Reimagining Learning

Imagine a different kind of online learning experience, one in which learning is active, meaningful, and collaborative; A virtual environment that is intentionally and flexibly designed to encourage communication and engagement in a variety of modalities, at different paces, and across time zones. Where learners from different parts of the world come together to share diverse perspectives, exercise their agency, build community, and foster empathy while challenging themselves in ways that are both independent and interdependent. Where passion and curiosity drive the choices that are made. Where making a difference, or responding to a call to action, lies at the heart of where students go with their learning. It’s experiences like these that the Sewickley Academy (SA) hopes to engender through its newly established partnership with Global Online Academy (GOA).

On October 5, 2020, Sewickley Academy joined a consortium of more than 135 high-performing schools in becoming full members of Global Online Academy (GOA). GOA is a premier online teaching and learning organization committed to reimagining learning and empowering students and educators to thrive in a globally networked society. Our membership makes it possible for students to take advantage of a broad range of courses and learning experiences not available to them on our campus. Leveraging global connections, relationships for learning, and a variety of digital tools, GOA support students in developing the following core competencies:

- Collaborate with people who don’t share your location.
- Communicate and empathize with people who have perspectives different from your own.
- Curate and create content relevant to real-world issues.
- Reflect on and take responsibility for your learning and that of others.
- Organize your time and tasks to learn independently.
- Leverage digital tools to support and show your learning.

During the 2020-21 school year, 18 Sewickley Academy Senior School students took a leap of faith and embarked on our school’s first journey with GOA. Taking courses as varied as Introduction to Investments, Prisons and Criminal Justice Systems, Entrepreneurship For Global
Context, iOS App Design, Social Psychology, and Medical Problem Solving, to name a few, our pilot group of students connected with peers around the world, shared and listened to diverse perspectives on relevant, real world topics, and gained deeper knowledge and practical skills through application and reflection. Through our Global Studies Program, service learning initiatives, and partnerships with sister schools abroad, Sewickley Academy has consistently looked for opportunities to extend learning beyond the confines of Western Pennsylvania. Our membership with GOA provides students with yet another opportunity to connect with people, cultures, and experiences beyond our borders. Our pilot group of students have described this as one of the most exciting and meaningful features of their participation in GOA courses this year.

Students also appreciated the flexible nature and pace of GOA courses citing the usefulness of the format in helping them develop soft skills like communication, time-management, and empathy. GOA intentionally creates learning experiences that are “interactive, generative, and personalized.” In each of their courses, GOA leverages online spaces to help students develop modern learning skills such as “cross-cultural collaboration, time management, project planning, advocacy, and real world problem-solving.”

**GOA Course Design and Support in SA**

GOA courses are relationships-based online classes that are led by expert teachers trained and supported by GOA's staff. A GOA course takes a similar commitment of time, effort, and engagement as an on campus course. They are interactive and dependent upon student participation and students typically spend 5-7 hours a week on GOA courses. They are primarily asynchronous, meaning that students do not need to attend pre-determined class meeting times. Instead, teachers design and publish coursework and calendars, and within that framework students can make decisions about how to manage their work and time gaining important independent learning skills along the way. Students can expect to connect synchronously with teachers and classmates via video on a weekly or biweekly basis and all student work is submitted and assessed in their Learning Management System. In addition, students communicate frequently with teachers and peers via email, chat, and video calls among others and the classes are small (1:20 teacher to student ratio) to ensure personalized support. All students at Sewickley Academy receive credit for their GOA courses, which are taken as a part of their regular course load. Enrolled students meet in groups or one-on-one with Sewickley Academy’s Site Director, Mrs. Plaza-Ponte once each PANTHER cycle or whenever a need arises. Although we have necessarily begun our association with GOA with a smaller number of students, we anticipate growth over time and hope that within five years the majority of all students passing through our Senior School will have had the opportunity to take a GOA course.

**The SA Faculty’s GOA Journey**
In March of 2020, just before spring break, the school made the announcement that we would not be returning to campus and expressed the real possibility that we would be teaching online for the remainder of the academic year. Sewickley Academy teachers did a remarkable job that spring, quickly adapting to the new reality, learning how to use Zoom, how to screencast, and how to make the best use of online learning tools like Padlet, Flipgrid, and Seesaw. Although we made it work, we knew that if the pandemic continued we would have to find more flexible and responsive ways of meeting the needs of our learners. For many of us, an initial strategy was to take what we did in the physical learning space and try to recreate it online. Although this approach got us through those early weeks of pandemic teaching, we knew we could do better.

We asked ourselves this: Who is doing online learning better than anyone else, and how can we learn from them? Since its inception in 2011, Global Online Academy has been at the forefront of not only online teaching and learning, but best practice in general making use of the latest research on motivation and the science of learning. Moving beyond simply “planning lessons,” GOA seeks to “design learning experiences” placing a deliberate focus on agency, equity, personalization, and mastery. When we think of online courses, relationships aren’t the first thing that comes to mind. In fact, many of us shy away from online learning because we crave the connection we feel with others when learning in physical spaces. What makes GOA remarkable is how they’ve made empathy and belonging a key part of the learning environment even in online spaces.

When we discovered that GOA was offering a menu of courses under the broad heading of Designing for Online Learning, we knew we had to take advantage. Over the summer, every teacher took one or more courses from GOA with different areas of focus such as designing for student agency, designing online assessments, and designing for wayfinding (online learning spaces that are clear and easy for students to navigate). During our August In-Service, teachers “jigsawed” what they had learned. In other words, teachers who took different courses gathered in groups to build shared knowledge and plan how they would implement those best practices in their virtual and physical classrooms in the school year ahead. These courses were tremendously helpful in establishing a new vision and standard for what excellent online teaching and learning could look like at Sewickley Academy. GOA modeled, in their own online professional learning courses, how Sewickley Academy teachers could help all students succeed in the year ahead whether they were learning on campus or from home. Impressed with the quality of the courses they took over the summer, Sewickley Academy teachers continued to enroll in professional learning at GOA throughout the 2020-21 school year. Not only did GOA’s professional learning courses help our school to thrive during the most challenging year of our careers, the values that guide GOA’s work, which align so well with our own, will influence how we teach well beyond the pandemic.

Our current strategic plan calls for a greater emphasis on experiential and project-based learning. We know that people learn best when they have multiple opportunities to connect with others and
apply what they’ve learned in ways that are personally meaningful and relevant. Our membership with GOA expands opportunities for students to exercise their voice and choice and to act with more autonomy and ownership as learners. True project-based learning will require both a shift in approach and an augmentation in skills for our faculty, who will need to design learning experiences that foster the critical skills and habits of mind that students will need in order to achieve success when they leave the Academy. Our GOA membership, and the faculty development that will continue to spring from it, will, we hope, elevate student voice and choice beyond GOA courses themselves and inspire Sewickley Academy teachers to further position students as co-creators of their own learning experiences as we all navigate a changing landscape.