Our Vision and Strategy:
Preparing Students, Teachers, and Leaders for the Future of Learning

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A New Mission

In 2017, Global Online Academy (GOA) adopted a new mission:

GOA reimagines learning to empower students and educators to thrive in a globally networked society.

We deepen learning through courses that equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful in high school, college, career, and life.

We coach teachers to think differently about how they design student learning experiences.

We work with educational leaders to ensure they have the strategies and tools to lead innovation and change.

We updated our mission because our work has become our imperative: education faces an urgent need to change, to reimagine its traditions in a way that meets the new, modern demands of college, career, and citizenship. This change cannot be made at the edges of existing structures; rather, it confronts core ideas about how students learn, how teachers teach, and how schools operate.

These are ideas GOA has been exploring since our founding in 2011, when we began bringing together learners from around the world. Over and over, we've seen that transformative learning experiences can happen anywhere, at any time, as long as we stay focused on what matters in education: an environment built on human relationships and designed for the learner.

Our vision for learning imagines a future that builds on and broadens GOA's work to include all learners, from all places, in new kinds of learning experiences.

Our Commitment to Innovation

We believe in informed innovation.

Because GOA is not tied to a single institution, prescribed curriculum, or exam preparation process, we have the freedom to respond quickly to new information and to shift our practices as learners' needs change. However, because we are an educational organization that partners with schools, we have a responsibility to protect the wellbeing of our students and the integrity of our program by making informed choices based on data, research, and feedback. As we grow, we will evolve, and our evolution will reflect our rigorous engagement with the ever-changing educational landscape and the inspiring work of students and teachers.

Our Vision for Learning

At GOA, we realize our mission by designing — and helping others design — learning experiences that prepare students and educators to apply what they learn to new contexts, especially real-world contexts.

Education is changing because the world is changing.

The core demand of our global society is that we adapt to, navigate, and create new networks of people and information. The value of "content" and "knowledge" is shifting constantly, and the ability to learn quickly, in a variety of contexts, with new tools, is more important than ever. The question being asked of us is no longer "What do you know?" but "How do you learn?"

The role of education has always been to create safe, supportive, engaging environments where learners can develop the skills necessary to succeed in the world. But, what should those environments look like? How might we design experiences where learners focus on process, not product; on skill-building, not content acquisition?

In both our student program and professional learning program, GOA designs experiences that help learners locate their intrinsic motivation and develop the skills necessary to become lifelong seekers of new ideas and connections. These experiences focus on authenticity: solving relevant problems, sharing ideas with real-world audiences, and exploring ideas and projects that engage learners' passions.

Student Program: The Power of Competency-Based Learning

The core of GOA's student program are small, interactive online courses. We offer students the unique opportunity to learn online with a global cohort of peers and the support of a passionate teacher.

Since the program began in 2011, students and teachers have told us that the hands-on, collaborative learning that happens at GOA develops the skills necessary for success in a networked world. Students come to GOA because the classes speak to their passions and ambitions. They return to GOA because the experience gives them more independence and voice in their learning, all with the support and collaboration of an excellent teacher and committed peers.

In 2015, based on data from our courses and extensive research, we began to transition GOA's student program to competency-based learning (CBL), a mode of learning that allows students to advance upon demonstration of competency, not time spent.

CBL mirrors how students will learn, work, and succeed in the world outside of school: it prioritizes agency, encourages adaptability, and reflects the professional cultures and expectations students will encounter in the future.

What is Competency-Based Learning?

Learners advance when they demonstrate competency. Time spent is not a factor in assessing competency.

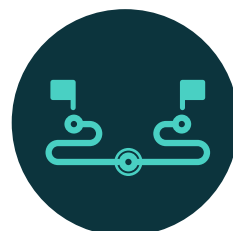Competencies and associated learning outcomes are explicit, transferable, and written for learners.

Learners have multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate competency.

Development of learner agency is an essential component of CBL.

Learners have voice and choice in the learning process.

Assessments focus on application and transfer of knowledge.

The pedagogy of CBL isn't new. In fact, the concept is grounded in the centuries-old apprenticeship model. However, growing research on learning and the brain, a global society and economy, and the proliferation of powerful technology make adoption of CBL more important and more feasible than ever.

Adopting CBL requires reviewing, reflecting on, and often reimagining traditional teaching and learning practices, especially the use of space and time, the roles of teacher and student, and the ways learning is demonstrated and assessed.

GOA's Six Core Competencies

GOA has placed six core competencies at the center of the student experience:

1

Collaborate with people who don't share your location.

2

Communicate and empathize with people who have perspectives different from your own.

3

Curate and create content relevant to real-world issues.

4

Reflect on and take responsibility for your learning and that of others.

5

Organize your time and tasks to learn independently.

6

Leverage digital tools to support and show your learning.

In addition, our teachers create course-specific competencies, skills tied directly to mastery of the foundational concepts and content of their courses. These core and course-specific competencies drive the design and facilitation of GOA courses.

Our key strategies in moving the program towards CBL are based in the same values that drove the founding of GOA: human relationships support deep learning, relevant topics and projects engage students, and students should develop the skills necessary to use modern tools to pursue their passions.

We know that what attracts students to GOA is the opportunity to explore topics relevant to their personal goals. We know that what engages students in GOA courses — and drives them to return over and over — is their active participation in a community where all learners contribute to making meaning.

The work of the GOA Student Program is to continue this momentum using CBL as its primary tool, building more transparent and feedback-driven learning environments, designing learning experiences that are more flexible and student-centered, and identifying and adopting technology that supports rich and meaningful facilitation and visualization of student learning.

Professional Learning: Transforming Teachers and Schools

What is learning for?

The sweeping changes happening in education and beyond offer any number of exciting opportunities for growth and innovation. In order to make sense of these opportunities, however, it's more important than ever for schools to have their own clear visions for learning.

GOA is a partner to educators, schools, and organizations — both inside and outside our consortium — looking to transform teaching practices and learning environments to meet the challenges of a changing world.

A thoughtful, intentional revisiting of mission and purpose allows schools to ground change management in core values. Which skills or competencies are mission-critical? Which innovations best serve our purpose? The outcomes of this important work include rethinking core structures like time, space, and assessment as well as the roles of teachers, students, and technology in designing meaningful learning experiences.

This is complex, layered work that is best accomplished when all levels of an organization collaborate on a coherent, forward-looking vision for learning. GOA's professional learning services help teachers and leaders foster open and collaborative environments that support meaningful learning, for students and adults.

Our Approach to Transforming Teachers and Schools

We work with students to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful in college, career, and life.

We work with schools to identify the best ways to involve students in this important work. Our years of experience in our student program have taught us the importance of making student voices a significant part of professional learning. Hearing from students, reflecting on their work, and incorporating their ideas into the design of learning experiences are essential components of professional growth.

We support and coach teachers to think differently about how they design student learning experiences.

Meaningful professional learning is ongoing and job-embedded. Our design workshops guide teachers through an intentional process that helps them identify and articulate the student competencies and outcomes that drive learning in their classes. Based on this work, we coach teachers to design experiences that build competency and give students voice and choice in demonstrating their learning. These experiences model the kind of work that engages students: interactive, hands-on, and relevant.

We work with leaders to ensure they have the strategies and tools to lead innovation and change.

Our school partnerships engage school leaders in discussion and activities that help them create and implement strategic plans. Through both deep understanding of their own communities as well as relevant experiences beyond the walls of their schools, leaders can better understand what makes their communities successful and, importantly, what their communites place is in the educational landscape.

The Work Ahead:
Eight Recommendations

As we work towards realizing our new mission and vision for learning, we see transformational opportunities ahead. We will continue to use our work with students to hone our expertise in innovative approaches to teaching and learning. We are also poised to lead a broader discussion about school change, and we foresee several needs.

1 **Determine efficacy of competency-based learning, at GOA and beyond.** CBL is relatively new, and ongoing study of how Students perform in this system is an essential element of implementing it successfully. Careful, ongoing study of the efficacy and relevance of GOA's core competencies to student's success in college, career, and citizenship will ensure the program evolves thoughtfully. In addition, broadening the research to educational organizations of all kinds would capture CBL's validity in many different contexts.

2 **Prototype, create, and test technology and a platform to support and scale CBL.** Implementing CBL at scale will require an excellent technology platform that allows for open and efficient assessment of, discussion about, and clear reporting of learning. Numerous mastery-based assessment tools and initiatives have recently emerged in the market. Time to research and evaluate these tools is needed to identify how technology can empower students and teachers to understand and track learning over time.

3 **Create and deliver case studies that bring modern learning experiences and innovative practices to life.** Storytelling is a powerful way to communicate the value of this work. Educators, in particular, crave examples that help them frame and concretize their own understanding and approach to shifting practice. School, teacher, and student stories about the design, implementation, and impact of modern learning experiences play a valuable role in inspiring wider adoption.

4 **Design professional learning experiences that help educators reimagine their practice.** Traditional modes of professional development lack the flexibility, personalization, and collaboration required to support educators in taking a modern approach to learning experience design. Creating research-backed professional learning that improves student learning outcomes will be an essential component of meaningful change in education. The approach to this process should mirror the approach we want to take with students: competency-based, learner-driven, and relationships-based.

5 **Design and cultivate opportunities for experiential learning.** We can learn from seeing modern learning in action. Experiential learning via school visits and/or online modules that allow for firsthand observation as well as interaction with educators doing this work would be an important element of ongoing professional learning.

6 **Create opportunities for education leaders to convene around school design and change management.** The challenges that lie ahead are not unique to school leaders; however, leaders often play dual roles: vision crafter and change manager. Making time for school leaders to convene and collaborate on how to best inspire, sustain, and support school change is essential.

7 **Communicate with stakeholders, including students and families.** Empowering young people to own their learning will enhance their understanding of how they learn, increasing metacognition and intrinsic motivation. Inviting students and families into the learning, assessment, and school-change process will be critical to the success of school change.

8 **Identify and design for the competencies and learning outcomes that ensure access for all.** Educational equity means furthering access for everyone, and especially those furthest from opportunity. Positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, ability to set long term goals and navigate systems, and depth of knowledge acquired in a field are important competencies for all young people and, if taught explicitly in schools, create more access and opportunity for all young people. Developing deeper understanding about why and how these competencies should be developed will ensure all types of learning environments will become more equitable and accessible.

Ultimately, this work prioritizes learning how to learn, encouraging metacognition and reflective learner practice, and teaching skills and competencies that lead to success in college, career, and citizenship. GOA is committed to help coalesce the field and, in collaboration with mission-aligned learning organizations, deepen practice and support excellent teaching and learning for all students.

Acknowledgments

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