

Beyond the Virtual Classroom: Extending the Social Presence Model to Extracurricular Activities in Online Schools

For more than 15 years, researchers have been working to build and test a framework for increasing student engagement and connection in online instruction.¹ This “social presence” framework offers research-informed strategies that have been primarily described in the context of virtual classrooms and courses.

In recent years, online schools have expanded beyond the virtual classroom to offer students extracurricular activities, such as virtual clubs. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, this infographic provides an initial look at how the Social Presence Model could help strengthen these extracurricular opportunities for K-12 students, along with examples of student clubs at Florida Virtual School, the nation’s largest state virtual school.

Introduction: Why Should We Use Research to Strengthen Virtual Clubs?

The audio portions of this infographic were taken from a conversation between April Fleetwood from Florida Virtual School, Diana Sharp from the REL Southeast, and Aimee Whiteside from the University of Tampa.

Clubs at Florida Virtual School: Selected Highlights and Recommendations

- ✓ 60+ clubs offered
- ✓ More than 5,000 students in at least one club (2020-2021)
- ✓ Most popular clubs: Cooking, Chess

Research on Virtual Clubs: Selected Highlights and Recommendations

Social Presence Model for Building Learner Connections²

Click on a circle for details.

¹ Whiteside, A. L., Garrett Dikkers, A., & Swan, K. (Eds.) (2017). *Social presence in online learning: Multiple perspectives on practice and research*. Stylus Publishing.

² Sharp, D., Whiteside, A., Fleetwood, A., & Clark, A. (2020). *When teachers and students are separated: Strategies from research on social presence for teaching at a distance* [Infographic]. Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_When_Teachers_and_Students_are_Separated.pdf

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Introduction: Why Should We Use Research to Strengthen Virtual Clubs?



- The explosive growth of virtual education means more students are in virtual learning full time.
- Clubs can provide more opportunities for student connections and relationships, which are crucial to student engagement.
- Clubs may provide additional opportunities for students to build confidence in academic areas (e.g., Math Club), pursue interests (e.g., cooking, chess, and gardening clubs), and explore the arts.
- The Social Presence Model may provide an initial heuristic, or framework, for strengthening virtual clubs and using research to examine what makes them successful.

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Affective Association

Establishing emotional connections

Strategies

Reach out to students, learn about them, and build relationships.

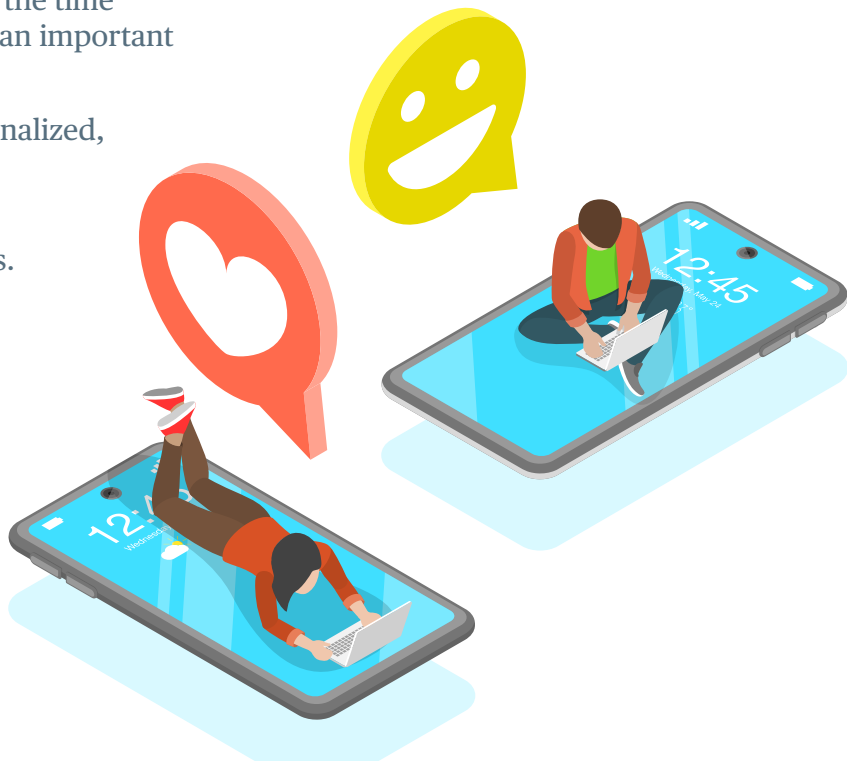
Prevent frustration by providing an organized structure that makes it easy for students to learn about the club, who is in it, when/how it meets, the time commitment, and why it is an important opportunity.

Ask students to make personalized, short video introductions.

Keep students engaged by dividing meetings into parts.

Give students leadership roles.

Offer plenty of time for students to collaborate and share.



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Community Cohesion

Creating positive social connections and interactions

Strategies

Pay attention to students' language.
Encourage the use of “we” and “us.”

Use awards ceremonies as another way to
help students learn about each other.

Consider a scavenger hunt to
encourage students to learn
about each other.



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Instructor Involvement

Actively engaging your students with instructional decisions

Strategies

Refer to students by name.

Provide early and continuous feedback on students' progress.

Facilitate norms, ice breakers, and organization.



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Interaction Intensity

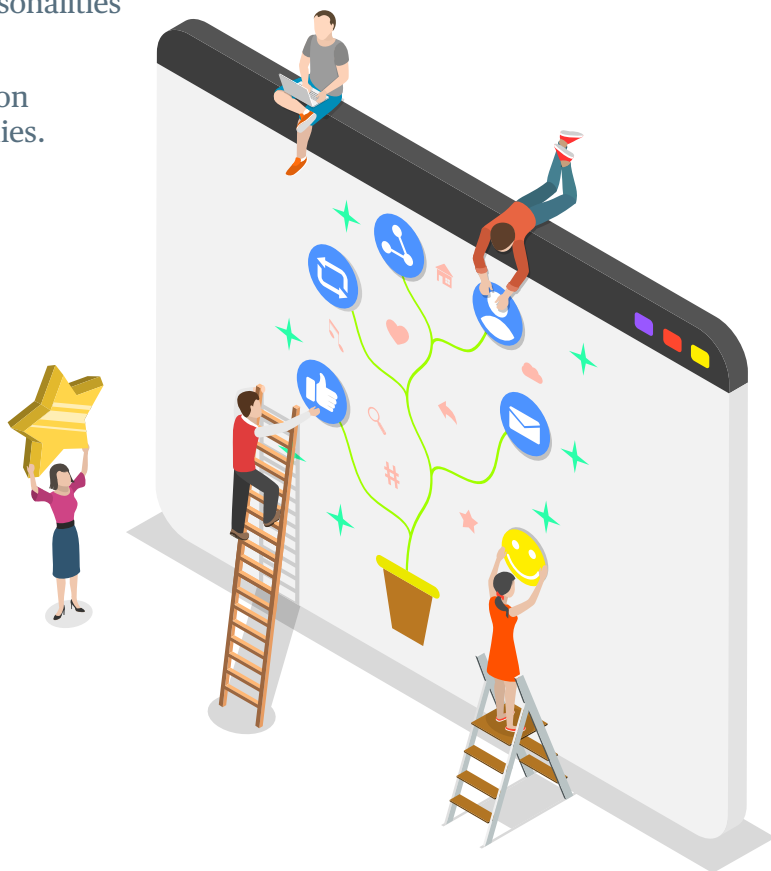
Strengthening how students interact with and support each other

Strategies

Ease students into interaction.

Allow students to show their personalities in video introductions.

Help students team up for work on fundraisers and awards ceremonies.



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Knowledge and Experience

Connections to students' unique backgrounds

Strategies

Ask students about their prior knowledge and experience.

Consider working with students to establish milestones for badges they can earn.

Help students abandon fixed mindsets (e.g., "I'm not a good artist") and adopt a growth mindset.



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Clubs at Florida Virtual School: Selected Highlights and Recommendations

- [Florida Virtual School offers over 60 clubs for students.](#)
- Over 5,000 students participate in clubs.
- Students meet via Zoom with the club sponsor.
- Clubs are limited to 300 students maximum.
- In 2020-2021, the number of students in clubs tripled.
- The most popular club: Cooking Club.
- [Other clubs offer opportunities for art, photography, and literary activities.](#)
- [Clubs are available for students at all levels: elementary, middle, and high school.](#)

Key Strategies for Virtual Clubs

- Provide leadership roles for students.
- Establish roles for students to play during large Zoom meetings.
- Divide hour-long meetings into parts to keep them engaging.
- Create opportunities for students to make videos and projects.
- Create opportunities for virtual performances.
- Offer Club Awards ceremonies to recognize student achievements.



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Research on Virtual Clubs: Selected Highlights and Recommendations

Research on clubs and other extracurricular activities at virtual schools has been minimal. Here are selected highlights:

- Using action research methodology, researchers traced the formation of social networking at a hybrid high school. Students used a NING network to form interest groups, organize a talent show and prom, offer emotional support to others, and discuss teen issues.¹
- A survey administered to 31 professionals in virtual education provided an initial look at the frequency with which online and hybrid programs offered extracurricular and enrichment activities. Service projects, clubs, field trips, orientation events, and social gatherings were the most common activities.²



- Using teacher ratings, school data, and student interviews, researchers examined students' perceptions at a private online school, including those related to their social interactions and extracurricular activities. Most students at this school reported minimal social interactions.³
- Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with African American and Hispanic students in an online school that did not offer extracurricular activities. Participants reported feelings of isolation that they believed affected their academic progress.⁴

Recommendations for Future Research

- Consider examining the participation of diverse learners in virtual clubs.
- Consider examining how virtual clubs can increase the level of personalized learning experiences for students.
- Consider examining how clubs can foster student mentoring and community connections.

1 Barbour, M. K., & Plough, C. (2012). Odyssey of the mind: Social networking in a cyberschool. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(3), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i3.1154>

2 Bryans-Bongey, S. (2015). Meeting the holistic needs of K-12 online learners: designing schools for the future. *Internet Learning*, 4(2), Article 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289707119_Meeting_the_Holistic_Needs_of_K-12_Online_Learners_Designing_Schools_for_the_Future

3 Keaton, W., & Gilbert, A. (2020). Successful online learning: What does learner interaction with peers, instructors, and parents look like? *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 6(2), 129-154.

4 Kumi-Yeboah, A., Dogbey, J., & Yuan, G. (2017). Exploring factors that promote online learning experiences and academic self-concept of minority high school students. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 0, 1-17.