What do your students experience when they leave your program?

What can you do support their return home?

Intentional, passionate experiential educators often want their students to leave their programs as emboldened people, ready to take on the world and make a difference. But how often do we educators even consider what our students experience after they leave? Maybe they grew and learned a lot about themselves and the world while they were with you, but can they properly apply such learning to their home environment? Based on conversations with experts in the field, as well as extensive research, I have developed the following suggestions to help my fellow experiential educators ensure that when our students leave us, they are empowered to transition smoothly back to their home life, and to transfer any new identities, values, and learning skillfully. These recommendations are for any educators or program directors who want to guarantee the effective transitions of their students and transference of their important lessons.
Important Considerations: Transitions & Transference

**Transition**: an emotional shift in identity or perception that occurs with life changes

**Why consider?** Students will struggle to adapt their new learning, values, and identity from your program to their home environment. This struggle may cause them to reject their new learning.

As experiential educators, we often hope that our students will leave us with new values and potentially a new identity or perception of themselves. After leaving us, students return to environments that may not be ready for such changes. This disconnect of understanding often causes stress and rejection of new learning by the student. Preparing students for this transition can help ensure a healthy and empowered re-entry.

**Transference**: the synthesis and intentional application of learning to other settings

**Why consider?** When students leave your program, they may find a gap between their new learnings and their home environment. Emphasize transference to guarantee your students can continue to employ your important lessons.

Educators want their students to be able to transfer, apply, and adapt their learnings to other settings. New skills and thought processes are only useful if they can be employed in the multiple environments a student will experience throughout his or her life. Emphasizing transference with our students encourages them to frequently utilize their new, meaningful learnings.

**Understanding transition progression** can help both educators and students prepare for change upon program termination. Transitions are arguably complex and individual experiences. However, extensive review of transition theories presents this general model that can apply to many processes, including group progression, study abroad, identity change, and loss.

Transitions are commonly represented using the Transition Curve hypothesis, which is expanded to include a similar curve hypothesis is expanded to include a similar model. The process of transition and team development over time allows us to explore the life changes associated with these transitions. This model can help both educators and students prepare for change upon program termination. Transitions are arguably complex and individual experiences. However, extensive review of transition theories presents this general model that can apply to many processes, including group progression, study abroad, identity change, and loss.

**Transition progression over time**

- **Honeymoon**: excitement from the novelty of the change, exploring ‘new’ setting
- **Shock**: realization of the complexity of the change; frustration and grappling with dissonance
- **Adjustment**: acclimate to setting, find balance between personal and outward perceptions of self and identity.
Prepare your students for return

Methods of Empowerment

Fortunately, there are many methods we can use to prepare and empower our students to re-enter effectively. These methods are broken down into themes. Specific activities within each theme are also suggested. I would encourage any creative educators to use these ideas and adapt them appropriately to their own practice.

Reflection-
Researchers and practitioners alike agree that reflection has strong power in helping students realize and internalize their learning and growth. Different modes for successful reflection include written, oral, or introspective.

**Written**- personal journals, student self assessment, program evaluation, cumulative essays, online blogs and email updates

**Introspective**- regular sit-spot, daily solo-time, solo wilderness experience

**Collaborative**- facilitated discussion, feedback circles, debriefs, closing circles

**Performance or artistic**- visual representation of learning, skit or performance, art or visuals

Mental Preparation and Plans-
Mentally preparing students can help them understand the finiteness of their experience, get ready to apply learnings, and to generally be more effective upon return. Ways to prepare students for the end and re-entry vary in depth and intensity.

**Mental preparation**- acknowledge finiteness, discuss/imagine/visualize transition, coach and mentor, teach coping skills (meditation, physical routine to maintain)

**Make plans**- create an action plan or goals for return, plan a service-related project, discuss involvement opportunities for future (travel, gap year, farms, service)

Acknowledgement and Celebration of Experience-
Acknowledging and celebrating students’ experience and growth can help them both appreciate and absorb what they have accomplished over the program. This can be done through review of events, celebrations of learning, and ceremonies, rituals or graduation celebrations.

**Review events**- memory activation, photo slideshow, student sharing

**Celebrations of learning**- culminating project, formal or cumulative presentation, skill responsibility given to student, skills demonstrated to outside group, faculty shares about student

**Ceremonies, rituals, graduation**- special meal, candle-lighting ceremony, special location, gifts or diploma, certificate for students, fun/social events

Correspondence and Support Networks-
Students often try to stay in touch with each other, and us, after their programs. These communications, and other support networks in schools and homes, greatly aid our students through their transitions and transference.

**Alumni networks**- class representatives, reunions, return to program location, involvement in future programs, social networks, email list serves

**Teachers or schools**- create empathy by educating teachers about program, offer professional development, emphasize academics or skills that transfer well to school

**Parents/guardians**- train, educate, prepare parents for transition of their child, update through photos or blogs about student experience, invite to program location
Again, these four themes can provide a useful start for educators to facilitate effective and empowered re-entry for their students. While this list is no doubt incomplete, hopefully it can inspire conversations and creative processes for intentional educators, helping you determine and undertake the practices that work best for your program. In the end, you can prepare your students for the end of your program, inspiring them to transition and transfer learning well.

**About the Author:**
Stephanie Lewis created this resource as part of her Master's of Science in Natural Science Education & Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming. She has worked for several years in outdoor adventure and residential environmental education programs. Her integrated and intense experience with the Teton Science Schools graduate program ('10-'11) motivated her to study transitions and transference of experiential education students, to better understand her own transition processes and practice more effective preparation strategies with students.