

# LAYERS PRACTICE SPACE

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE



## Becoming a More Equitable Educator: Mindsets and Practices



TEACHING SYSTEMS LAB

# Welcome to Layers Facilitator's Guide

This is a guide to help you facilitate the Layers practice space, a digital scenario developed by MIT's Teaching Systems Lab to help teachers rehearse common and challenging classroom moments. In this scenario, participants will experience a simulation where they alter a lesson based on what they learn about students' lives outside of school.

The goal of this activity is to guide educators in a conversation about the [Context-Centered and Context-Neutral Educator Mindsets](#). Participants will talk about how they consider students' context, and how they do or do not think about integrating knowledge of students interests, lives and community contexts into their teaching practice.

We believe that mindsets like Context-Centered and Context-Neutral are often out of balance in schools, and hope that conversations and activities like these will help us begin to rebalance. To learn more about the Educator Mindsets, access our online course, [Becoming a More Equitable Educator: Practices and Mindsets](#).

The practice space should take between 60-90 minutes.

## IN THIS GUIDE YOU'LL FIND THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS

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# Getting Ready to Facilitate a Practice Space

## PREPARE YOURSELF

- Watch [this video](#) from instructor Justin Reich about facilitating practice spaces.
  - Spend some time looking over the following documents. You'll need to be familiar with them to facilitate effectively.
    - The Layers [scenario](#) itself (this link is just for facilitators to explore the practice space; use [this link](#) for participants)
      - After you explore the scenario, be sure to fill out the survey at the end - it's different from the one in the course; it helps us understand how people are using and sharing our materials.
    - The [Context-Centered versus Context-Neutral Educator Mindset Table](#)
    - The [Debrief Guide](#) and Mindsets in the Practice Space [handout](#).
    - For more resources on facilitation, see [Appendix A](#).
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## SCHEDULE A TIME TO MEET

- We recommend planning 60-90 minutes to do the practice space with a group. A longer time will give you more time to debrief. If you have less than 60 minutes, consider asking participants to complete the practice space individually before meeting.
  - If you are new to facilitating equity conversations, you may want to consider inviting a smaller group of colleagues to try it out with you before sharing with a larger audience.
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## GATHER NEEDED MATERIALS

Each participant will need:

- a device with internet access to do the practice spaces. We find laptops and Chromebooks work best for TeacherMoments, while the platform doesn't work as well on mobile devices.
- a copy of the Context-Centered versus Context-Neutral Mindset Table ([Handout 1](#))
- a copy of the Mindsets in Practice Handout ([Handout 2](#))

# Facilitating the Practice Space

## BEFORE STARTING THE PRACTICE SPACE (5-10 MINUTES)

Facilitator Actions	Suggestions
Set up	Set out a copy of Handouts 1 and 2 for each participant, face down.
Once participants arrive, orient them and frame the simulation	Talk about what you're about to do and how it fits in with shared goals and challenges in your context.
Set norms and expectations	Share that practice spaces are great places to try out responses, try new things and make mistakes in a structured environment. Encourage participants to be open-minded and ready to listen and learn from peers.

## DURING THE PRACTICE SPACE DIGITAL SCENARIO (30 MINUTES)

Note that you would skip this part if you chose to have participants do the individual, digital part of the practice space ahead of time.

Facilitator Actions	Suggestions
Connect everyone to the practice space	Share link and troubleshoot as needed <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>link to <a href="#">Layers Practice Space</a></li></ul>
Let them know about the practice space survey	Let participants know there will be a survey at the end of the practice space, and encourage them to complete it - either during the workshop or afterwards if they run out of time.  This survey is very helpful to us, because it helps us understand how people are using our materials.
Manage time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Check in about time every ten minutes or so.</li><li>Around five minutes before time is up, ask everyone to click forward until they get to the section titled Reflect, even if they haven't completely finished the other parts.</li></ul>
Troubleshoot as needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Walk around to see if participants have questions</li></ul>

## DEBRIEF GUIDE (20-40 MINUTES)

If you find yourself with 20 minutes or less to debrief, we recommend choosing 5-6 of these prompts. We've put prompts we think are particularly important in **bold**.

Facilitator Actions	Suggestions
1. Which students did you guys have?	Get a few responses. Notice if there are two participants who both worked with the same student card.
<b>2. Anticipate question: What information about your students do you consider important when building, creating and/or brainstorming class activities?</b>	Ask how they thought about this before doing the practice space - and offer space to also share how they feel now.  Check to see if anybody mostly focused on students' relationship to the material or what was going on in class.
<b>3. Reflection question: what do you think the purpose of this game was?</b>	Listen to people's ideas here. You can circle back to the game's purpose when you discuss the mindset table.
<b>4. If you adjusted your lesson, at what point or layer did you decide to adjust (layer two, three, etc.)?</b>  <b>How big were the shifts, and how did you adjust the lesson to address what you learned, if you did adjust it?</b>	If you noticed that two participants both had the same student, see if they would be willing to share how they approached teaching that student.  If you need another prompt, you can ask:  Considering the students you were assigned in the game, was there a student in particular where you thought: "based on what I'm learning about this student now, I want to revise this lesson"?
5. How did you deal with the third layer? Did anyone struggle to incorporate the third layer, or didn't think it mattered?  Did anyone struggle trying to create lessons that helped all three students at the same time?	The third layer can help illuminate some of the challenges and potential of a Context-Centered mindset, and is there in the hopes that it can explain the previous layers.

## DEBRIEF GUIDE CONTINUED

Facilitator Actions	Suggestions
<p><b>6. Ask participants to turn over <a href="#">Handout 1: Context-Centered versus Context-Neutral Educator Mindset Table</a>, briefly review it and share your thoughts.</b></p>	<p>Ask them to focus specifically on the first column, "Orientation." Ask them to compare and contrast the top and bottom halves, and ask for their reactions to contrasting statements like:</p> <p>1A) I try to understand students as a product of their family and community.</p> <p>4A) Educators don't need to understand students' families and communities.</p> <p>We believe it's important that educators understand that a student's academic achievement is the result of myriad interactions over time with adults and peers inside and outside of the classroom</p>
<p><b>7. Ask participants to review the final column of the mindset table, "Consequences," and compare/ contrast the top and bottom halves.</b></p> <p><b>Ask: Does it seem important to build connections between the curriculum and community? Or are layers one and two enough?</b></p>	<p>Focus on contrasting 1C and 4C:</p> <p>1C) "Educators seek to build connections between the curriculum and the community to make content meaningful and relevant."</p> <p>4C) "Educators miss opportunities to build partnerships and make curriculum meaningful for students."</p> <p>If you need another prompt, ask: what connections can you make between this practice space and dilemmas you've faced as an educator?</p>
<p>8. If time allows, ask participants to review the <a href="#">Handout 2: Mindsets in the Practice Space</a>. (If not, simply give it to them as a takeaway to learn more about the mindset).</p>	<p>Ask them to consider their own responses along a spectrum of Context-Centered versus Context-Neutral and share responses to the handout.</p>
<p><b>9. Call to Action &amp; Next Steps:</b></p> <p><b>How can you connect this with your own practice? Are there places you could experiment with bringing more Context-Centered reasoning in your practice?</b></p> <p>What about your school environment as a whole?</p> <p>What next steps might this group take together to continue to address these issues in our context?</p>	<p>Here are some suggestions to bring Context-Centered reasoning into your practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notice opportunities to learn about your students' home lives, see if your interactions with them are influenced positively, and how your perspective changes.</li> <li>• See your students as complex individuals whose home life influences their own in-school experience and interactions.</li> <li>• Find ways to connect knowledge about your students with your curriculum and classroom culture to encourage their success.</li> </ul>

## WRAP UP (5 MINUTES)

### Facilitator Prompts

Thank participants for participating and ask for feedback or final thoughts on the experience of doing the practice space together.

Encourage them to fill out the survey at the end of the practice space if they haven't already.

## DEBRIEF TIPS

1. If participants are expressing a Context-Neutral mindset, ask them to look at the top half of the mindset table, and ask how they might reframe their position using any of these Context-Centered-based orientations.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX A. Want to dig deeper as a facilitator?

- a. Watch a video of [educators debriefing](#) after doing the Layers Practice Space together.
- b. Learn more about Context-Centered and Context-Neutral Mindsets in [this video](#) from course instructor Richard Milner IV, professor of education at Vanderbilt University.

### APPENDIX B. What are practice spaces?

- a. A practice space is an online scenario that allows you to explore an improvisational moment with students in a way that helps you stretch and grow. It allows you to try things and then reflect on how well they might work or how you reasoned about your decisions.
- b. Watch this [short video](#) to learn more about how we describe practice spaces in the Teaching Systems Lab.

### APPENDIX C. Handouts

Handout 1: Educator Mindsets Table: Context-Centered versus Context-Neutral

Scroll to the next page for a printable handout; click [here](#) for a digital version.

**Navigating the chart:** The chart can be read from left to right. Each mindset has orientations (common ideas or thought patterns), explanations of the orientations (describing the reason behind the thought patterns), and consequences that result from the mindset.

## A Framework of Educator Mindsets and Consequences

### CONTEXT-CENTERED VERSUS CONTEXT-NEUTRAL

Mindset	Orientation	Explanation	Consequences
<b>CONTEXT-CENTERED</b>	<b>1A)</b> I try to understand students as as product of their family and community.	<b>1B)</b> Educators approach work with an appreciation for how realities outside of school impact student learning and performance.	<b>1C)</b> Educators seek to build connections between the curriculum and the community to make content meaningful and relevant.
		<b>2A)</b> I understand students' communities are unique and learn about them.	<b>2B)</b> Educators are aware that students come from communities and understanding these communities is part of relationship building.
	<b>3A)</b> I am able to see the assets in students' communities and families.	<b>3B)</b> Educators are aware that students bring to school strength, resilience, and assets derived from their families and communities.	<b>3C)</b> Students have academic opportunities that are relevant and meaningful to their lives where they can draw on community and family assets.
	<b>4A)</b> Educators don't need to understand students' families and communities.	<b>4B)</b> Educators deliver subject matter as isolated content irrelevant to surrounding community.	<b>4C)</b> Educators miss opportunities to build partnerships and make curriculum meaningful for students.
	<b>5A)</b> Educators don't need to understand parents and the community in order to educate children.	<b>5B)</b> Educators don't need to take steps to get to know students' unique families and communities.	<b>5C)</b> Educators rely on stereotypes, generalizations, experiences with past students to learn about their students' communities.
	<b>6A)</b> Educators see students' families as irrelevant or a detriment to academic success.	<b>6B)</b> Educators see schools as closed systems and view interactions outside of school as inconsequential or even harmful for learning.	<b>6C)</b> Educators ignore how everyday interactions outside of school influence students' educational experience.
<b>CONTEXT-NEUTRAL</b>			

Adapted by the MIT TSL from R. Filback and A. Green of USC Rossier School of Education, and derived from the work of Bartolome, 2008; Hancock, 2011; Milner, 2010; Pollock, 2008”



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## HANDOUT 2: MINDSETS IN THE PRACTICE SPACE LAYERS

“Being context-centered means...I’ve got to work with the community to deeply understand, not only what I read in the newspapers, but to understand the forces that have shaped that community, it’s sense of self, and it’s current battles and successes. In our curriculum, we’ve got to find ways of weaving together where students come from and where they’re living and what they care about and what’s going on in their communities”

- Rich Milner, Professor of Education, Vanderbilt University

With the students in the *Layers* practice space, we discover that each of them contains multiple aspects of identity - from the behaviors they express, to their passions and areas for growth, to their home lives. The home and community backgrounds we see in Layer 3 can often be invisible on the surface, but can ultimately influence students’ behaviors, decisions, and relationships in the classroom.

### CONTEXT-NEUTRAL REASONING

Context-Neutral mindset favors the idea that interactions students have outside of school are inconsequential for teaching and learning, and views the classroom as a closed system. Without recognizing these interactions, educators often miss out on opportunities to make students’ educational experiences more relevant, and meaningful.

**Context-Neutral mindset: “The first layer had everything I needed to know. I think the third layer about home lives actually had the least effect on the lesson plan - I think designing for the second layer was less important too - layer three just told me WHY they acted that way”**

### CONTEXT-CENTERED REASONING

This mindset is about acknowledging that a student’s actions and interests are not arbitrary but instead are influenced by outside forces (e.g., familial responsibilities, law enforcement in their community, immigration status, etc.). A Context-Centered rationale doesn’t just recognize what students experience, but accommodates and tailors curriculum to these students to create a safe and responsive learning space.

This mindset emphasizes that what happens daily outside of schools is directly linked to the learning experience inside.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

We encourage you to test the hypothesis that Context-Centered and Context-Neutral mindsets are out of balance in schools. Educators hold a unique power to shape the way their students relate to the classroom and course content. When teachers take into account the many layers students carry in their instructional planning, students’ school experiences become much more positive - with higher academic achievement and stronger interpersonal relationships.

Moving forward we encourage you to:

- **Notice opportunities to learn about your students’ home lives, see if your interactions with them are influenced positively, and how your perspective changes.**
- **See your students as complex individuals whose home life influences their own in-school experience and interactions.**
- **Find ways to connect knowledge about your students with your curriculum and classroom culture to encourage their success.**

## APPENDIX E. Sample invitation email text

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I have been taking an online course with MIT's Teaching Systems Lab about equity teaching practices as a pathway for transforming the school experience. I would like to share some of what I learned with folks at [insert name of school or organization]. I'm hoping that it will help us talk about ways to support all of our students, and close gaps of opportunity or access they face.

To do this, I'm inviting colleagues to get together and complete an activity from the course called a practice space. A practice space is a digital scenario representing a typical interaction at a school. Each participant will respond individually, and then we'll talk about what actions we chose, what we'd like to practice more, and how this can help us understand best practices in supporting students.

I would like to invite you to join us on [Insert Date]. Can you join us?

You do not have to register for the course or review content in order to join the activity. However, if you would like to learn more about the course, visit the [Becoming a More Equitable Educator](#) edX page or [YouTube channel](#). If you're interested, consider enrolling in the course to get access to videos, readings, and other activities.