

virtual clubs and remote events: extracurriculars for online learners at aelo swiss academy

There is a particular kind of silence that people imagine when they picture online school. One student, one kitchen table, one laptop, and a loneliness thick enough to spread on toast. It is a tidy image. It is also about a decade out of date.

Picture a Tuesday evening instead. Debate club is about to start at AELO Swiss Academy, and the video call fills up tile by tile: a student in Zurich logging in from a desk held together by sticky notes, a student in Singapore doing time zone arithmetic on her fingers, and somebody's cat crossing a keyboard with the confidence of a department head. The motion for tonight is announced. Someone forgets they are unmuted and says something unrepeatable. The club president restores order, a parrot offers its own closing statement, and the debate begins.



That is what extracurricular life looks like when school fits in a browser tab. It is messier than a gymnasium. It is also a great deal less lonely than the stereotype suggests.

the myth of the lonely online learner

The stereotype survives because early online learning really was mostly content delivery. Videos, quizzes, silence, repeat. What a few chaotic years of remote everything taught the world is that physical presence and actual connection are not the same thing. You can sit in a classroom of thirty and feel invisible. You can log into a call of nine and feel seen.

Here is the structural problem every online school faces, and the honest ones admit it: remote learning removes the corridor, the cafeteria, and the random collisions that make a school feel alive. Nobody gossiping by the lockers. Nobody dragging you into a project you did not know you cared about. None of that happens by accident online, so it has to happen on purpose.

At AELO Swiss Academy, clubs and remote events are not a garnish on the academic programme. They are load-bearing. Students are scattered across countries and time zones, which means community cannot be assumed. It has to be designed, scheduled, and defended against the eternal gravity of the mute button. Communities do not spontaneously generate over fibre-optic cables. Somebody has to build the corridor first.

how the club system actually works

The mechanics are less mysterious than outsiders assume. At the start of each term, students browse a catalogue of clubs and sign up for what interests them. Most clubs meet weekly, a few fortnightly, for 45 to 60 minutes. That length is not an accident. Every online community eventually performs the same experiment with 90-minute calls, reaches the same conclusion, and never speaks of it again.

Each club has a staff advisor whose real job, in practice, is to keep the lights on, handle anything administrative, and end the meeting on time. The talking, arguing, and organising belong to students. Between live sessions, chat channels and shared boards keep the thread going: a photography challenge can run all week without anyone sitting through a single extra call, which is the entire point.

Scheduling gets the respect it deserves. Meetings are anchored to Zurich time, naturally, but global clubs rotate their slots so the same region does not always draw the 10 pm short straw. Recordings exist for those who genuinely cannot make it, though everyone knows the live session is where the jokes land, and jokes are roughly 80 percent of the reason anyone returns.

And if a club a student wants does not exist? There is a path. Find an advisor, gather a handful of interested classmates, and write two honest sentences about the plan. The bar is deliberately low. A chess club has been started with less.

a tour of the catalogue

Debate and public speaking translate beautifully to video calls, which surprises people until they think about it. Breakout rooms give teams a private corner to panic in before rebuttals, and the format rewards exactly the skill shy students tend to build first: thinking clearly while terrified. Model United Nations takes this further. Students represent countries they have never visited and defend positions they do not personally hold, which is either diplomacy training or an acting class. Possibly both. The crisis committees, where a fictional situation unravels in real time while delegates scramble to respond, have produced some of the most impressive student work I have seen from teenagers who claim they left their homework on a train.

Coding and game design run from block-based beginner projects to genuinely alarming amounts of actual code, with https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ showcase evenings where students demo half-finished games to a merciful audience. Chess is quieter but no

less cutthroat. The club runs a rolling season-long ladder, and the faculty advisor, who arrived with something of a reputation, has occupied the bottom three rungs since October. Chess also survives questionable wifi better than most activities, since a frozen screen and a thoughtful opponent are visually identical.

The creative writing club works on a workshop model. Pages get submitted in advance, then the live session is spent giving and receiving feedback with a sharpness that would startle most newsrooms. The cardinal rule, learned the hard way in the club's first year, is that critique attacks the sentence and never the author. An annual anthology collects the strongest pieces, and watching a student read their published work aloud at the spring showcase, voice wobbling slightly on the final line, is the kind of moment that pays for the whole apparatus.

Art and design club leans on shared digital canvases where twenty students can draw at once, which produces either collaborative masterpieces or organized crime, depending on who discovers the spray-paint tool first. Photography challenges run across the week rather than inside a single call. Last month's theme was "refrigerator contents as self-portrait," and the results were more revealing than anyone had negotiated for.

Music is the one territory where physics refuses to cooperate. Latency makes live ensemble playing over video calls nearly impossible, so open mic nights work differently: performers pre-record, the audience gathers live, and the chat becomes a wall of applause in emoji form. It is not a concert hall. It is also the only concert where a singer in Lima can bow to applause arriving from Manila, Oslo, and one extremely enthusiastic grandmother.

The culture exchange club might be the most quietly valuable of the lot. Students teach each other greetings, referee disputes about the correct way to eat regional dishes, and occasionally coordinate international snack shipments, an activity occupying a legal and logistical gray area that everyone has collectively agreed not to examine too closely. The film club runs synced watch parties where the chat splits its output between genuine film criticism and chaos, in a ratio that varies wildly by title. The podcast club produces an actual series with occasionally dubious audio quality and unimprovable content. And the student council, which counts as a club in every way that matters, spends its meetings arguing about spirit week with the gravity of people negotiating an international treaty.

beyond the clubs: the events calendar

Clubs are the weekly heartbeat. The events calendar is what makes the school feel like a place instead of a platform.

A monthly all-school assembly opens with the serious announcements and closes with something deliberately silly, because an administrator who cannot laugh at their own slideshow has forfeited something important. Guest speaker evenings bring in people whose careers make students lean toward the screen: a glaciologist explaining what a melting ice core actually sounds like, a founder describing the failure that taught her the most, an alum now in medical school cheerfully itemizing how much sleep she does not get. The questions afterward run longer than the talks. That is the entire point.

Showcase nights are the emotional center of the year. Science projects, game demos, short films, and poetry readings get presented to an audience of classmates, parents, and siblings who wandered in under false pretenses and stayed to the end. Seasonal traditions have formed on their own, the way traditions do when people keep showing up: a winter talent show where one student performed an original rap about the water cycle and has never been permitted to forget it, a spring scavenger hunt coordinated across six time zones, and graduation itself, streamed live, where families on four continents watch the same ceremony at the same moment. It is a small technological miracle wearing the costume of a formality.

field notes for your first term

A few things tend to be true for students at AELO Swiss Academy signing up for the first time, and they fit on one hand:

1. Pick one club that matches something you already love and one that makes you slightly nervous. Growth lives in the second one.
2. Check the meeting time against your real schedule, not your aspirational one. A 9 pm club attended while yawning is a 9 pm club you will quit by November.
3. Camera on for at least the first two sessions. Trust builds faster when faces exist.
4. Give every club three meetings before passing judgment. First sessions are universally awkward, in every medium ever invented.
5. If you decide to leave, tell the advisor. In a group of nine, a missing person is not a statistic, it is a question everyone asks.

the trade-offs, honestly

None of this is frictionless, and pretending otherwise would be poor service.

Time zones remain the permanent tax on a global school. Someone, every term, attends Model United Nations while eating dinner at an hour their grandmother would classify as midnight. Rotating meeting slots distributes the pain fairly, which is admirable and still not the same as eliminating it.

Then there is the recording trap. Recordings exist so that nobody misses content, and they are genuinely useful. They are also the excuse students reach for when the live session starts to feel optional, and a club where everyone watches recordings is a club that has quietly stopped existing. Advisors know this. The good ones guard the live session the way you guard a campfire.

Screen time is the objection every reasonable parent raises, and it deserves a straight answer. Students at an online school already spend their academic hours on screens, so a club has to earn its slot rather than merely fill one. In practice this filter helps everyone: the clubs that survive are the ones students would choose over doing nothing, which is a higher bar than it sounds and a healthier one.



The last trade-off is emotional. Community online is opt-in in a way that hallway community never was. Nobody gets drafted into a lunch table. That is a gift for students who found physical classrooms loud and merciless, and it is a challenge for students who wait to be invited. The advisors' real craft is spotting the second group and doing the inviting themselves, early, before the silence gets comfortable.

the corridor, rebuilt

Somewhere along the way, the debate club president who originally joined to conquer a fear of speaking will chair her third tournament. The chess student will offer the advisor a merciful rematch, lose on purpose, badly, and everyone will pretend not to notice. A graduating senior will log in one final time, watch the tiles fill with faces from five time zones, and realize the loneliness everyone warned them about never actually moved in.

The school builds the rooms. The students furnish them. AELO Swiss Academy promises a corridor that exists online too, and keeps that promise with a timetable, a mute button, and a certain amount of stubbornness. What happens in that corridor, Tuesday after Tuesday, is the good part, and it belongs to the students entirely.

