Classworks

Building a Community
of Online Learners

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## Building a Community of Online Learners

As any educator knows, there's a lot of work that goes into making your online classroom feel like a community. In physical classrooms, students thrive in environments where they feel a bond with their peers and their teacher; the kind of "we're all in this together" mindset can be just as important to students developmentally as reading or math skills. In an online learning environment, where students don't receive the same face-to-face interactions with their peers, there are steps we can take to ensure that no students are left sitting on an island alone.

Research from The Developmental Studies Center says that strong classroom communities are based on four key principles:

1. **Mutually respectful, supportive relationships between students, parents, and teachers**

2. **Frequent opportunities to collaborate**

3. **Valuing student input on content selections, shared agreements, and conflicts**

4. **A shared sense of purpose and ideals**

Kids today are digital natives; they are naturally adept with the language of technology and will grow up in a world where most of their interpersonal connections happen in online spaces. We've seen this in entertainment, social media, and, more recently, education. For us digital immigrants, those who have eased our way into technology over the years, it's important that we carry over our community building techniques in a way that will resonate with students years down the road.
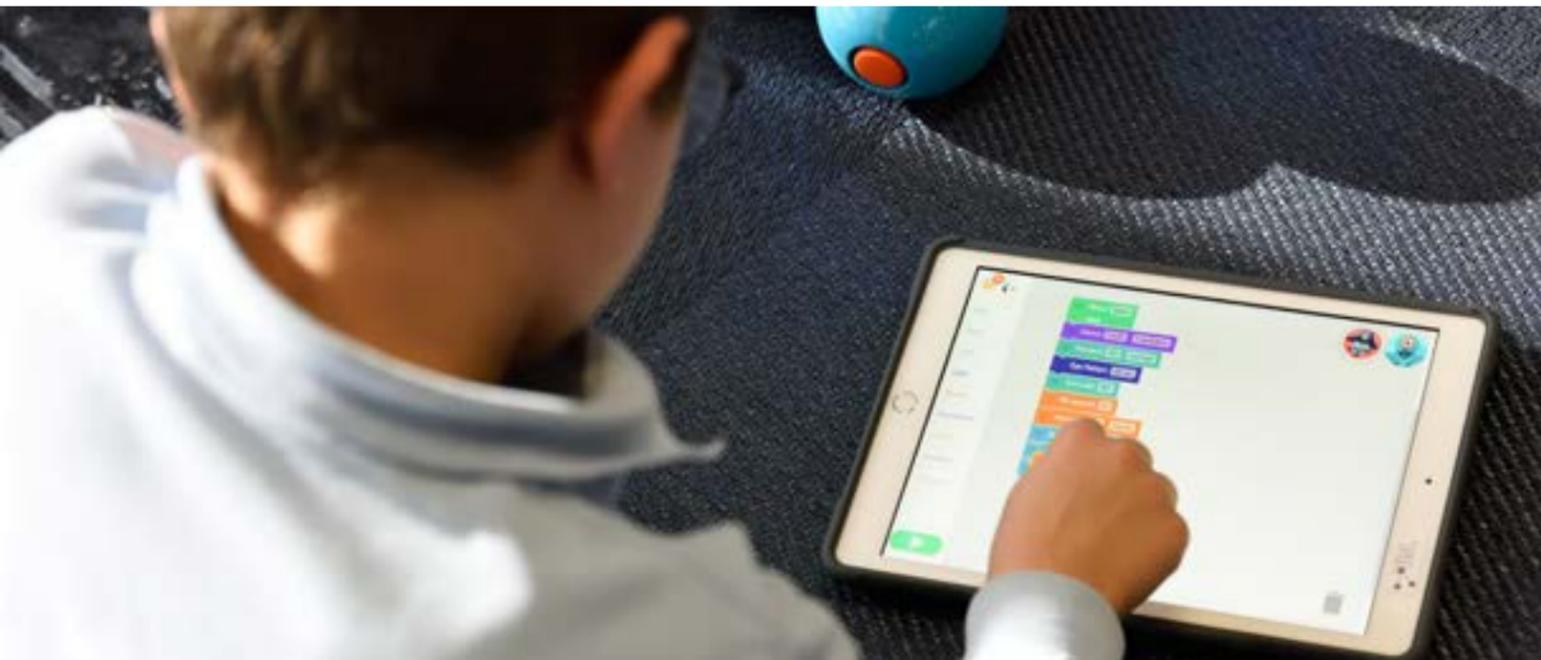
Parent-Teacher-Student Relationships

While teachers are traditionally the ones facilitating the lessons for students, the shift to digital classrooms has allowed for parents to play a more active role in their child's learning than when attending school on-site.

Although it can seem like we're all stuck in these fixed roles, all parties have a hand in contributing to the success of the classroom community we're trying to build. For educators, that means breaking down barriers and getting parents involved in the conversations that relate to their child.

One of the silver linings from the shift to remote learning has been a surge in parent participation in districts where it has historically been difficult to attain. Often, parents are more able to hop on a five minute check-in call with their child's teacher than take time off work for a formal parent-teacher conference. In a similar vein, video conferencing technology has lifted many geographical burdens that previously prevented face-to-face conferencing.

Online tools that keep parents informed can also help fill in the gaps between communications with pertinent information about their student's daily work. Parents of students using Classworks have live links to students' dashboards. They can see their student's goals, badges, and progress on their lessons.

The teacher's role, beyond facilitating the learning, should be to motivate and foster success by creating a supportive environment. This means regular check-ins, providing opportunities for one-on-one time, and getting to know your students as individuals. The power dynamic between students and teachers shouldn't be viewed as some authoritarian figure calling all the shots, but rather as a two way street. Teachers and students both have an important role in the digital community, and a mutual respect for the value they bring is vital to being successful.

Collaboration is Key

There's a lot of power in virtual learning, but for students who are used to seeing their peers in person, the experience can feel a bit isolating at times. Even teachers have struggled with not being able to interact with their students face-to-face.

This is why it's so important for teachers to offer frequent opportunities for students to collaborate. For example, starting each video lesson with an activity that stresses connectedness over content. This could be a group stretch, deep breathing, or other grounding exercise. Then, move onto a fun ice-breaking activity to get students in the zone to connect and share ideas throughout the lesson.

Once interpersonal connections have been established, you'll notice much more success in navigating collaborative exercises where students must rely on each other to complete an assignment.

Activities, like our Classroom Reading exercises, pull students into the conversation to discuss things like main ideas, new vocabulary, and related subject matter. Grouping students dynamically and assigning each participant a specific role based on their preference is a great way to structure these types of activities. One student might be the group scribe, taking notes as the discussion happens. Another student could opt to be the speaker, sharing their group's findings with the rest of the class.

Teachers should also consider creating an online space exclusively for community building. This could be a section on Google Classroom where students talk about their day and receive comments from their peers. During lunchtime, or other downtime, the teacher could open a Zoom room and moderate quietly as students are given a chance to connect with each other, vent about any frustrations, or chatter as they normally would in class. Keep in mind, it will be important to create and enforce community rules for sharing and engagement. This is especially valuable for younger students as they learn to navigate the digital world in which they are growing up.

Valuing What Students Have to Say

With less opportunity to see and hear students physically, we need to be on our A-game about making sure each student's input is given the appropriate consideration and response it deserves. It can be very easy to let online successes or written contributions go unnoticed. Teachers should foster a classroom that celebrates students' accomplishments and contributions to the digital community.

If a student does really well on an assignment, it should be celebrated! Many tools you use likely have reward systems or digital bulletin board kits embedded within them, that can easily be made visible to the class.

Some students are more introverted, and as we've seen, have been able to thrive in a virtual environment. Although they might not be comfortable speaking openly, teachers could encourage written feedback and then share with the class.
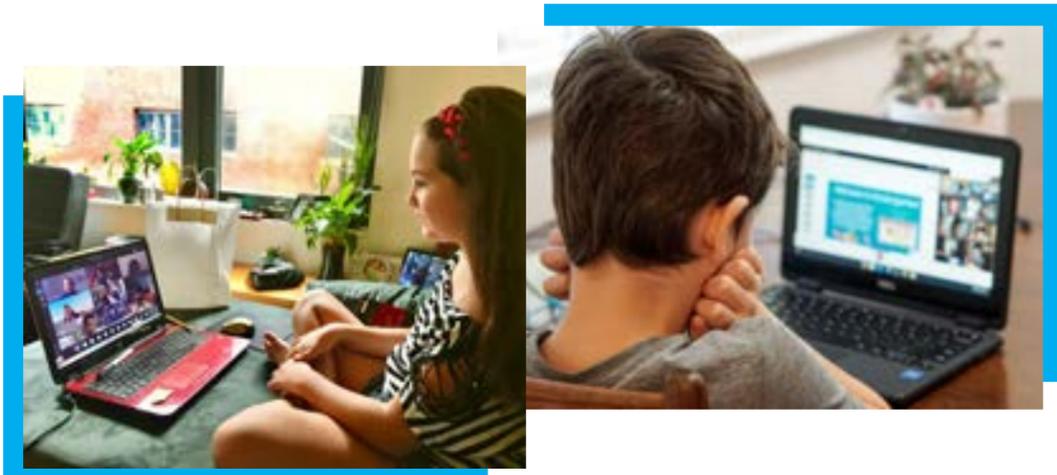
Even in a digital environment, there are bound to be opportunities where everyone doesn't see eye-to-eye. If two students are disputing over an easily-resolvable conflict, the teacher should provide a safe space to hear both students' perspectives and guide them towards an appropriate solution instead of just handing down consequences. Maybe the students themselves have a better solution in mind than you did!

This also applies to instances where the teacher is struggling to connect with a student. For example, if a student repeatedly fails to upload assignments, we should be proactive in asking the student what might solve the issue rather than assigning a consequence because it happened.

Shared Sense of Values & Ideals

Remember that notion of "all being in it together"? That's where this concept hits home. In order for your students to be community, they must feel a shared sense of belonging and determination to reach a common goal.

A classroom Shared Agreement is a great place to start. These classroom promises reflect how students wish to be treated, how they commit to treating each other, and how they can help to work towards classroom or even schoolwide goals. Agreements can zero in on what's expected during learning time, and also what's expected as they navigate their interpersonal relationships, like everyone being on camera during lessons and not talking over each other during discussions.

All students should have a voice when creating your agreement, even those who normally don't speak up, and everyone should feel comfortable with the final product; it's a lot easier to attain success when everyone is united towards a common goal.

Reviewing the agreement before lessons and during collaborative time can help reinforce yours and your students' commitments towards one another.

Why it Matters

In our online world, students can often feel isolated and ignored by the social forces that help shape our outlooks on the world. It's our job as educators to equip them with the skills to be successful in an increasingly digital space.

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, recognizes that students in classrooms with a strong sense of community are more likely to be academically motivated, develop social and emotional competencies, and act ethically.

For many students, the changes we've seen in education over the last year will have lasting effects on the way collaborative learning takes place. And, with schools still navigating the proper ways to reopen, it's more important than ever to develop the skills that will help them down the road.

Classworks

Since 2003, millions of students have used Classworks to close learning gaps, keep pace, and grow! Our mission is to deliver the most compelling individualized learning experience that helps teachers create an equitable learning environment for students of all abilities and ethnic and social backgrounds.

Learn more at **classworks.com**