

2 - Creating an Online Community

Original Air Date: 10/6/20

Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. URL at www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas and inspiration to use today. Let's get started. Today, we are here with Dr. Stephanie Heald. She is an assistant professor at Ashford University*. She has a PhD in education, an MS in education, a BA in elementary education, and an AAS in early childhood education. She also holds a dual advanced degree in building and district-level educational leadership from St. John's University and has had the privilege of conducting her year-long leadership residency in Clark County School District. Dr. Heald's topic today is building an online classroom community, which is such an important topic right now. Dr. Heald, thank you so much for being here with us.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to talk about this.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: We're excited also because I've heard you talk many times about building a virtual space for learners. To me, it's so intriguing because it's so relevant and vital today. Why is this such a passion for you?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, I can think back to my days in my own personal classroom, my own elementary classroom, and I can remember setting up the community. I can remember welcoming, putting a little space together for welcoming families and children in the center. That was one thing that was very important to me. Fast forward ahead 18 years, and we're in a totally different society. Many of our parents now are not able to bring their child to the classrooms, and they're not able to drop them off and chat about the day's occurrences and what's happening in school. Sometimes, they're not able to connect with the teacher throughout the day at all because of work commitments, work hours, lack of transportation. Several variables impact our families today. We're dealing with a whole different characteristic of our society today. We really want to engage them in the school connection, and we really want to make them a part of the school community culture, but we grapple with ways on how to do this. So, building an online virtual learning community for our children and our families and our communities and our stakeholders and other colleagues is a great way to really bring everyone into this community and give them a sense of welcoming and invitation and support and resources and networking collaboration and all those things that we used to be able to do in the actual physical on-campus classroom.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: So, what are the basics that teachers need to start to build their classroom community online with their children and their families?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: That's a great question. You know, I think with everything we do that contains elements of technology, we have to first become comfortable ourselves. So, really, that is us going into whatever tool we wish to use to build this virtual community and kind of getting to be become familiar with it and exploring it. And that sometimes is simply just creating an account and looking through templates that are already there, looking through other examples, searching the internet. One of my favorites to use to start a foundational online learning community is Google Sites. And the simple fact is that Google is pretty widely known. It's pretty user-friendly. It's free, which in education, we all love free. It is something that can be accessed 24-7. We can put synchronous materials on there, which means real-time materials, which we can do our virtual meetings on it. But we can also post asynchronous materials. And that's materials that we want our families and our children to have access to at any point in time. And this really helps our busy families and our children when they get home to be able to log into this virtual community and just obtain resources or connect with classmates or connect with families to connect with teachers. Or you know what? I've even seen it used for community members to do teacher outreach. And teachers use it to do community outreach, vice versa. So, this online

learning community can really be built to be a bi-directional tool to build relationships with, like I said, our children, our families, and our communities.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: So, I love that you talk about how it can reach so many. Is there a way to make this interactive and individualized for each individual student, like differentiation?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, that's a great question. Very recently, I have seen educators use it in such an innovative manner. And what they've done is they've actually built pages for each and every one of their students. And this is super cool because it allows them to show basically a system of documentation or a system of assessment or a system of progress online. So, each and every child in their class has a page that's only accessible to the families, only accessible to who they grant privileges to. So, say my son has a page, Cameron has a page. And in the beginning of the year, I take a picture of a writing sample that he does in class. I upload that picture to his particular page. And I date it September 9th, 2020. I can then share that with parents. They can access it anytime. And throughout the months, we can add to that. So, then we can see Cameron's writing sample grow. By the end of the year, you have this awesome online portfolio, this online documentation system that families can actually see. Here's where Cameron started. Here's the progress he made. Here's where he is right now. And it just serves, again, as that neat little learning tool where they can check in and see where their child is. I also think I've seen it used more recently to really get the message across there to families, too, about what's going on, not only individually but class-wide. So like I said, our families are very busy. And we want to keep them connected to the classroom in some way. So, allowing this site to have resources for them and just, you know, hey, here's a heads up of what's going on in the learning week really brings them, draws them into that classroom community and makes them want to be a part of it. So that's really exciting. The last part about this is when we excite our children with this online learning community and we entice them to go there and we show them, you know, the great valuable resources that are there and maybe some fun games and some, you know, little hints and tricks for the week and just these little things that make them want to go there, they're going to draw their families in and make their families want to go there. And in turn, we really hope that this is, like I said, one of those bi-directional learning tools that we can just continue to build and continue to enhance as we progress through the year.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love this. And have you seen that families are interested in these kinds of things? Or are there any concerns, pros, cons to the entire way that you're building this around building those relationships?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: One of the things our families have expressed that right now, now more than ever, they need a sense of normalcy. They need some access to resources. They need to have some form of communication that is there for them when they need it. Now, this could be at 11 o'clock at night to a working dad who is not home and able to support his child till then. This could be a working mom or a grandmother who doesn't have that time until outside those school hour windows. And what this does, this learning community provides that place that they can go at any point in time and they can seek help. They can look for resources. They can look at recaps. They can be connected to outside resources that might be able to support them, help get their child through whatever learning activity they're doing. It can help them understand more about the particular developmental domain that the child is working in in class. So, families need this. They want this connection. They want to be involved and engaged. But sometimes reality is that they can't be because of, like I said, transportation or work or other children at home or commitments or simply they just can't because of life. And that's providing them with this learning community that they can log into on their time is really a valuable resource for our diverse and very busy society today.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I totally agree with you. And I also just want to mention that this website can be any website that you have that's preexisting, one that you find that is very easily accessible to you, one that parents can use. There's so many out there, correct?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah. There is not one right or wrong way to do this. And that's the cool thing about it. It really depends on who you are as a professional and what you are looking to achieve. There are several free resources out there. And they just provide a great starting point. You really want to look at this, this building of the community as just that, a process, not a product. If we think we need to, you know, conquer the world in one week, it's really not. It's not going to happen. It's really not. This is going to be something that you build and add to over time. You develop over time. You refine over time. You learn lessons over time with this. So, a really great starting point, like I said, is just to kind of explore using your search engine and find something out there that really appeals to you. Something that inspires you. Something that you can see yourself using in a productive way for your particular program or setting. And also, for your comfortability.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: 100. Then what you need to do is just create yourself an account. And once you create that account, start small. What you want to do is create that very first page. Just like your classroom, when your families, when your children open the door, they want to look inside that classroom and they want to feel a sense of comfort. They want to feel a sense of welcoming and invitation. They want to feel a sense of cozy. Your website or your webpage or your virtual learning community should be the same. That landing page for them should make them want to come in and learn more. And that's really what you're trying to create for them. Exactly. I love this. It's so exciting. I want to leave with three takeaways that you want to give your listeners right now about the topic you have been discussing.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Three takeaways. I would say the first one is set a realistic and manageable goal. When you set that realistic and manageable goal, it is something that you can build on. The starting point could just be exploring and creating a login for that matter. A login is that first step. Just create something that is very manageable. Number two, definitely look at it as a process, not a product. We don't want to build something and just have it sit there with old information and just stay stagnant, so people don't want to come back. We want it to be a process. We want it to be evolving. We want it to be more and better each time our children, families, and communities log in. Number three, remember it is a community. Communities are built on back-and-forth relationships. It is built on the needs of our populations. It is built on respect, and it is built on a level of just these formable relationships that are positive. That's ultimately what is going to make the most powerful impact for our children, our families, and our students.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Do you have one challenge that you want to leave your listeners with?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: I challenge you to create some form. Take a step in the direction to create some form of online learning community for your program.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Thank you so much, Dr. Heald. We will be back soon. Thank you for joining us today.

**Ashford University is now the University of Arizona Global Campus.*