

Protocols in the classroom

A time and place for pie

Using Transitions to build classroom community

A few years ago, I made the intentional decision to start every Monday morning in one of my seventh grade social studies classes by engaging in the  [Connections Activity](#) (ed. note: now updated as the  [Transitions Activity](#), and referred to as such throughout this article) with the students. This was not an unusual decision for me; I had used Transitions in a number of my classes prior to this, and it had always had a profoundly positive impact on the classroom culture.

I can't recall exactly why I chose to do it with this particular group of students, this particular school year. Was it that the students coasted into class Monday mornings silent and shut down, carrying that closed off demeanor into each day's lesson? Was it that the students didn't seem to gel as a group, and I wanted to find a way to bring them into community with each other? Was it that I had the sense that these students had stories to tell, but the class periods went so fast and there was so much to do that those stories just weren't surfacing? Was it that a few gregarious students dominated every class and much of my time, leaving the quieter students unknown?

I don't know exactly why I chose to integrate this particular activity into this particular class, but I decided to and I knew that it was going to be great! I had an instinct that this was the structure that would allow the students to feel safe to share about their thoughts and experiences in and outside of the classroom. It would give our classroom community the space to witness each others' important thoughts and life events.



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As we learned about each other, our community would grow stronger, and our knowledge of each other would enhance my ability to teach my students well and their abilities to see each other as fully human. Our classroom would become a safe space for deep, connected learning to happen. It was going to be powerful. I just knew it.

With no hesitation, on that Monday morning several years ago, I explained Transitions to my students. After fielding several questions, I felt confident that my students understood the intent of the protocol. With anticipation in my heart, I announced, "Transitions is now open," and started my timer for 10 minutes.

Silence.

I can wait it out, I thought. This is totally normal. The protocol is new, and the students need time to think of what to say.

Still more silence.

I noticed the seconds ticking down on my timer. Just wait a little bit longer, I coached myself. It will only take one student to speak, and

then students will be sharing in waves. Be patient.

The silence was becoming unbearable for me. Did I do a really bad job of explaining this, I wondered. Concern tinged with panic started to creep into my consciousness. What if no one said anything at all, I worried.

And then, a student cleared his throat. I could feel my tension lessen. This is it, I thought. The magic is about to happen.

"I like pie!" The words danced off my student's tongue, a broad smile upon his face and an impish twinkle in his eye.

Several students giggled softly, while I felt frustration and disappointment rising in me. Keep calm, I thought. Keep your expression just as it is. Don't react.

The subsiding giggles were replaced by still more silence.

Maybe they just don't know what to say, I thought as the silence pressed in around us.

Clearly, I need to set the example, I decided. Like other details of the day, I've now forgotten exactly what I shared at this point. I probably shared a story about one of my dogs getting into some kind of mischief. Or maybe I shared a great joy or disappointment from the weekend. Whatever I said, it was honest and it worked. After I was done, several different students shared stories from their weekends. These stories weren't dramatic or intense, but they were real — real things that happened to my students.

And then the timer rang.



“Transitions is now closed,” I said, somewhat thankful that we got through it and hopeful that students would grow into the protocol over time.

After this initial introduction of Transitions, it didn’t take long for my students to catch on to the protocol and relish in taking part in it each week. We actually had to extend the time because so many students wanted to speak, and as the year went on, they increasingly shared incidents from their lives that required a level of honesty and vulnerability that surprised me — the death of a loved one; the joy of a baby sibling being born; the excitement of having a family member come home from military service overseas; illness in the family; disappointment in any number of adults.

As the students became more willing to open up about their lives, we periodically found ourselves sitting with the hard-to-bear truth of someone in the room. When students shared about car accidents, bullying, catastrophic illness in their families, or death, heaviness would hang in the room. It was the kind of heaviness that allowed us all to know that we stood together in empathy for the person sharing their story. It was also the kind of heaviness that can

be difficult to move on from, the kind of tension that just has to give.

I distinctly recall one of those heavy days. I can visualize the student who shared, but no details about what she said. I can also recall how brave I thought she was for being

willing to be so honest about here feelings in front of her peers. After she spoke, the heaviness set in. It seemed like there were no words appropriate to follow her words, nothing left to say of greater importance.

As I scanned the room, allowing us time to sit quietly together in community and wondering how long to let that quite last, I heard a nervous giggle and the familiar words, “I like pie.” Giggles erupted throughout the room. The tension in the room seemed to abate, and Transitions rolled on.

At first, I didn’t know what to do with this event. Was the pie comment disrespectful and insensitive to the girl who had shared so openly? Should I be angry? Or was the student who spoke of pie simply a 12 year old, uncomfortable with the quiet weight of the room, doing what he knew how to do to help lighten things up and move on? Should I be thankful?

With the knowledge that the latter was most likely the case, but that the former might also have been felt by the student who shared (or others in the room), I decided to speak to our class’s lover of pie, at the end of the class period. We talked about how natural it is to want to release tension in a group, the power of

words, when humor works and when it may not, and how to be sensitive to others in the room.

After our conversation, I was fairly certain the student would be a more sensitive member of our classroom community. However, I also knew that I needed to be more responsive to students who struggled to sit in heavy silence and needed something to lighten the moment so they could move on.

Once the students got the hang of Transitions, they absolutely would not let go of it. I was not allowed to cancel it. Period. It had become our Monday morning ritual. So, when my assistant principal walked in one Monday morning to observe my teaching for 20 minutes, I had no choice. He was going to observe Transitions, which technically had nothing to do with the 7th grade Social Studies curriculum.

He watched. He listened. He left.

A couple of days later, I had my meeting with him to discuss the observation, and I went in armed with my rationale for taking the time to do Transitions. I was ready to defend the value of a safe and caring classroom community and a teacher who knows her students well enough to tailor instruction to their interests and the realities of their daily lives. My defense was unnecessary. My assistant principal immediately picked up on how important Transitions was to the students and appreciated the community he witnessed in my classroom.

So Transitions went on that year. And occasionally, when it was too quiet for too long and the tension needed to be released, that one student would break the silence and give us the gift of giggles by saying, with a kind smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye, “I like pie.”

