Excellent Teaching Happens
EVERYWHERE

PORTABLE PRACTICES
for Teaching Across Learning Environments

Physical Learning Environments

When we think about learning environments, what typically comes to mind is the physical environment: school buildings and classrooms. Let's begin there and think about how resilient and innovative educators are when teaching in changing physical environments.

In 2019, Zekria Farzad founded the The Moria Camp School on the island of Lesvos (Greece) to educate Afghani refugee children. The school began outdoors under an olive tree and then evolved into a building made of scrap pallets and plastic sheets. In just 18 months, what started as one school under an olive tree grew to five schools across the Greek islands educating more than 4,000 refugee children. Learn more at Wave of Hope for the Future.

"When the pandemic threw us lemons, we made lemonade by transforming our elementary program into a forest school in the park."

On the other side of the world, a private school called Brightworks in San Francisco originally opened its doors in a 9,000-square-foot warehouse in the Mission District. When the pandemic hit, they needed to find more space for social distancing: "When the pandemic threw us lemons, we made lemonade by transforming our elementary program into a forest school in the park." Now they are moving into a 120-year-old structure located in the eucalyptus groves of the Presidio neighborhood. The renovated military barracks is now a green building that is certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.
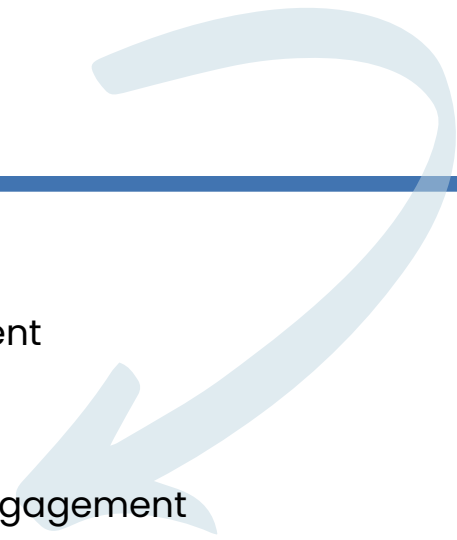
Continuity of Learning

Portable Practices

The Moria Camp School and Brightworks are, in many ways, nothing alike. Their social, political, and financial conditions certainly are worlds apart. And yet, both schools demonstrate that school is not merely a building. When their physical environments changed, they looked at what was fundamental to their community of learners and found ways to continue providing those fundamentals. Continuity of learning, a phrase we heard throughout the pandemic, is about continuity of effective practices regardless of the physical learning environment. We describe these kinds of practices that are effective across learning environments as being portable.

In this session, we will look at effective teaching practices through the lens of portability – what do we already have in our back pockets that travels well when we move between learning environments? What could we consider adding to that back pocket to be even more agile educators?
Let's explore three continuity of learning elements (or what Fairfax County Public Schools calls best practices for teaching and learning) and one example of a portable practice for each.

Three Portable Practices

☑ **Academic Conversations**
Create a Student-Centered Learning Environment

☑ **Checks for Understanding**
Measure and Adjust to Student Learning and Engagement

☑ **Community-Building Circles**
Build Relationships that Promote a Safe and Positive Environment

Continuity of Learning
Create a student-centered learning environment

Portable Practice
Academic Conversations

According to education blogger John McCarthy, "Student-centered classrooms include students in planning, implementation, and assessments...Teachers must become comfortable with changing their leadership style from directive to consultative – from 'Do as I say' to 'Based on your needs, let's co-develop and implement a plan of action.'"

In student-centered learning (SCL), students' interests drive education. SCL gives students the opportunity to decide two things: what material they learn and how they learn it. In contrast to teacher-centered approaches, SCL engages students as leaders and decision-makers in their own learning. Academic conversations are one example of a portable practice that puts students in the driver's seat of their learning.

Based on Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford's book _Academic Conversations: Classroom Talk That Fosters Critical Thinking and Content Understandings_, there are five core conversation skills that students should use to transform their ordinary conversations into academic conversations. These skills are explicitly taught, practiced, and scaffolded. Academic conversations aren't about reaching one conclusion. Instead, they're about exploration; they don't stop at the "I agree or disagree" portion, but ask questions about the topic, leading to a deeper understanding of it from multiple points of view. In an academic conversation lesson, students can explore the challenging topics they are passionate about using learned conversation features (see below).

Facilitating Academic Conversations Anywhere

FEATURES OF CONVERSTATION	PROMPTS FOR USING THE FEATURE	PROMPTS FOR RESPONDING
COME UP WITH A WORTHY TOPIC	Why do you think the author wrote this? What are some themes that emerged in...?	I think the author wrote it to teach us about... One theme might be...
ELABORATE AND CLARIFY	Can you elaborate? What do you mean by...? Can you tell me more about...? What makes you think that?	I think it means that... In other words...
SUPPORT IDEAS WITH EXAMPLES	Can you give me an example? Can you show me where it says that? Can you be more specific? Are there any cases of that?	For example... In the text, it said that... One case showed that...
BUILD ON OR CHALLENGE ANOTHER'S IDEA	What do you think? Can you add to this idea? Do you agree? What might be other points of view?	I would add that... Then again, I think that... I want to expand on your point about...
APPLY/ CONNECT	How can we apply this idea to our lives? What can we learn from this character/story? If you were...	In my life... I think it can teach us... If I were..., I would have...
PARAPHRASE AND SUMMARIZE	What have we discussed so far? How should we summarize what we talked about?	We can say that... The main theme/point of the text seems to be...

(Source: ACSD)

Continuity of Learning

Measure and adjust to student learning and engagement

An educator's primary responsibility is to search out and construct engaging, meaningful educational experiences that allow students to solve real-world problems and show they have learned the big ideas, powerful skills, and habits of mind and heart that meet agreed-upon educational standards. This looks less and less like standing at the front of a classroom, presenting

to students who are intently – and quietly – taking notes. Our role as teachers and our instructional spaces have evolved to meet the cognitive, behavioral, and social needs of learners across multiple learning environments. An effective teacher in the 21st century focuses on their role in attaining learning outcomes through student-centered learning and seeking evidence of learning. One portable practice that embodies this teacher role is checking for understanding.

Portable Practice
Checks for Understanding

A critical role of the teacher is to use frequent formative assessments to make sure that anticipated learning is happening. The key recognition here is that it is the teacher's responsibility to adjust teaching to seeking evidence of learning. Checking for understanding (CFU) is the teacher continually verifying that students are learning what is being taught while it is being taught. CFU provides the teacher the opportunity to improve learning based on student responses throughout the teaching and learning process. Using a formative assessment such as CFU in real time allows teachers to make crucial instructional decisions as necessary (such as re-teaching) during lesson delivery.

Teach for America gives its new teachers eight quick ways to CFU:
- Interactive notebooks
- Kahoot!
- Pair up and talk it out
- Whiteboard
- One-question quiz
- Turn the tables
- Exit slips
- Time to reflect

Effective teaching includes checking to see if students are understanding the lesson during instruction while you still have a chance to course-correct. As we can see from the list provided by Teach for America to its new teachers, this does not have to be a paper-and-pencil formative assessment. Checks for understanding are quick, embedded, and do not halt instruction. They travel well between in-person and remote learning, and many online learning platforms excel at creating opportunities for students to reflect their learning efficiently.

Build relationships that promote a safe and positive environment

In Session 3 of this module, we learned that strong relationships with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students' level of motivation and therefore promote learning. Students who do not feel safe may avoid assignments, put their heads down, yell or make negative comments, disrupt or leave a learning environment, or act out aggressively. Students who have access to a greater number of strong relationships are more academically engaged, have stronger social skills, and experience more positive behavior. Positive relationships create greater psychological safety, a major precursor to learning.

In Session 3, we focused on the eight phases of instruction and how teachers can embed community-building practices throughout the phases. Below, we describe a specific – and portable – practice that can help foster peer-to-peer relationships and help resolve conflict when those relationships break down.

Portable Practice
Community-Building Circles

A community-building circle is one of the methods of restorative practices in education. Restorative practices focus on resolving conflict, repairing harm, and healing relationships. They support a positive and safe school climate, prevent bullying, and reduce disciplinary incidents. As a tiered system of support, restorative practices operate on both a preventive and responsive level. At the responsive level (tiers 2 and 3), restorative interventions respond to incidents of harm or conflict in a school.

A tier 1 prevention measure is a community-building circle practice. Restorative schools teach and practice the structured communication model of a community-building circle to develop, strengthen, and maintain relationships among students and with school staff. Circles are planned like lessons, with co-created agreements and predictable routines such as an opening mindfulness moment and a check-in prompt. Inclusion is regulated by the use of a talking piece, which gives each participant a chance to be seen and heard on the topic of sharing. One of the benefits of dedicating time to a restorative circle is the reward of getting to know your students well.

As educator Marieke van Woerkom, senior trainer, coach, and curriculum writer for Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, puts it, "Our students come to school with many issues on their minds and in their hearts. As educators, we can help them process their thoughts and feelings so they can better handle their situations and be more present in class."

3 Tiers of Restorative Justice

Tier III — Circles of Support & Accountability — Support Reentry

Tier II — Restorative Conferences — Respond to Conflict & Harm

Tier I — Community-Building Circles — Build & Strengthen Relationships

For more on restorative justice, see The Restorative Justice Coalition at Reed College.
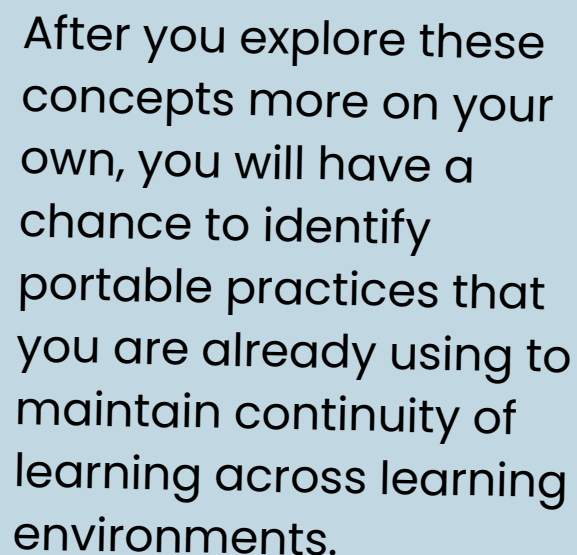
Research-Based, Effective Teaching Strategies

While looking quite different from each other on the surface, academic conversations, checks for understanding, and community-building circles are connected to each other by a through line. They are grounded in a high-level view of education as student-centered, learning-focused, and emotionally intelligent.

Here at the TALE Academy, these specific practices stand out for their portability across learning environments. We have to remind ourselves that we already have a lot of portable practices that need little tailoring to impact students wherever we are.

Now it's your turn!

After you explore these concepts more on your own, you will have a chance to identify portable practices that you are already using to maintain continuity of learning across learning environments.

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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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