Building Community in Online Learning Environments

By Andrea Harkins Parrish, Ed. D.

The Importance of Community-Building

Today’s teachers are navigating uncharted waters. There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed us to the brink of our professional and personal capacities to serve children and their families. What we originally thought would impact one school year has now expanded into two and, perhaps, the unforeseeable future.

In response, teachers and school administrators have jumped into action. They have climbed Mount Everest in integrating technology! As a researcher, I have seen teachers quickly scale from using a web tool in their classroom to full adoption of their school system’s learning management system, virtual web conferencing tools, and a host of online tools to facilitate innovative instruction online.

I have watched my own children’s teachers and my many friends who are teachers attempt to master effective “classroom” management online, all while pressuring themselves to build routines, stick to the schedule, and jump into content instruction.

Understandably, teachers are pressuring themselves to teach content right away. As teachers, we feel an obligation to provide children with instruction they have missed. But what I would like to present here is a suggestion (and perhaps, permission) for us to take a step back. Let’s pump the brakes for a minute and make sure that we have first built a sense of community within our learning environments.

Whether students are online or in a physical classroom, long-lasting learning occurs when children feel that they’re a part of something great. Meaningful learning occurs when students first feel a sense of belonging. This is achieved by making all students feel welcomed and valued. So, first things first. Let’s achieve that sense of belonging for every student and their family.
Tips for Building a Strong Community in Your Online Classroom

There is a broad base of existing literature on ways educators can build a sense of community in an online learning environment (Austin & Hunter, 2013; Banas & Wartalski, 2019; Delen & Liew, 2016; Lee, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). While much of this research has focused on higher education, the onset of COVID-19 is responsible for recent growth in the K-12 literature on this topic. No matter the audience, creating a learning space where children feel safe to take risks is optimal for authentic learning. So, what can teachers do to build community online? Here are a few ideas, collated from a variety of readily available online sources:

1. Design Regular Opportunities for Social Connectedness

Social connectedness isn’t an extracurricular activity; it’s a vital part of every school-based routine. Our goal should be to incorporate social connectedness in every subject, every day. This includes opportunities for student-to-student interactions and regular teacher-to-student interactions. These teacher-to-student social interactions can best be achieved in small group discussions or one-on-one teacher-student check-ins. By regularly building these opportunities into a daily school schedule, we allow students the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with teachers as well as their peers. For young children and those with disabilities, these social opportunities may require scaffolding through discussion prompts, formative check-ins, and visual supports to encourage full participation.

2. Include Parents in the Community-Building

If children are learning from home, it’s essential that educators also make parents feel welcomed and valued. Take steps to demonstrate to your students that their parents are vital and valued members of this learning community. Encourage parents to participate, to the extent that they are able. Allow children the flexibility they need to learn in the home environment, since this isn’t a traditional classroom. This means talking to students about this and acknowledging that their parents aren’t distractions or interruptions; they are part of the learning environment, and it’s okay for children to ask them questions and communicate about what they’re learning. Give parents options for meaningful participation and coach them about how they can support their children.
3. Scaffold Responsibility as You Build Routine

As you teach online, slowly phase in parts of your routine. Set a long-term goal for how you and your students will master all of the components of the school routine and then back map your expectations so that you can meet that goal together with your students. Demonstrate flexibility with both students and parents, particularly when it comes to the submission of online work. To create a risk-free learning environment, reinforce students’ early attempts to complete and submit academic work online. Remember that students’ academic skills may be rusty from a lack of practice and adjust your expectations accordingly, until students have reached the desired level of performance.

4. Consider Flexible Options for Online Participation

There is a hot debate as to how we can reliably measure and encourage learners’ participation online. Those who most closely subscribe to the synchronous model of virtual learning tend to argue that students must have their cameras on at all times and document their full attention through evidence of a distraction-free environment. While an active webcam is helpful for the teacher to receive feedback from his or her audience, Dr. Torrey Trust, an educational researcher whom I respect, recently published the following infographic that helps us to take a step back and consider the complexities of requiring online camera usage. Dr. Trust also poses some alternatives that can be used to formatively assess students’ learning and ongoing participation in an online environment.

![Female online teacher engaged in online teaching.](image)

### Using Video to Assess Student Attention in Virtual Class Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t Do This</th>
<th>Do This!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![X] Connect students’ video use and eye contact time to participation points, grading, or school attendance.</td>
<td>![✓] CHOICE. Let students decide whether to turn on, or keep on, their video. Allow them to use virtual or blurred backgrounds and fun filters (e.g., be a banana or potato). <a href="https://bit.ly/virtualimgfilters">https://bit.ly/virtualimgfilters</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![X] Remove students from the meeting if their videos are not on.</td>
<td>![✓] REAL-TIME CHECK-IN. Ask questions often to assess student understanding. Allow students to respond via audio or virtual meeting tools (e.g., chat box, polls, nonverbal reactions - “thumbs up”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![X] Trick students into turning on their videos (e.g., for a class dance party).</td>
<td>![✓] USE DIGITAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS. Collect different types of data to evaluate ongoing learning - Answer Garden, Gimkit, Kahoot, Google Forms, Poll Everywhere, Socrative, Classkick, Ted-Ed, Playposit, Ed Puzzle, Nearpod, etc. <a href="https://bit.ly/formassessmeth">https://bit.ly/formassessmeth</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![X] Give extra credit to students who have their video on.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Why Does It Matter?

- **PRIVACY.** Students might be uncomfortable displaying their living space to their peers.
- **SAFETY.** Students (and their family members) may not want their image captured, recorded, or shared. Students could be cyberbullied if a classmate takes a screenshot of their video.
- **EQUITY.** Students might have unreliable Internet access, low bandwidth, devices without video capabilities, or limited access to a device.
- **PERSONAL.** Students might feel shy or anxious to be on camera.

### “But I Don’t Like Teaching to Blank Screens”

- **Teach students to setup their Google Meet or Zoom profile picture as a bitmoji, school photo, or a favorite selfie. When the camera is off, the students’ profile picture will show up, giving you a virtual audience to talk to.**

### Ask Before Assume

- **This is a challenging time for everyone. If students are struggling to show attentiveness, ask questions rather than make assumptions about their actions or punish them for lack of engagement.**

Infographic created by Torrey Trust, Ph.D. is licensed under CC BY SA NC 4.0 | Template designed by Rachelle Wootten 2014
5. Focus on the 3 R’s: RESPECT, RELATIONSHIPS, and RELEVANCE

Remember that learning right now, in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, is about respect, relationships, and relevance. It is not about achieving absolute academic rigor. Only after we establish respect, relationships, and relevance can we attain rigorous content learning. At this time, teachers’ focus should be on establishing meaningful relationships with students, creating a culture of respect for and with students, and creating relevance again for content learning during an unsettling time. Due to the lack of instruction that occurred in the spring of 2020, we must also expect the need to re-teach skills and provide remedial instruction. To do so, we must be patient with ourselves and our students. If we do, the rigor will come.

Resources for Practitioners

If you are interested in learning more about ways to create a sense of community in your online learning environment, here are some readily available online resources that might be of use to you:

5 Virtual Ways to Build a Classroom Community
This blog post by PBS outlines methods for building a sense of classroom community in online learning spaces for young children.

Fostering a Strong Community in a Virtual Classroom
This Edutopia article provides tips for creating community in a virtual community, with a focus on establishing cultural norms in your classroom.

Creative Ways Teachers are Building Classroom Community Online
This article provides examples of ways teachers across the country have used innovative methods, including the use of social media and multimedia, to create engaging online learning spaces.

A Place of (Remote) Belonging
This blog post by researchers at Harvard University outlines some practical tips for creating welcoming virtual learning environments for young children.

10 Strategies for Engaging Parents (Not Children?) During Tele-Intervention
This resource provides recommendations to engage families of young children with disabilities in online intervention.

Taking Care of Yourself
This infographic, developed by researchers at Vanderbilt University, provides strategies that educators can use to support their mental health during this transition to online learning.
References


About the Author:

Dr. Andrea Parrish is the Director of Development and Learning Systems and an Assistant Research Scientist at the IDEALS Institute. Prior to her work in higher education, she was a special educator and central office administrator, providing technical support in special education. Dr. Parrish conducts research in special education and technology integration and currently runs applied research projects for the IDEALS Institute which focus on creating systems change for vulnerable populations in school districts.