

## Chapter 3

# From Co-Developing Norms to Providing Them: A Journey Toward More Equitable Community Building

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### ABSTRACT

*It is a common perspective that new communities should co-construct norms, in the beginning, in service of community building and increasing buy-in. While these are potential outcomes for certain groups, the authors' work in cultivating learning communities of early career high school math and science teachers at the Knowles Teacher Initiative has demonstrated that asking new communities to co-construct norms in the beginning can be challenging and problematic as it can often serve to reinforce problematic interactions and expectations in a learning community whose members, and their ways of learning, are varied and diverse. The authors' current perspective is that norms should be given to a newly formed community to better advocate for all of its members' needs and to advance the learning of the whole community. This chapter describes the challenges and assumptions that new communities encountered when asked to construct their own norms; considers the role of identity, power, and culture in norm construction; and presents the three norms that are now offered to new communities.*

It is a common practice for new groups to use their initial meetings to set the stage for the work that they will do together. Whether the group is a teacher with their new students at the beginning of the school year, a PLC committed to exploring how equity appears in their classroom, or a team of professional development providers opening their practice to one another, many communities believe that it is important to first set some norms together before delving into their future work. Weinbaum and his colleagues (2004) in *Teaching as Inquiry* suggest that setting norms and working agreements for a

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group is one of the top four considerations for starting effective learning communities<sup>1</sup>. They argue that co-construction supports buy-in to the norms, encourages group members to share about their values, and supports groups to practice engaging in challenging conversations. This is a common perspective. Allen and Blythe (2015) advise that collective engagement in constructing norms increases the meaningfulness of the norms to the participants (and consequently, increases the likelihood of norms being followed) while Lakey (2010) argues that the norm-setting process can build community if the norms are drawn from the group.

Indeed, much of the literature on adult learning communities argues that developing norms together builds community and increases buy-in for working together. While these can be potential outcomes for certain groups, our work in cultivating learning communities of early career teachers has shown us that asking new communities to construct norms in the beginning can be challenging and problematic, particularly if there is any type of diversity within the community and if that diversity is the locus of some of the main learning goals of the community. We've found that it is challenging for our teacher groups to co-construct norms that are intended to surface and support a collective understanding of how diversity impacts the community's learning, their own classroom teaching, and, by extension, students' learning. Our current perspective is that norms should be given to, rather than created by, a new community so that all of its members' needs, particularly members whose needs are most often ignored or rejected, can be recognized. In this chapter, we will share our previous process for forming norms and the challenges and assumptions (logistical and ideological) associated with those practices, describe the kind of community we wanted to build and how culture, identity, and power were important considerations to scrutinize, and share our three current norms and how we support the community to adopt them. We'll start by describing our context, as it has important implications on the norms we create.

## **OUR CONTEXT AND ITS IMPACT ON CREATING NORMS**

The Knowles Teacher Initiative is an organization whose mission is to improve math and science education for all students through developing and supporting a network of math and science teacher leaders across the nation. The Knowles Teaching Fellowship program offers over \$10K worth of benefits (including fully-expensed professional development meetings, summer stipends, mentorship, grants for Fellow's professional learning and materials for their classrooms, and access to a professional community) each year to those who are invited to join.

Our teachers are purposefully selected for demonstrating potential to develop content knowledge for teaching, exemplary teaching practices, and qualities of a teacher leader. These are the criteria that we believe can contribute to the development of a network of teacher leaders. Applicants go through a rigorous selection process that involves a written application, an individual interview, and multiple group interviews to determine whether they have the dispositions, awareness, and understanding to achieve our mission. Each year, we invite one cohort of about 35 teachers (who we call 'Teaching Fellows') into our Teaching Fellowship. Our curriculum requires three in-person meetings a year with their cohort and monthly online meetings in small groups. Our Fellows also have the option of meeting more frequently virtually or using grant funds to meet in person in regional groups.

Once accepted, our goal as professional development providers is to support this new cohort to build a community where they can (a) make intellectual contributions with which the community will authentically engage, (b) share and explore dilemmas that they encounter in their practice, and (c) work

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