

Re-imagining and Rebooting Back to School

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It seems odd to be writing a back to school article during this moment of time. It is especially confusing when, as this article is being written, many across the state have no idea what school is going to look like or when it will start. What kinds of things can a teacher do to prepare themselves for a lot of unknowns and continue practices we know are important in education? It might be better to think of the upcoming back to school as a reboot or even a re-imagining of school rather than a typical return. While school will look and feel very different as we move into the next academic year, the tools and methods for effective instruction remain the same. At a distance, virtually or otherwise, impactful teachers purposefully build relationships and routines with their students in a class culture that values all voices.

Research around learning and trauma indicates that a stressed brain struggles to learn. This is a pandemic, a stressful time for everybody living through it. As teachers in a service profession, one of the things you can do to help your students is to take care of yourself. Teachers give a lot of time, energy, and emotion in service to those around them. During traumatic times, it is important to stop and take time to recharge the batteries and avoid becoming exhausted or overwhelmed. Plan off-screen time, turn off the computers and phones, disconnect from the virtual community, and reconnect with the physical one. Take a simple walk in nature, do a little sketching, or read a funny book. Schedule time to relax, refresh, and recharge. As stated by Fisher, Frey, and Hattie in the *Distance Learning Playbook*, "When we model healthy, growth producing relationships, students see how they work. When we model respect, kindness, and a range of emotions, students notice how we regulate and respond." Like ways we help make learning transparent for students, it is important to make healthy social emotional practices transparent also.

Relationships of trust and collaboration provide support with tackling challenges. Strengthening our own professional networks through social media and learning communities such as the Texas Alliance for Geography Education (<https://www.geo.txstate.edu/tage/>) or the Texas Council for Social Studies (<https://txcss.net/>) allows us to use the strength and experiences of others to address our own challenges.

Our students also need learning communities and growth producing relationships as they navigate new realities. Building relationships starts with the heart. When we are not there physically to read emotions and body language, it is important to design opportunities within learning experiences to connect with students using virtual resources. This process involves a teacher getting to know the voice of their students, creating opportunities for students to have ownership through choices, and spending time nurturing the class community. With limited instructional time, embedding prompts and activities which address relationship building along with acquiring and/or applying content understanding are critical. For example:

- Conduct regular heart check ins with students. From having them indicate their current emotional state through emoji selections or responding to questions like What is on your mind as we...What are your biggest hopes as we start this lesson? What are your biggest worries as we start this unit/lesson? in a [Padlet](#) or in a discussion board, there are many ways to gauge where your students are emotionally as well as building community and relationships.
- Students can apply their knowledge of map elements through the creation of a Map of Me. Using an object which is significant to them as their map base, students create a landscape reflecting personal celebrations, memories, and turning points.
- Use quotes, unusual maps (see Library of Congress's [Zooming into Maps](#) activity), art, or interesting photographs in lesson openers. Ask questions such as What do you see? Feel? What else do you know that relates? How does this connect with you today? to engage students emotionally in addition to typical content related prompts.

- In a variation of “This or That”, allow students to self-select a small group based on preferred landscape, settlement pattern, economic activity, or place. Before they begin the small group assignment, have them discuss briefly as a small group their choice and what attributes the group has in common with their selection.
- Provide multiple options students can use to acquire new learning, such as an [Edpuzzle](#) video with embedded questions, guided inquiry using a [HyperDoc](#) or [Symbaloo](#), or teacher-led discussion.
- Allow students to choose the format to show what they have learned. Evidence of learning could include infographics, story maps, narrated slideshow, or children’s book.
- Include reflective questions in exit tickets to solicit student thinking behind their work, like What was one learning challenge you faced and what strength helped you overcome the challenge? Select one new vocabulary term you learned today – what symbols or prior learning helped you understand the new terms? How does it connect to something in your life? Summarize one concept you learned today using a favorite object. Describe one way you supported a thinking partner’s learning today.

“Maintaining and communicating predictable routines is very important. Doing so helps students to maintain a sense of psychological safety—a sense that they can manage stress or connect with someone who can help them manage stress.”
 -- Teaching Tolerance, *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus*, March 2020.

Anybody who has had their computer reimaged knows that often when you first turn it on after the desktop and programs do not look the same. It is hard to find things, software has new icons, resources have new names, and a lot of the tools we were used to knowing how to use we struggled to find. Coming back to school after months of being out maybe similar for our students, even for some of our teachers. The idea that the tools our students need to navigate in school are still the same, but they may look and feel different. Whether you are teaching virtually, face to face safely distanced, or a blending of the two, directly teaching and modeling routines enhances a student’s ability to acquire the learning outcomes desired.

Additionally, trauma can often cause regression in behaviors. Students who learning listening skills, accountable talk, or how to categorize PEGS (political, economic, geographic, and social) characteristics previously may struggle to demonstrate these practices without reinforcement. To support students through their transition back, teachers may want to identify what routines are critical for student success and how might they be reinforced early and often.

Consider –

- Including a weekly video of yourself introducing the learning goals and activities
- Providing step by step how to directions with screen shots for common tasks such as access online textbooks, navigating digital library resources, virtual meeting tools, finding previous lessons, or saving and submitting assignments.
- Sharing examples and non-examples for discussion board exchanges, virtual meeting etiquette, civil discourse, accountable talk, citing sources, and group work.
- Designing a common lesson structure with clear learning goals and success criteria to ensure students understand what expectations and resources are related to that day work.
- Create anchor charts with classes for process routines like [APPARTS](#), [SOAPStone](#), or OPTICS.
- Use graphic organizers to support thinking routines such as See, Think, Wonder or Beginning, Middle, and End.

While the turmoil of change is unsettling, it often leads to new thinking and improved practices. This period has the possibility of being a time of great and wonderful shifts in education, enriching learning experiences for all our students. As you begin your journey back to school, remember to take care of yourself, take time to know your students, provide support through routines and know that many are on the journey with you. Together we can ride through the storm to a bright new horizon.

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Resources

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