

SPARK!

Igniting digital learning through shared experience

Leader Edition

HOW CAN I CREATE AN ENGAGING COMMUNITY IN ONLINE SPACES?

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At Davidson Academy Online (DAO), a fully virtual school for profoundly gifted students living in the US and Canada, we think of community as a schoolwide phenomenon. In brick and mortar schools, the physical building is the center of all things, making it easy to build a community space. We wanted to both replicate this space and eliminate that feeling of overwhelm that so many people experience when they first move online. **We accomplished our sense of community by focusing on three major concepts:**

#1: Presence is key!

It is well established that feeling the presence of other users is a huge factor in both student success and satisfaction in online classes. As we were building DAO, we wanted to focus on presence as a big part of the experience for both students and teachers. The administrative team at DAO made the decision very early on that we were going to require students and teachers to use video in our live session. Seeing everyone's faces in every meeting has gone a long way toward building community. While there are valid reasons why schools might not want to require the use of video, it has been a game changer for us. Of course, presence isn't just about video. It's about constant communication, about getting to know students personally, about being present on a course via detailed and personalized feedback. There are a lot of ways to think about presence, but at DAO, we've made it about constantly emphasizing the fact that there are humans on the other side of every computer screen.

#2: Technology is a facilitator of community, not the community itself

While technology helps to facilitate the presence discussed above, a true community needs to be human-centered as opposed to technology-centered. This requires selecting technology that enhances the human-based aspects of your virtual school community. At DAO, we have established some central spaces online where everything happens: Canvas is our hub for academics, Microsoft Teams is our central mode of communication, and Zoom is our location for synchronous class meetings. Getting that sense of space squared away early in our school's existence helped to create a digital "map" of our community. Students and teachers always know where to go for certain kinds of interaction.

#3: A strong online community is student-led

Educators talk a lot about student-centered learning, but it's usually not the first thing people think about when considering online learning. On the contrary, virtual classrooms can be incredibly effective student-centered spaces. Teachers at DAO build trust early on by being open, vulnerable, and transparent, and by respecting the voices and opinions of the students. Once the students understand that the virtual classroom is a safe place for them to be themselves, the teacher can serve as a moderator rather than a director, and the community itself drives the learning process. While our community does have guidelines and processes, most of what we do is student-led, from our classes to our student council to our award-winning advisory program. We try to be flexible to meet the needs of the students, and that flexibility produces a community that wants to join us for learning every day, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Establishing community is in the fabric of DAO rather than just something we do in the classroom. Offering a full middle and high school experience in a virtual setting means focusing on school culture and identity. By being present, utilizing human-centered technology, and letting students lead the way, we've gone a long way toward achieving our community goals.



RESOURCES

<https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/57241/six-ways-to-build-community-in-online-classrooms>

<https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/teaching-with-technology/teaching-online/community-building/>

Trade Secrets

Less is more when it comes to technology

One thing that we learned at DAO after a couple of years of operation is that we had to narrow things down to just a handful of platforms and apps. Limiting our technological interactions to three major platforms (Canvas, Teams, and Zoom) not only keeps things centralized for students, but it also makes communication manageable for teachers and helps us better serve our parent community.

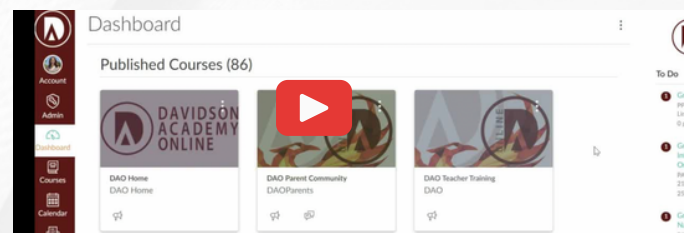
Make time for community building

It is important to intentionally make time to build community, both in the classroom and as a larger school. At DAO, teachers are encouraged to create spaces that are unique to their class. In fact, "Classroom Culture" is a competency that we investigate during classroom observations. Schools can also set aside time during the week for community meetings, advisory periods, and student-led events.

Teachers need community, too

At DAO, we like to say that working remotely doesn't mean working alone. Just like the students, teachers at DAO utilize Microsoft Teams as our communication platform, and we are in touch constantly. Not only do we collaborate via Teams and Zoom, we also host team building events, conduct professional development sessions, share pictures, and get to know each other as colleagues and friends. When teachers see the kind of supportive community available to them in virtual schools, they are better able to encourage students to build communities of their own.

DAO Technology and Community



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