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Empowering Teachers
TO DEVELOP
Portable Practices

TALE *Academy*

Portable Practices

port•a•ble

adjective ——————

able to be easily carried or moved, especially because of being of a lighter and smaller version than usual

noun ——————

a version of something, such as a small lightweight television or computer, that can be easily carried

In Module 1, we introduced teachers to the idea of **"portable practices" – practices that they can use across learning environments.** Portable practices are developed through a resilient design for learning (RDL) approach, which, as we discussed in Session 2 of this module, is "the ability to facilitate learning experiences that are designed to be adaptable to fluctuating conditions and disruptions" (Quintana & DeVaney, 2021). The three elements of RDL are extensibility, flexibility, and redundancy. Extensibility is about making the practice as lightweight as possible by identifying the essential questions/elements; flexibility focuses on the end goal of the practice (e.g., learning outcomes) and moves backward from there to identify multiple pathways that lead to the same goal; and redundancy applies universal design for learning to the practice so that the practice can work for everyone, as well as everywhere.

In Session 2, we proposed that school leaders adopt a resilient design for leading approach that follows similar principles but focuses on addressing the contexts within which schools exist. We suggested that in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, leaders respond to volatility with vision, uncertainty with understanding, complexity with community, and ambiguity with agility. In this session, we explore how leaders can integrate resilient design for learning with resilient design for leading to help teachers make their practices portable AND aligned with the school's vision, mission, and goals. We will focus on the shift from complexity to community by considering how professional learning communities (PLCs) – a tried-and-true approach for teacher collaboration – can help with this important work.

THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Modules 1-6 of the TALE Academy are all focused on the work of teaching. We provide teachers with strategies that they can use in their own classrooms. So when we speak of "portable practices" in Modules 1-6, we are focused on adapting what is within the domain of the teacher. **For each portable practice that we have described, there are four steps:**

4 Steps to Portable Practices

Step One

Identify a Learning Barrier

Begin by identifying a learning barrier that pops up when shifting across learning environments.

Step Two

Identify Correlating Learning Goals

Establish a goal or series of goals directly related to overcoming the learning barrier.

Step Three

Identify an Existing Practice in Your Teacher Toolkit

Explore your existing teacher toolkit to see what practices you already have in place that can be adapted to address the barrier and achieve the goal.

Step Four

Make the Practice Portable

Apply the three design elements of resilient design for learning (extensibility, flexibility, and redundancy) through proven instructional design practices (essential questions, backward design, and universal design for learning). The result should be a portable practice that can be used across learning environments.

From Barrier to Portable Practice

In prior modules, we walked teachers through the adaptation of a number of practices for portability across learning environments, including those listed in the chart below.

Learning Goal	Portable Practice
Continuity of Learning	
Creating a student-centered learning environment	Academic Conversations (Module 1 - Session 6)
Measure and adjust to student learning and engagement	Checks for Understanding (Module 1 - Session 6)
Creating Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Educational Experiences	
Empower students to advocate for change in their communities	Youth Participatory Action Research (Module 2 - Session 5)
Addressing Learner Variability	
Create equitable, stigma-free learning environments	High-Leverage Practice: Flexible Grouping (Module 3 - Session 5)
Help students manage their workload and avoid being overwhelmed	High-Leverage Practice: Scaffolded Supports (Module 3 - Session 6)
Keep students focused and engaged	High-Leverage Practice: Explicit Instruction (Module 3 - Session 7)

From Barrier to Portable Practice

Learning Goal	Portable Practice
Teaching Across Multiple Languages	
Harness the power of students' primary language to learn content	Translanguaging (Module 4 - Session 3)
Engaging Families	
Authentically engage families in meaningful, two-way communication that supports student learning	Engaging with Funds of Knowledge (Module 5 - Session 5)
Embedding SEL Into Instruction	
Build relationships that promote a safe and positive environment	Community-Building Circles (Module 6 - Session 3)

These are just a few of the myriad practices that teachers already have in their toolkits and can be adapted to be portable across learning environments. And while helpful, these practices are fairly high-level. What happens when teachers move these practices into specific classrooms with real students? That's where the rubber hits the road and, to be effective, teachers need support. Specifically, they need the support of their peers in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs).

THE SCHOOL LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE

When asked the top resource teachers accessed during the pandemic to support them in emergency remote teaching (ERT), they didn't cite technology, online training, or resource banks. They cited their fellow teachers.

In a December 2021 survey of 630 teachers from across the country, more than half stated that their peer teachers were more supportive now than they were pre-pandemic, citing camaraderie and collaboration as the silver linings of the storm that was teaching during COVID-19. As teachers worried about child safety, nutrition, and mental health, grappled with how to best serve students with disabilities, and provided emergency remote teaching (for most, for the first time in their lives), teachers planned with each other, offered each other emotional support, and shared resources and instructional strategies.

In the face of complexity, teachers turned to collaboration.

Now, as we transition from ERT to teaching across learning environments (TALE), we can harness the power of teacher collaboration with purpose, intent, and administrative support. For decades, teachers across the world have been using professional learning communities (PLCs) to work together to improve their teaching practices. And it is to PLCs that we suggest we once again turn to help support our shift to TALE. But first, we need to agree on what we mean when we use the term "PLC."

PLCs as a Collaborative Process

The website All Things PLC (which is supported by Solution Tree) calls out the challenge of talking about PLCs: "The term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning." PLCs have been proposed as the solution to everything from classroom practices to systemic reforms. They are variously described as events, organizations, programs, communication systems, or as a fancy way to describe meetings.
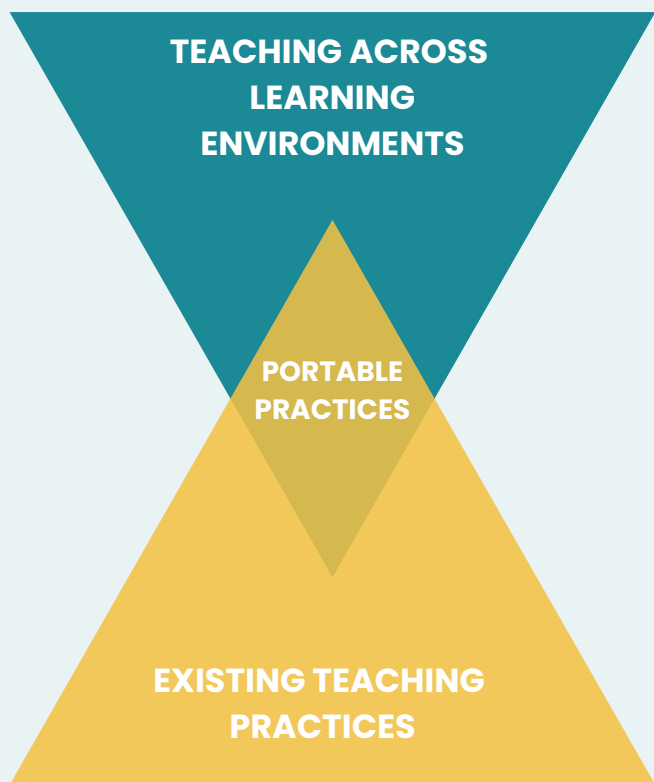
In the TALE Academy, we use the definition of a PLC established by All Things PLC: "**an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve**." During the early 2000s, PLCs became synonymous with data-driven instruction where "data" included formative and summative assessments, teacher-developed assessments, observations of student learning, and more. There arose an emphasis on using hard data (test scores, growth rates, value adds, etc.) to drive continuous improvement. But, as we know from studying learner variability, demonstration of learning does not always look the same, and measuring student learning cannot be standardized. We are in the midst of another sea change in which our shared understanding of terms such as "proficiency," "mastery," and "competency" are in flux. At the same time, so are the contexts and environments within which we teach.

In other words, things are becoming more complex.

Working the Diamond for Sustainable Change

In the third edition of *The Power of Protocols*, McDonald et al. (2013) describe this kind of moment in education as a space where policy and practice meet, often in contradictory and complicated ways. They share the story of a group of Connecticut teachers who came together to implement the new standards that the state had just issued. The teachers met as a PLC regularly to review the standards and figure out what they meant for their classroom practices.

Working the Diamond to Achieve TALE

TEACHING ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

PORTABLE PRACTICES

EXISTING TEACHING PRACTICES

> At one point, the new teacher study group adopted a logo and motto, and ordered some sweatshirts with both emblazoned. The logo featured two isosceles triangles. The one with its base near the bottom of the sweatshirt represented teaching practice. "Like a mountain," the teachers said, "difficult to move and hard to scale." The other, with its base toward the neckline, represented the state's standards. "Like a dagger," they said, expressing their fear of the newness of standards in those days. These triangles overlapped near their apexes, forming a third geometric figure, a diamond-shaped one. This was shaded in the logo and inscribed with the group's motto **"Work the diamond" – that is, the sometimes elusive space in which policy prescriptions and practical knowledge can mix creatively.**

We propose that school leaders support teachers in the same process of "working the diamond" as a way to shift their teaching practices to align with the new world of TALE. In that diamond space, teachers can respond to complexity with collaboration.

Leadership to Support Effective PLCs

There are a number of resources dedicated to guiding school leaders in the creation and implementation of PLCs (see sidebar). For the purposes of this session, however, let's return to the definition of a PLC we presented earlier and go from there.

P L C Defined

We define a PLC as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve."

Let's break that definition down on the following page so that we can consider how to establish PLCs through resilient design for leading.

From PLC Barriers to Leadership Practices

Who

EDUCATORS

Barrier: Buy-in
Goal: Teachers own and take responsibility for and pride in the PLC work.

Leadership Practice: Provide PLCs with autonomy and support self-governance.

What

ONGOING PROCESS

Barrier: Process without product
Goal: Teachers use collaborative processes that result in specific products/ deliverables.

Leadership Practice: Support the PLC members in establishing clear and specific outcome goals.

When

RECURRING CYCLES

Barrier: Process fatigue
Goal: Teachers are engaged and eager to participate.

Leadership Practice: Cycle as needed, where need is determined by the members of the PLC.

Where

TRADITIONALLY IN-PERSON

Barrier: Lack of time during the existing school schedule
Goal: Teachers experience PLC work as integrated into their existing work, not an "add on."

Leadership Practice: Allow for synchronous and/or asynchronous meetings, either in-person or virtual. Modalities are determined by the members of the PLC.

Why

TO ACHIEVE BETTER RESULTS FOR THE STUDENTS THEY SERVE

Barrier: Lag between changes in practice and manifestation in student outcomes
Goal: Teachers recognize and celebrate multiple forms of progress.

Leadership Practice: Support the use of multiple forms of data, including leading indicators such as changes in teacher mindsets and practices, as well as student mindsets, practices, and engagement.

How

COLLECTIVE INQUIRY AND ACTION RESEARCH

Barrier: Vague directions and guidance
Goal: Teachers have a shared understanding of and agreement around how their PLC operates.

Leadership Practice: Use protocols that include a clear and shared purpose, norms, roles, and steps to carry out collective inquiry and conduct action research.

The approach described above requires school leaders to give up the reins in many regards. It is a teacher-driven approach (from the bottom up) to address schoolwide changes (from the top down). In allowing PLCs to "work the diamond," school leaders need to give up some traditional forms of management and control. You will have an opportunity to explore strategies for establishing and supporting such PLCs in your school throughout this session. For now, it is key to note a few items you may want to put in place to support the work of PLCs:

Trained PLC Facilitators

These can be lead teachers, instructional coaches, or other members of your instructional team. They should be thoroughly familiar with the practices of facilitative leadership, collective inquiry, and collaborative processes for change.

Time in the Existing Schedule

In traditional face-to-face PLCs, this means blocking out time for collaboration during the school day, week, and year, as well as during dedicated periods of professional development. If you adopt asynchronous collaborative strategies, the scheduling can be more flexible, BUT it should still be allocated. For example, instead of a 50-minute live meeting with 5-8 staff members, you might allocate 15-minute chunks of time during individual teachers' days for them to engage in online asynchronous work.

Autonomy with Shared Outcome Goals

PLCs working in the way that we describe here should not be run by the school leadership team. Rather, teachers need to form trust among peers so that they can authentically explore and improve their practices. Some PLCs adopt the "Vegas norm" of "What happens in the PLC stays in the PLC" as a way to clearly articulate that the work of the PLC is for the group and is not part of a teacher evaluation process. This encourages experimentation and takes away the fear of failure.

Protocols Rather than Agendas

In an agenda-based meeting, there is usually one person leading who then takes the group through a series of sequential activities that may or may not have anything to do with one another or a shared outcome goal. Protocols, on the other hand, are designed to move teams through a series of sequential processes that lead to a shared outcome goal. The School Reform Initiative, a nonprofit committed to fostering transformational learning communities, explains that protocols "offer structured processes to support focused and productive conversations, build collective understanding, and drive school improvement."

The Big Picture

Let's return to the purpose we stated at the beginning of this session: supporting teachers in developing portable practices. As a way to illustrate the relationship between implementing PLCs and developing portable practices, we drafted a protocol that teachers, working in PLCs, can use to help one another transition their existing teaching practices into portable practices. The protocol is a draft, not direction, and each PLC should begin by reviewing and refining it so that it meets their needs and goals. One version of the protocol is for teachers who are **synchronously** participating in a PLC and the second is for **asynchronous** PLCs.

Collaborating to Design Portable Practices Protocol - Synchronous
Collaborating to Design Portable Practices Protocol - Asynchronous

Now It's Your Turn!

Next, you will explore one of the Portable Practices Protocols so that you can begin to see how you will shape your own leadership strategies to help teachers implement this and other TALE strategies in a collaborative way.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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