



Nat:

Welcome back to Reach. Teach. Talk. during these very uncertain and very interesting and novel times, we are looking for hope and we're looking for possibility. And we are teachers who are used to being in a brick and mortar classroom, and we are being called upon to move from our brick and mortar classroom to the online, the remote classroom, the online learning format. And for many of us and myself included, this is a daunting situation. This is something where we can feel like, you know what? Everything I build in my classroom is through my connections, through the trust I've maintained with my students. I know my students, and I know the mood that they're coming into the classroom with, I don't know that on an online format. I don't know that through the screen of my computer. I worry that my teaching is going to suffer or become numb because I am not sharing space. I'm not sharing air. There are things I might miss sound-wise, orally, or optically.

Nat:

So I have as a guest today for Reach. Teach. Talk, the executive director of Malone Schools Online, which is a, and I'll let her give the details about Malone Schools, but it is a consortium of independent schools around the country, over 25 schools that offer 37 or 38 up to 40 now classes for secondary school students. And Ms. Claire Goldsmith has been a teacher in the classroom. She has also worked with Stanford Online and then made the transition to heading up being Executive Director for Malone Schools. And I'm thrilled to have Claire with us today because she is going to offer us some advice and strategies, some hope. She has been in this before, she has gone from brick and mortar to the online and is going to have some really some good pearls of wisdom to share with us, that might make us feel a little more relaxed and a little more ready and able to grab the bull by the horns here and as we move our brick and mortar to this screen based surface technology, remote learning classroom existence.

Nat:

So without further ado, Claire, welcome, and thank you so much for taking your time today.

Claire Goldsmith:

Thank you so much for having me, Nat. I really appreciate it. Just feel like we should let our audience know that we were once on a long trip to China together and bonded on a number of long bus rides and great meals. And it's wonderful to be reconnected in this way, in this time of crisis, where I think we're all figuring out how we can keep doing our jobs, caring for our students, our communities. And so it's my pleasure to be here talking all about your idea of relational teaching and how it applies in this view context. I'm happy to say a few words just about how I got here and why it's relevant. I did teach in a very traditional classroom here in Los Angeles at Harvard Westlake School. And after graduate school was looking for something new and interesting to do and heard that Stanford had an online high school.

Claire Goldsmith:

And I was probably the least person you would expect to wind up in an online high school, because all I knew were these amazing relationships with students that you get in a brick and mortar context in really excellent schools, like the ones I had gone to and the one I had taught at. But I thought it sounded

interesting and like a new challenge and someone convinced me to take the job of director of student life in an online high school, which many people actually thought was a joke. Because they said, how can you have student life and in online high school? And I had to figure out a way to make that mean something. And it was creating a yearbook and a debate club and advisory and homeroom and taking so many of the best elements of a really thriving school community and bringing those into an online context.

Claire Goldsmith:

And so after several years at Stanford Online High School, in many different roles, I had the incredible opportunity of taking a project that we created there at Stanford University and spinning it out to join all of these traditional brick and mortar schools across the country together in online learning. Using the same basic philosophy of Stanford Online High School, which is about connecting in real time classes. And I'll talk a lot more about that later, but that was a key factor for me in wanting to bring that kind of online learning, which is live and interactive and really human into a different context in a way that would provide opportunity for students all across the country.

Nat:

And how do you find, if you can think about some of the successful surprises you may have discovered after having come from a brick and mortar classroom environment, Claire, to Stanford Online. I mean, how do you have an advisory in an online program? How do you really feel like you get to connect and build trust with your students when you're seeing them in very specific times and very specific context?

Claire Goldsmith:

Well, I'll start by just saying to your audience of brick and mortar teachers who are making this transition, that fully online teachers create unbelievable connections with their students, having never met them in person. So all of you have actually an advantage in having been, three quarters of the school you already in person with your students and making the switch online. You will actually be able to do this in a pretty beautiful and seamless way because there's already so much shared history and a deep relationship there. In fact, at Sanford Online High School, we bring students together in person once a year, not all students, but many of them, for an on campus summer program at Stanford to deepen some bonds in person. And we find that those bonds then sustain themselves throughout the school year. So having some in-person touchpoint is actually really wonderful and you all are starting out with that already.

Claire Goldsmith:

I think that one of the, as far as tips go for this, and then I can talk a little bit more about how you do an advisory. First of all, connecting live in a video conference setting is crucial. There are many different ways to connect online and I'll talk about some more of them, but having that live face to face interaction, like the one we're having now, is just the absolute best. It doesn't mean that class just needs to translate to a video conference. It actually really, I think requires a rethinking of time and how you compose a course, but not having some kind of face to face interaction, I think is a really missed opportunity. And I always felt that teaching online, I knew my students as well as I knew the ones in my brick and mortar classroom, I could see when they came into the virtual video conference a few minutes early, just kind of finishing up their lunch and maybe pushing it off to the side, what they were up to.

Claire Goldsmith:

I could see if their sibling was running through the background about to go out and play soccer. And I could talk to them about that. I couldn't smell their lunch, I often couldn't see really how tall they were, but I could really get a feel for their personalities. If they were having a bad day, what was going on with them, I could meet with them individually and connect in a lot of other ways as well, which I can certainly touch on. And I think the proof is in the pudding, in the program I run now almost every year

we have at least one student request a college recommendation letter from a teacher that student has never met in person and who might live on the other side of the country. But they have such a connection and relationship through their class online that it absolutely makes sense for them. And we've had students travel across States to meet one another, we've had students wind up at the same college from different places and become really close friends. So the interaction that happens live is absolutely meaningful.

Claire Goldsmith:

That said, I think there are ways to do it better, just connecting isn't quite enough. It has to be relational, right? This whole book, I'm holding for those of you listening, I'm holding up Nat's amazing book, is about those kinds of human connections. So one way to do that is to be real and be yourself. I think for example, in this conversation before we started recording Nat and I added a little bit about the bizarre turn of events, that means we're having this conversation at all today. And where we're each sitting and what's going on in the background, I'll tell listeners, you might hear my nine month old start to cry a few rooms away. Or my toddler might think that she can run into mommy's office now because I'm at home and I'm a real person sitting here. And there are ways of being vulnerable and open online, especially in a situation like this, that really engender that human connection.

Claire Goldsmith:

And it's crucial that teachers do that with students as well. How is everyone doing today? One of our great teachers in our program makes sure to check in with every single student verbally like this at the start of class, how are you? What's going on? Oh, I can see that it's a little cold there, it looks cold outside in Omaha. Or I heard there were some tornadoes there while you were in Nashville, let's talk about that. So connect with every student. And I'll add that there are also multiple other platforms to make that connection in, in addition to the live video conference, which again, I think is crucial. A text chat, which many of these video conferencing platforms have. Sometimes when I taught middle school history online, I would notice that a student was a little quieter than normal during class. And I could send that student a private text chat through the platform and say, "Hi, Tommy, how's everything going today? Anything you want to share?"

Claire Goldsmith:

Or if I knew that one of my students knew the answer to something, but maybe was feeling shy and wasn't speaking up, I could say, "I'm going to call on you next for this next question and I'd love if you could be prepared and jump in and answer that." So that's just one example. There are many other ways to do these kinds of things. And I guess the last point I'll make is that as an example, I'm pretty involved in my synagogue here in Los Angeles. And I've noticed that within just a couple of weeks, they have done remarkable things to make the community feel connected, even remotely. My daughter is in preschool there, there are multiple modes of connection for her, with her teachers. Phone calls, FaceTime, a video conference like this one, emails, all kinds of art projects that we can do and then take a picture of it and send back and they can comment on. But also music every day, live or recorded, being able to watch services.

Claire Goldsmith:

And I find that now with the integration in social media as well, I'm figuring out who different people in my community are that I've maybe seen, but I never knew their names, but now we're commenting on the same YouTube video at the same time. And we're making all these connections. So there is a lot you can do to feel incredibly closely connected.

Nat:

There are so many pieces of wonderful gems that you just shared right there, Claire. Just even starting with the whole background of the classroom, like the idea that you could change the background, like

I'm looking, we are seeing what's extensively your office here and there's some beautiful black and white framed photos behind your head that just shows you're a traveler, you've traveled to certain places. There's this really nice looking desk in the background there that looks like an antique desk. You might have a story about that. There are ways that instead of going to the same tried and true classroom every day. And by the way, when I was a teacher at Harvard Westlake as well, we shared a classroom. I would share a classroom with teachers and therefore we wouldn't be able to necessarily own the classroom by putting out all of our personal stuff like we could, if we had our own classrooms. So working remotely gives you that opportunity, as you shared.

Nat:

Also, this idea, which I love, of, it's like a thicker dimension of communication, because as you're teaching, you're able to, as you said, to text the students and say, hey, just give them a little alert. Like I'm going to call on you next, just hope that's cool. Or how are you feeling today? I'm noticing that you seem a little quieter than usual or on the opposite end, what an amazing comment you made a few minutes ago there. I'm conducting a class here, I'll shoot you a quick text with a smiling emoji or something. So it sounds like there are opportunities to even go deeper in the actual class period, both with the visual look, but also the way of being able to communicate feedback.

Nat:

And then what really stood out to me, Claire is just this, the opportunity to connect one on one, and this ability to use whatever platform your school, States we're going to use, to be able to connect one on one with students and to be able to work with them. Because it's not all about, going to be all about as you said, the synchronous real time video class teaching, but it's also going to be expected that you're able to give one-on-one feedback and have one-on-one chats. And be there and this also leads to shaping an advisory, right, to really be able to see and comment on where each kid is coming from in a very rich and I would even argue enhanced way given the online platform. So does that make you think of any additional things that you might want to share here?

Claire Goldsmith:

Yeah. I said it makes me want to get back into the online classroom more and more. I've been an administrator now for a while. You're totally right about seeing in somebody's world a bit more, literally, and there is, you get to talk about educating the whole child. You actually get more dimensions to your students where you're coming to class from home. And it's sometimes tricky to navigate that because obviously you're seeing more and you want to be aware of bias or just, you're getting more information, but that also is just a wonderful richness. So getting to see the sibling from time to time or understanding what's in their background, but more than that, you can use that in an educational way. So rather than just pretend that we're not at home, why not make that part of the curriculum. So for example, in the program that I run, we have a number of classes that make use of the fact that students are in different environments, different geographical context actually, in the case of our program.

Claire Goldsmith:

So we run a class on the American food system and our students are all over the country. So we can actually have them do projects that relate to the food systems where they live. And I think even when your students live in a one proximal, proximal to each other, they're still at home. So what does that mean? Well, maybe there's an opportunity to have them talk about a favorite possession of theirs or to come to school from a different room in their home and talk about that or pick their favorite spot or make a recipe that relates to a family recipe. And do some chemistry project related to that, or some journaling about what you see out your window in a time of quarantine. I know that my street right now is just covered in joggers, I've never seen so many joggers out and about and start thinking about all different kinds of things.

Claire Goldsmith:

So how do you make that meaningful in an educational way? And I think especially now that's actually an empathetic move because it's acknowledging that we're all in, this is a hard situation. Let's not pretend it doesn't exist, let's use it and make it meaningful.

Nat:

I would like to just, I want to make sure that every viewer here and listener heard you use the term empathy right then, because the absolute stereotype, right about the robotic techno future that is now lacks soul, it lacks the ability, it lacks heart. And the fact that here you are the executive director of a Malone Online Schools and Stanford Online Dean, talking about how this can bring about empathy through the various backdrops, through looking through people into one's home. I mean, let's admit it right, there's a little more intimacy, right. Actually I went on right here and that breeds empathy. And I love that. And I think about how empathy is also generated through these ability, oh, sorry, these techniques to be able to connect with your students in this format as well. Because these one on one again, these one on one little texts or comments can bring closeness in a way they're in the classroom, right.

Nat:

Remember in the brick and mortar classroom, right, you would know there's a student or there're a couple students who you've got your eye on, but you don't want to embarrass them in front of the class either. Right? You don't want to draw attention, you can do this in a way that doesn't. Does that make sense?

Claire Goldsmith:

That makes perfect sense. That's yeah, I think that's really well put. Not to mention, just little tech tricks like screen-sharing and all these video conferences you can share your screen in two clicks. And so if you're working on a paper, you can just share it with your teacher right there super quickly or maybe not a paper, maybe I don't know, your favorite YouTube video. You just pop it up and play it, as a teacher you can do that too. So it's not even just bringing the physical space in, but everything in your world can be shared and seen pretty immediately.

Nat:

Yeah. And I'm thinking now about, just as we wrap this up, the idea of anything that you think would be important for ... Because you've worked with teachers who are coming new to an online classroom teaching format, anything that you would just say like, okay, first of all, I would say one thing, which is perfectionist pernicious, like don't, if that dog is going to knock over your coffee on your desk, because then the dog's knocking over your coffee in your desk. If your toddler's going to come in at three and a half years old, take charge, that's okay too. It happens. And we can all be a little looser about it. Any mantras like that you can help, that you would want to leave teachers with.

Claire Goldsmith:

Yeah. So I completely agree with that. And I would also just give a line of confidence, which is, if you're a good teacher, you're going to be a good online teacher. Teachers ask all the time like, well, to teach in your program must I have had experience teaching online? And we actually say no, a lot of times experience teaching online, being something else that that's not really what I'm looking for. I'm looking for your ability just to be a great teacher and connect with students and be into your copier, subject and passionate about it and be creative pedagogically. That's just being a good teacher, that's not about knowing certain tech tools. So you will make that transition. I also think that there's this notion of well, student teacher connection is based on shared space. And I would really push back against that notion.

Claire Goldsmith:

I think student teacher connections are based on a few things. First is a shared goal, which is for the most basic level, like I'm here to teach you X and you are here to learn X. And it's a little bit maybe transactional about getting to the next thing, but there is a shared goal. There's also connection based on shared interest. And that's passion for a particular subject, just getting so excited about something or reading together. That's a connection right there, when you've just seen that student light up about the book that you picked and you're just overjoyed about that moment. I think it's also created this connection on shared experience. And when I think back to teaching in all contexts and when I've most bonded with my students, it's been about a wonderful conversation we had academic or otherwise. In an extracurricular context or a student opening up about something going on.

Claire Goldsmith:

If those moments in office hours that you remember, or when I had a guest appearance in the student dance show at Harvard Westlake, well, that was a shared experience. And it bonded us together pretty well. Sorry for that interruption in the background, there we go. Per the notion of authenticity and so I think that shared experience is key. And then finally, teacher, student connections are also forged in times of challenge and crisis event. And I can think of several of those, unfortunately in my teaching career where we really developed the bonds in part, because of the challenge we were going through as a community. Well, surprise, all of those things can exist online. From the shared goals, to the shared interests, to shared experiences, and certainly share challenges. And this is a shared challenge. This transition to moving online is a challenge for everybody. So that itself will create a bond and you don't have to worry about the rest. You don't have to worry about whether your recorded lectures are perfect or you covered exactly X amount of content.

Claire Goldsmith:

The reason we're in this is because again, we care about our communities and we're here to teach life lessons and be a point of safety and security for our students, especially in this time. And so we can all do that as teachers.

Nat:

Those were obviously beautiful words and wonderful sentiments to leave us with. This idea of shared goals, shared connection, shared exploration, this idea that we are sharing together. And in this uncertain time, what's led us to this situation that we're in now today. And what has led to this beautiful conversation, inspiring conversation, is about the unknown that we're all in this together and that is reassuring. And that's what this connection and yes, I'm talking to you through a screen, Claire, but I feel I genuinely do feel as if we could be sharing the same literal space. And this experience alone is proof enough for me. Right? So I just want to say, thank you so much for taking your time to be on this podcast, to come at a really, it was quite a moment's notice here. I would like to refer anybody, any viewer or listener to Malone School's website, which Claire, what is the specific website? I'll have it-

Claire Goldsmith:

Thank you so much. It's maloneschoolsonline.org. And I will say we have a community resources page that we threw together in about five minutes, that actually has some resources there to help schools and teachers transition online. And I'm also happy to work with anybody directly on this. We are a service to our schools and all schools out there and hope that we can be helpful to people as they make this transition.

Nat:

That's a wonderful offering. And also I'd like for everybody to look up Claire's article in Medium Online, it is, a lot of this subject content that we covered today is reflected in this essay. And it is a really thorough and very inspiring, I thought, read. So take a look, Medium Online. Claire Goldsmith, thank you

very much. Educational, I mean, sorry, Executive Director Malone Schools Online. Thank you so much for being with us today. Cheers. Awesome.

Speaker 3:

You've been listening to Reach. Teach. Talk. With Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to nat@reachacademics.com.