

Understanding Teacher Community as a System: A Strategy for Leadership Development (Part One)

Conventional wisdom tells us that teacher leadership is something that is reserved for those teachers who have “earned their chops” through years of experience, expertise or “success” in the classroom. At KSTF, however, we believe that teachers at all stages of their careers have important roles to play in a **distributed model of teacher leadership**.

The KSTF Fellowship therefore **supports early-career teachers to develop the skills and dispositions for teacher leadership**, and we do this across the five years of the Fellowship. For example, **in the first two years of the Fellowship**, Fellows build a strong cohort community and develop skills to be an active participant in that community. In the third and fourth years, Fellows collaborate with colleagues for the purpose of understanding, changing, and improving students’ opportunities to learn. Building on that work, fifth-year Fellows focus explicitly on exploring their identities as teacher leaders. We support Fellows to consider ways they can act as teacher leaders from within and outside their classrooms, and to think about how teacher leadership both relies on and supports the kind of teacher community that creates opportunities for collaboration, continuous learning, and improvement of teaching practice.

Before Fellows decide on the actions they want to take to drive improvement in education, or the skills or dispositions they want to develop to carry out those actions, we encourage them to start by looking closely at how they and other teachers work together within their professional community. We think of “teacher community” in lots of different ways: this might be a math department, a biology professional learning community (PLC), a ninth-grade team, or simply a pair of

teachers who teach and plan the same introductory chemistry class. By examining one's teacher community, Fellows can identify *how* that community is functioning, *what* about that community can be strengthened, and *where* they might see a place for themselves to act as teacher leaders.

Sometimes it can be hard to step back and look at our own communities in this way. Elements of "community" can seem invisible—like the tacit norms that we enact, or the unspoken expectations for each person's participation. It's natural to look at our own communities as monolithic (a "strong" community or a "challenging" one), or to view them as "fixed" and unchangeable, rather than something that can adapt. Examining our own understanding and assumptions of community in order to see nuance and finer detail can be challenging, but important, if we hope to work toward improvement. What's more, although Fellows might identify particular challenges that they want to address within their community, they might then struggle to find entry points where they can take action to effect change.

For these reasons, we think it's useful to support Fellows in examining professional community as a system of interrelated parts, and considering ways that we can find leverage points within that system to exert influence and work toward improvement. For the past few years, we've been using the concept of an activity system (Engeström, 1999) as a framework for understanding and critically analyzing the collective activity within teacher communities. By focusing on activity, we can include the doing of teacher collaboration, as well as the learning that takes place in teacher communities. We've adapted the concept of an activity system to reflect aspects of a teacher community, using these elements:



Adapted from Engeström, Y. (1999). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R. Punamäki (Eds.) Perspectives on activity theory, (pp. 19-38). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Members: Who are the participants in this activity?

Community: What is the larger community in which this activity is situated?

Focus: What does everyone think we are working toward?

Norms: What norms govern how we work? How do we communicate? How do we handle conflict?

Roles: What roles do members play? Who is responsible for what? Who has agency to do what?

Tools/Resources: What are the tools and resources that we use to accomplish our activity?

Thinking in terms of this framework emphasizes that teacher community is a **system of elements**, where each element serves as a lens for looking more closely at different aspects of that community. More importantly, we can see how these elements are interconnected and therefore influence one another, and that working together, the elements of this system produce a particular outcome that can only be changed if we find ways of adjusting the system itself. When Fellows look at their professional communities as a system, instead of seeing a monolithic community characterized simply as “weak” or “strong” they might instead identify ways that they want to change the outcomes, and therefore particular parts of the system (leverage points) where Fellows can feasibly make changes in order to work toward improvement.

In order to illustrate what this looks like in practice and what a change in outcomes can be, in my next post, I’ll describe how Fellows use this framework in their work. I’ll also share an example of one Fellow using the framework to explore his math professional learning community (PLC) at his school and finding ways to work toward improving his PLC’s work.