

## **BOYS AND ONLINE LEARNING: A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN ...OR NOT?**

By Carey Pohanka, Upper School Instructional Technologist and Middle School French Teacher

How might a community of support help Upper School boys adapt to an online learning environment?

### **AREA OF STUDY**

St. Christopher's School is a member school in Global Online Academy (GOA), a consortium of schools that offers online courses for high school students in member schools. At our school, boys in grades 10-12 can take GOA courses that count as an elective. The available courses are ones that we do not offer to our students in our face-to-face environment. Students have taken courses such as iOS Apps, Introduction to Psychology, Graphic Design, and Practical Astronomy, just to name a few. Boys who take these are intrigued by the idea of an online class. They are also quite passionate about their chosen subject. When questioned why they enroll in these courses, every boy noted future aspirations as motivation, sharing statements such as, "I want to be a psychologist one day," "I would like to go into astrophysics one day," and "I plan on doing something in the course field."



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In the four years that our boys have been taking online classes with Global Online Academy, I have seen a wide variety of success and failure. In my work as the Global Online Academy Site Director and as a GOA teacher, I was curious to see why some boys are successful in an online class, while others were not. Through a desire to become more effective in my role as Site Director, I wanted to see what research and boys had to say about how I might best support them.

### **WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US**

GOA courses are voluntary and offered in a variety of topics of interest to high school students. Reichert found that teachers “noted the increased engagement their students exhibited whenever scholastic material seemed to bear meaningfully on their existing or future situations” (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, pg. 29). A student’s choice in his learning seems key to his success.

Discussions are a key component of GOA courses, and research suggests that there are differences in how

female and male students approach online discussions. According to Lowes, “...males may respond to the first posts they come to, an economical strategy in terms of use of time. Females, on the other hand, may view several posts before they choose which one to respond to. This in turn suggests that females are not only more diligent but may also be more intent on creating community while males are focused on the end result” (2016, pg.113).

### **METHOD**

Over the years I had tried multiple methods of supporting boys taking GOA courses, but I had never tried bringing them together as a community of learners. After one boy noted that he felt alone and didn’t even know if any other St. Christopher’s students were taking GOA classes, I realized that I had an opportunity to create a support system here on our own campus. I hoped this new element would also help them be more successful in their online classes

In order to test my theory with my current GOA students, we met together as a group over lunch to share successes and struggles, and also just to get to know each other. I then interviewed and surveyed boys to see what they thought of the experience of building a GOA community.

Another aspect of support I hadn’t yet explored related to increased parental involvement. In the past, I’d rarely had interactions with parents of GOA students other than sending an email confirming that their son was enrolled in the online course, providing some basic GOA information, and reaching out if a boy was struggling in the course. I decided that as part of this community of support, I would meet with parents of GOA students during our back-to-school Parents’ Night. During a free period, several parents stopped by to learn about the GOA experience and discuss how they could best support their sons.

Once I performed my action, I gathered data from boys and parents using interviews and surveys.



## FINDINGS

The main component of my project involved bringing the boys taking GOA classes together to build a sense of community among them. Overwhelmingly, the boys said that even just knowing who else was taking GOA classes was of help. One boy shared his appreciation for meeting, stating: "...if I need help in history, I know these people are in my class. In GOA it's just me, but seeing Tyler, Parker and other kids, I can reach out to them, 'Parker do you know how to do this on GOA?' ...I definitely had a community in the GOA course, but it's kind of like there's a disconnect between St. Christopher's and GOA so I liked the connection of seeing everyone else who is taking a GOA course. And that's kind of the bond."

The lunch meetings allowed boys to share other unique issues to taking an online class. One limitation to a boy's success in a GOA course involves Canvas, the learning management system the boys must use when taking a class. As one can imagine, a benefit of these classes is the diversity of location of the students. Unfortunately, that can also be a hindrance when the system doesn't translate time zone differences well in relation to assignment due dates and times. During our lunch meeting, when asked what the biggest obstacle to their success might be, a boy said, "I hate the assignment dates thing," and every single boy nodded in agreement. Because of this struggle, GOA teachers are fairly flexible about due dates, but even with that flexibility, always seeing "Late" next to your assignments did not help boys feel confident about the class. During our time together, boys also shared thoughts about their teachers. They crave strong relationships with their teachers in an online class and are more successful when that occurs. For example, one student reflected that, "I enjoyed how Mr. Higgins said he read my website. I really like that he seemed to take an interest in what I do." Another boy exclaimed, "that is actually so true, though!" when I explained the research on boys and relationships with their teachers. I videotaped meeting conversations, and I observed the connection between the boys as they shared their experiences. Having a teacher in a virtual environment is new for many boys.

## THE MAIN COMPONENT OF MY PROJECT INVOLVED

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This year the added meeting with parents during Parents' Night proved beneficial. When one student this year began to flounder, his mom knew to contact me for assistance, and she felt comfortable reaching out because we had already built up a relationship and conversation about her son taking a GOA class. We were able to easily collaborate to come up with an effective plan for the student.

## PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

My research has many implications for best practices as a GOA Site Director at St. Christopher's. I will continue to build our parents and students into a GOA community by having a meeting with parents at Parents' Night. I will also gather the boys regularly to connect and share best practices for success in a GOA class. I'd also like to do more work at the beginning

of each semester to thwart any technical issues with the use of a new learning management system and its potential pitfalls.

I will share my findings with the teachers of our boys at GOA each semester to ensure that they can best meet the needs of our boys.

Going forward, I would like to study our required and offered courses at school to see if we can better fit the needs of our boys without having to take an online class.

Another aspect of GOA courses that I did not consider is that they are all project-based, student driven courses. Our face-to-face classes are not. I wonder what guidance a boy might need who has never been exposed to a true problem-based curriculum.

## REFERENCES

Lowes, S., Lin, P., & Kinghorn, B. C. (2016). *Gender Differences in Online High School Courses*. Online Learning, 20(4), 100-117.

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**THE CENTER  FOR THE  
STUDY OF BOYS**

711 St. Christopher's Road  
Richmond, VA 23226

**educatingboys.com**  
**804.282.3185**

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