as though they had been vilified in the article.

And the other piece that came out of that process was that, if I hadn't been able to think about it in that way and through that lens, I would probably still be really angry about what happened and not understand why I was angry.

From a personal, professional growth perspective, the actual writing process was really important

for how I think about and what I learned from that experience.

(9:21) **Brittany:** And was that writing process pretty straightforward for you? You know, you had this initial story that was really emotional, and your collaborators helped you get some critical distance and provide you with some useful lenses for making sense of that. At that point, were you able to just take that feedback and rework a draft? Or was it more involved than that? What happened between this collaboration with your critical friends and then publication?

(9:57) **Becky:** I remember feeling really relieved at the time that I had finally gotten a draft done, and I was submitting it somewhere.

I kept all of my drafts in one place, and I would take my work and I would copy and paste it whenever I made edits so I didn't have to look back at revision histories.

That document that has all the different iterations of the piece is well more than fifty pages of writing long. All these different sections that I had reworked, all the different iterations, and when I look at that whole thing, I think to myself: oh my gosh. I wonder when I found the space and time to do that.

But it was partly because I had this group of people that I was working with that were interested in my story and were waiting for the next version and were really invested in me learning from and articulating what I'd learned from my story.

(10:59) **Rick:** It was interesting to hear Becky's version, her side of the story, and one thing she said that really resonated with me was how she went into this piece of writing with a particular lens, but the people that she was working with to give her feedback helped her shift that lens -- she said she wouldn't have had access to that lens if she didn't have those people to give her feedback.

That was really valuable for me for me to hear because, like I said, when I read this story, it seemed very fresh and unique and original, and I was pretty much in awe that a person could come up with this really interesting spin on a pretty typical teaching dilemma. It's not like this is a special problem at her school -- this is a problem at every school, everywhere. But her explanation of that dilemma was really interesting to me.

And so it was great to hear her say that, like, the final product wasn't necessarily what she started

with, and that final product was the result of working with this community of other writers that were giving her feedback and helping her reframe her own thinking -- to change it from sort of this tone of outrage to more constructive analysis of the dilemma.

(12:34) **Becky:** And that analysis -- I remember the moment I was in that conversation with [Knowles Senior Program Officer] Roseanne [Rostock] while she was giving me that feedback. It was that transformative for me that like she was like, "What if you thought about this -- it sounds as if this is what's going on. What if you thought about it from a structural perspective? What was it about those structures that allowed different learning to happen in those spaces?"

That question. Maybe that's not exactly what she said. It was a long time ago, but the questions she asked to reframe and provide that lens were just as mind-blowing as me. It felt so different than the way I'd been thinking about it. It was a whole new avenue for thinking about the problem.

(13:23) **Rick:** I guess that's the big a-ha in this for me. I was really fixated on the product. Becky had written this really interesting piece of writing, and that product felt intimidating to me. But now, hearing about the really lengthy and intense process she went through to get there helps address some of my self-doubt. "Oh, well, I can't writing something like this."

Well, I can't and neither can Becky. She had a whole bunch of feedback and support to get to that piece of writing. For me, that's the big take-away from this story.

(14:09) **Becky:** I feel like that's akin to our a-has as teachers when we have the realization that all learning is socially constructed. I had to learn something to be able to write this, and I can't learn it by myself. I have to learn it with other people.

(14:26) **Angela:** What I was noting, when Becky was speaking about her process: to piggyback off what Rick said, I wrote down, "What I learned from my own story."

I think when most people go in to write something from their experience, oftentimes it's not through the mindset that they're going to try to learn something from their own process or from putting something down on paper.

Rather[, it's] "I'm going to deliver wisdom to people

who might want to hear my epiphany or a-ha moment.” But often the transformative moment that ends up resonating and becoming super-powerful for readers is the things you actually learned through the process of writing, and I really appreciate that Becky talked about her community of people who helped her get there. I think this is something that I didn’t realize about writing myself until I did it myself. It’s very much a learning process -- in a medium that is very product-focused.

(15:50) **Brittany:** I wonder how exploring these questions about writing and collaboration and sharing stories can help us make sense of what it means to be a teacher leader.

(16:04) **Becky:** I think about teacher leadership a lot, and now I think about teacher storytelling a lot, too. One of the things that really came back for me when I was thinking about this piece and where I was then in my thinking and where I am now, I think about how writing this story for your own learning is this very powerful professional experience in terms of learning and thinking really deeply about your own context and really thinking deeply about how you exist within that context.

I honestly think that alone is an act of teacher leadership -- in thinking about your place in this very complex community, you’re positioning yourself as an actor that can have an impact on that context. Once that story goes out into the world, whether or not you want it to, that story communicates to others that you’re this thoughtful actor in your community and that, through doing that, you are a teacher leader.

I also think about the many stories that I’ve read, and the stories I’ve read that have had the most impact on my own thinking have often come from other teachers. When I read about other teachers doing work that I aspire to be able to do, it allows me this avenue [to show me that] I can do it too because I’m reading about this other teacher who’s made progress on these places where I still feel like I am toiling away. It’s a much more hopeful way to learn about my practice than to read something that’s been stripped of its context or stripped of the way that it’s been implemented for a teacher.

(18:18) **Rick:** Similar to what Becky said, the importance of storytelling to teacher leadership is that, however you’re telling a story, whether written or via a podcast with audio, there’s this part of this process of telling the story is understanding your own thinking, and my biggest a-has as a teacher leader have been via writing that’s inspired reflection.

So when I’ve had a dilemma as a teacher-leader and just let it sit in my brain, there’s no growth or no evolution of my thought on that dilemma. It just kind of sits there. But when I take a dilemma and write about it or explore it via a podcast, there’s a lot of reflection that happens in that process, especially as other people come in to give me feedback on the writing.

And that’s when I have growth in thought or evolution of my thinking is when I’ve reflected on it through the writing process and then had others give me feedback on my thinking and on my writing.

So I think that storytelling’s an integral part of teacher-leadership. When I’ve grown the most as a teacher leader has been when I’ve written about a dilemma or a problem that I’ve had as a leader.

(19:58) **Angela:** Sometimes I see the leadership as almost as leading through examples or leading through admitting or showing that you have been there, and that not necessarily giving wisdom or a quick fix-it is the thing that is needed at the time. So I guess that’s kind of what I want to say about that.

Oh, also I think one of the ways -- just speaking about what Rick was commenting about, the times when you have most grown -- for me, that’s when I’ve been able to stop and ask for help. And I think that’s asking for help, for example, with my own writing or just with other teachers in my teaching practice. Being able to think of myself as not the person who ought to know everything, even though you might have more years or a higher title -- rather a place where you can actually have that community of people to support you through your growth and having that sounding board.

The writing practice might start as a solitary endeavor, but at the end of the day through writing through *Kaleidoscope* you will process a lot on your own but you will also have a lot of people on your side to help you make sense of what you’re learning about and what you’re experiencing.

(21:53) **Brittany:** We have some consensus around the idea that the process of writing or the process of reflection on and putting together one’s own story contributes to your own professional growth, helps you understand your context and your teaching practice better and that all of that can empower us, perhaps, to be teacher-leaders or to position ourselves as leaders in our various contexts.

But for me, leadership -- a key component of it is just connecting with other people, with other

teachers. I'm wondering about some examples maybe of how we can actually put stories to work to connect with or support other teachers.

(22:36) **Angela:** For example, this year I have a student teacher, a new teacher under my wing, and I've realized that instead of going to the fix-it kind of mode, "try this and that" -- a direct top-down leadership style, sometimes if I start from telling a story with that teacher and coming from a place of vulnerability or of "I've been there, I can relate to you, I've had this dilemma before or I've had this student before," it really breaks down the barriers of that trust of being able to communicate and work with another person.

(23:19) **Brittany:** For me, a big take-away here seems to be the importance of vulnerability. Angela, when you were talking, I'm thinking about sharing stories of your practice or your immediate experiences with your colleagues. Sometimes especially when you're doing it informally and out loud and maybe over lunch or a planning period or something like that, you are making yourself pretty vulnerable.

In those instances, the stories we're sharing are pretty raw, they're not necessarily polished, we probably haven't finished fully thinking through them yet. To air them, to put them out into the universe, certainly we are exposing ourselves in a way that is sometimes uncomfortable or challenging.

And that's really where Becky started. Her first take on the story that eventually became this fancy published article was a pretty emotional recap or raw reflection on a really challenging thing that happened to her in her school. She was able to share that with a really small and supportive and safe community, a place where she felt okay to be vulnerable, where there were colleagues who could help her push her thinking and help uncover her story.

And only through pushing through that vulnerability was she able to pull together this really polished piece that now, when we read it, we really only see the end of her learning. We don't see those initial stages of vulnerability that we might see in our own colleagues or that we might subject ourselves to when we share those stories with our colleagues or when we start on this really long arc of putting together an intentional, structured piece about something that we've learned from teaching in our contexts.

(25:07) Ultimately, the work of storytelling is too important for teachers to not engage with it. The vulnerability, the collaboration, the iteration -- all of these things are worth it.

It's a huge investment, and it can be difficult for us as teachers that we have the time or the capacity or the resources to undertake it. But other teachers deserve to hear our stories.

The act of putting these stories together in whatever form they take helps us deepen our understanding of the work that we do with our students in our classrooms every day.

And when we share that knowledge, we empower and support and encourage other teachers, and our profession deserves this. Our stories are worth telling and worth sharing and worth listening to.

Many thanks to our panelists—Rick, Angela, and Becky—for sharing their candid reflections and thoughts on teacher storytelling and teacher leadership. A special thank you goes out to Beverly Stuckwisch, an associate editor here at *Kaleidoscope* who facilitated this recording and made this happen. Without Bev's hard work, this episode of Teacher Voice would not exist. Thanks, Bev.

Becky Van Tassell's article, "The Trouble with Top Down," originally appeared in *Educational Leadership* in May of 2014.

Kaleidoscope and Teacher Voice are supported by the Knowles Teacher initiative. You can find the current issue of *Kaleidoscope*, as well as the complete archives, at knowlesteachers.org/kaleidoscope. You can also finally follow us on Twitter @EducatorVoices.