THE POWER OF

COMMUNITY

BUILDING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY ACROSS THE 8 PHASES OF INSTRUCTION

TALE *Academy*

MODULE 1 – SESSION 3

On the Cover...

Teachers at Tecumseh Elementary School in the Jamesville-DeWitt School District held a car parade to visit students in April 2020.

In an interview with Syracuse.com, Former Principal Jill Zerillo shared their goal: "We just want the students to know we are all thinking of them, and we do miss them."

Emergency Remote Community

If you ask any teacher or student what the most important thing that they took away from remote learning was, you'll hear a variety of answers. Some might reference the plethora of technology issues. Some might say they loved being able to eat a snack when they wanted to. Overall, though, the most resounding answer you're likely to hear (perhaps followed closely by "I learned that I hate the phrase 'you're on mute'") is that students, teachers, and administrators all learned that we are nothing and we learn nothing without community and relationships.

In December 2021, MIT Teaching + Learning Lab Professor Justin Reich presented his research on the experiences of students and teachers during pandemic schooling and how this research can help us reimagine and reinvent the future of education. Overwhelmingly, Reich's interviews uncovered that the role of community building could no longer be underestimated. One teacher said, "I have to stop thinking of community building as one 'unit' at the beginning that I rush through and start thinking about how community can play a much larger, systemic role in my classroom."

Throughout the course of the pandemic, what everyone wants became increasingly clear: to bring a level of humanity and connection to education that was not sustainably emphasized in decades past. Like eating all our vegetables or exercising 30 minutes a day (who has the time?), we all knew that taking the time to build a classroom community with intention and thoughtful planning was the ideal. The research shows us again and again that student achievement is significantly improved in positive school climates where trust, relationships, and identity acceptance are highlighted. However, turning this knowledge into reality has not always been easy. Teacher burnout, a stress on high-stakes testing, and an ever-morphing educational landscape have prevented making classroom community a sustained priority. It's time to change that.

Through emergency remote teaching, we learned that these classroom communities are just as, if not more, important across all learning environments. But long before 2020, when the idea of a global pandemic was merely fodder for the movies, countless studies concluded that without a sense of belonging and purpose, student engagement is impossible. In 2016, Stanford researchers found that explicit training in strategies for empathy and mutual respect had a significant effect on student behavior and academic performance. It was simple math: the more a student felt that they were a part of a community, the higher they achieved. Conversely, students who felt removed from their environment were more likely to incur suspension and have behavioral issues and lower grades.

As teachers, we saw this more than ever during ERT, when the whole country's sense of **predictability, flexibility, connectedness, and empowerment** felt dangerously at risk. As a result, we found ways to combat students' feelings of separation by going above and beyond. Teachers hosted car parades, drew sidewalk chalk art, and arranged care packages. They wore funny hats on Google Meets and experimented with cat-ear filters on Zoom. We let every student know that even though we had to be distant, we did not have to be isolated.

Building Community Across Learning Environments

How can we apply the lessons learned during the collective crisis of COVID-19 to create a place where all students – whether they are learning from 5 feet or 5 towns away from us – feel welcome, safe, seen, and heard? This session will help you apply the very best parts of pandemic teaching to your classes moving forward. Our framework will be the eight phases that instruction takes over the course of a lesson. Teachers will find these to be familiar, as they are the processes we perform every day. As we talk about each phase, try to imagine how you can expand on your current strategies to create a welcoming culture of respect and community for all learners in all learning environments.

Phase 1: Self-Care

There's the seat belt analogy. Or the oxygen mask analogy. Or a number of other analogies that essentially mean "Take care of yourself before you take care of others." Both the seat belt analogy and the oxygen mask analogy stem from the idea that we are on a life-threatening, plummeting plane, or perhaps that we are anticipating a car crash. We don't know about you, but we've had enough crisis-mode mentality for a lifetime, so let's table the catastrophe analogies and just say this: self-care is the first and foremost phase of any learning plan. It might mean taking one minute for quiet breathing during a particularly hectic lesson or breaking for a 10-second dance party when you sense that things are feeling tense. What strategies of self-care can you use at the opening of class to model self-care and show your students the importance of attending to our human needs?

Phase 2: Setting the Stage

Here's a familiar scenario: it's September. You've printed up class expectations, decided on the very best tried-and-true icebreakers, and planned for the flow of each day with your students. This first month will give them a chance to establish themselves as a class and to build relationships, respect, and friendships that will last all year. But by December, the honeymoon's over, the routine's out the window, and those feel-good moments are coming fewer and farther between.

Think back to the teacher from Dr. Reich's MIT research who realized that she needed to "start thinking about how community can play a much larger, systemic role in [her] classroom." She hit the nail on the head. We are bombarded every day with lessons that need to be completed and academic issues that need to be addressed. Often, community building just doesn't make it into our precious 45 minutes. But it needs to. When we develop and sustain class agreements, routines, and team building, we are investing in success that lasts through the school year. Consider what "setting the stage" looks like for you and your students across all learning environments. What norms and expectations will you create together that establish not only predictability and connectedness, but that will also endure the slog of March with its lack of breaks or three-day weekends?

Phase 3: Welcoming Your Learners

This is the phase in which you focus explicitly on creating that feeling of acceptance, connectedness, and community. Connecting and checking in with students at the start of a class—whether by greeting them at the door or sending a personal message in the chat—shows students that we see them as whole people, not just sponges waiting to absorb content. When we start with connectedness, not content, we establish the positive feelings that will allow students to take risks, be open, and fully engage when the learning starts. How can you ensure that students are welcomed with warmth and respect across all learning environments?

Phase 4: Warming Up the Think Tank

Now we're moving toward the meat of our lesson. In this phase, focus on engaging student inquiry through hands-on activities or entry games. When you create an opening routine (think: bell ringers, word scrambles, Sudoku), you establish that sense of predictability that builds student confidence and success. What types of activities can you start with that can allow students across all learning environments to interact with each other?

Phase 5: Connections During the Lesson

We've arrived! After the deep breaths, establishing routines, greeting students, and priming the pump (all in the first seven minutes, you superhero, you!), now it's time to work with content. Whatever the subject, whatever the lesson, creating opportunities for interactions between students builds on the classroom community and sense of connectedness that will foster a deeper understanding of the material. Through jigsaw activities, classroom discussions, and think-pair-shares, students master not only concepts, but relationship skills as well. How can all students, in all learning environments, interact with one another in a meaningful and engaging way?

Phase 6: Students Drive the Learning

Our good friend on the one-hundred dollar bill said, "Tell me and I will forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I will learn." Benjamin Franklin had it right: learning is about finding yourself in your inquiries. How do we involve our students in their own learning?

What opportunities do they have to feel empowered? After two years of having choice after choice taken away, here is a chance to give students back some autonomy. When we teach students that what they are learning matters, we give them agency, inspiration, and self-discipline. Think about how you can help students drive the lessons that you are teaching: you can use choice boards, authentic tasks, or peer tutoring. Across all learning environments, how can you engage students in the conversation about their learning and give them opportunities to authentically take part in the lesson?

Phase 7: Closing Time

The lesson has come to the end, class is winding down, and you can almost take a bathroom break. Now what? Closing activities are vital to the flow of the lesson and, again, build in that sense of predictability. It helps to give students a chance to check in before they check out. Investing time in reflection at the end of your lesson provides an opportunity for students to achieve metacognition and to assess their own understanding and performance. These exit tickets will also give you a sense of where you are and where you still need to go. What types of closing activities will allow students across all learning environments to reflect on their experience of that lesson? Is there a group closing routine that can help to bring the class back together and strengthen that sense of community and belonging?

Phase 8: Communicating with Families

This last phase happens outside the lesson, but holds incredible value in giving students the maximum opportunities possible to succeed. When we involve families, we are modeling the idea that it indeed takes a village. We again send the message that we see and respect our students as whole people with lives both inside and outside school. The connections that you make with families will have lasting effects on student outcomes. With that in mind, how will you ensure that all families, across all learning environments, will have the opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, and questions? Are the methods effective that you are currently using to engage families? If not, what changes can you implement to open a two-way communication between school and home?

INFUSING COMMUNITY THROUGH THE

8 PHASES OF INSTRUCTION

01.
SELF-CARE
What strategies of self-care can you use at the opening of class to model self-care and show them the importance of attending to our human needs?

SETTING THE STAGE 02.
What norms and expectations can you create together that will not only establish predictability and connectedness, but that will also endure the slog of March with its lack of breaks or three-day weekends?

SET LIST

03.
WELCOMING YOUR LEARNERS
How can you ensure that students are welcomed with warmth and respect across all learning environments?

WARMING UP THE THINK TANK 04.
What types of activities can you start with that can allow students across all learning environments to interact with each other?

05.
CONNECTIONS DURING THE LESSON
How can all students, in all learning environments, interact with one another in a meaningful and engaging way?

STUDENTS DRIVE THE LEARNING 06.
Across all learning environments, how can you engage students in the conversation about their learning and give them opportunities to authentically take part in the lesson?

07.
CLOSING TIME
What types of closing activities will allow students across all learning environments to reflect on their experience of that lesson? Is there a group closing routine that can help to bring the class back together and strengthen that sense of community and belonging?

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES 08.
How will you ensure that all families, across all learning environments, will have the opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, and questions?

Now It's Your Turn!

In your next workbook activity, you will complete a chart to help you reflect upon what your strategies for building classroom community look like 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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