Building a strong classroom community for asynchronous work

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

A Focus on Relationships When Students Aren't Together

Building a strong classroom community is possible even during students' asynchronous work time.

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Community building in school happens best when everyone is together in person, or in remote classes during live synchronous sessions. Yet over this past year, a large number of my remote classes happened asynchronously, and sometimes I had a class that was completely asynchronous, which posed challenges as I tried to build relationships with and among my students. It was difficult to build a sense of community when they never saw each other in person or live on screen.

Using creative strategies to develop a sense of community in asynchronous learning spaces has been helpful. And while I teach college-age students, these strategies can easily be adapted to middle and high school students.

5 WAYS TO FOCUS ON COMMUNITY IN ASYNCHRONOUS CLASSWORK

1. Passion boards: Using online corkboards such as Padlet has been a very effective way for my students and me to share good news, shout-outs, interests, and celebrations. For example, I set up an asynchronous online board where my students and I posted weekly good news or shout-outs, and we could comment on each other's posts to lend support and good cheer.

The board stayed up the entire term, and we learned about each other and shared in celebrations via the board. I was careful to use a password to protect the board for student privacy, and I moderated comments.

2. Scavenger hunts: Since my students were scattered across the United States, I set up an asynchronous scavenger hunt with GooseChase to get to know more about them and their home communities. (The app has free and paid plans for K–12 teachers.)

I set up challenges (missions) where students could share about their home life and culture, favorite places to eat, hobbies, and videos of their talents, or discuss the local organizations in their neighborhoods doing good work that related to our class. One challenge I sent to my students asked them to find a local organization working to alleviate inequities in their community. I asked them to interview a worker and share what they learned by posting a video or image with text to the GooseChase app. You could ask middle or high school students studying environmental science to find a native or nonnative tree in their

neighborhood, or have math students calculate the area of a table in their home—there are premade scavenger hunts, and you can create your own.

I would send a menu of challenges each week to my students through the GooseChase app, and they could choose the ones they want to complete. They could also see each other's posts in the class GooseChase feed, which helped them get to know each other better. You can also add a point system so students can try to earn a certain number of points by the end of the week. The app has leaderboards and opportunities for "bonus" points if you wish to use those to gamify the community building experience.

3. Netflix-style watch parties: During Covid, many of my students have enjoyed having Netflix watch parties, co-viewing a movie while having a live chat feed. I decided to create a similar collaborative experience using VideoAnt. I would load a video from YouTube into VideoAnt, and then students would be able to asynchronously comment on the movie as they watched. They could also see each other's comments and respond to them. For example, recently I had students watch *Without a Net*, a free documentary on YouTube, when we were discussing equity issues in K–12 schooling. There are thousands of free documentaries on YouTube that K–12 teachers can use on VideoAnt.

4. Digital storybooks: My students all had rich, unique stories about what shaped them to become who they are. In order to share these stories, I used the free and easy-to-use MyStorybook website, where students can create

and stories. This tool is great for every age of student, and we used it as a way to share stories asynchronously.

This past term, I created a new story prompt, "my life journey during Covid." Each week students would add a new page to their story, like a journal entry, so that by the end of the semester, they had a storybook about their lives during the pandemic.

5. Myself as a GIF: A quick, engaging—and sometimes silly—way to build community is to ask your students to communicate by making GIFs of themselves. My students and I used AndThenIWasLike to do this. I would provide a prompt, such as "how is your day going?" or "pretend you got your dream teaching job!" and then my students would create and share their GIFs with the class. It was a way for us to see each other and provide some joy in the asynchronous class.

These are just a few ideas, and there are definitely other ways teachers can develop community with the tools above. For example, a book or podcasting club in a Slack feed, or an "all about our class" digital storybook where each student adds their own page. While it can be challenging to build community when you're not able to be synchronous with your students, I have found that it is possible.