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Should We Require Students to Turn Their Cameras On in the Zoom Classroom?

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When our courses went online in the spring, many of our students kept their cameras turned off in class. It was eerie. When my students wouldn't say anything, I felt like I was speaking into a void, and my imagination started running wild. Was anybody else really out there? Maybe they had all just . . . left? Even when most students were talking, I wondered about those who weren't. Were they still paying attention? I had no idea.

It's tempting to address this problem by adding a strict camera policy to our syllabi for the fall: Students must keep the camera on during online classes.

Several of my colleagues are doing just that. I understand the impulse, and I agree that we need to find ways to help our students stay focused in our online classes. Making sure that we can see them and that they know it would be a simple start.

But let's think more before we add a camera policy to our syllabi. Why do students want to turn their cameras off in the first place? I'm sure some of them do it so that they can goof off without their professors noticing. But not all of them:

1. Some students are embarrassed about what people will see in their homes: Poverty. A mess. A crowded space. A virtual background will hide all that, but students can only use

one if their computer meets certain system requirements. On an older computer with older software, the virtual background won't work. And of course, poor students are more likely to have an older computer.

2. The camera makes some students acutely self-conscious, which makes sense given that it broadcasts a closeup of one's face to the entire class for the entire class period. My favorite description of the experience is from "Why Zoom is terrible": "You feel like every eyeball is on you, like a very intimidating job interview." I share this experience. Honestly, just reading the line from the *New York Times* makes my heart race. After the first painful month of Zoom meetings, I began turning the camera off as often as possible. It made the meetings less exhausting, and it became much easier for me to focus and to listen to what people were saying. If students are feeling overly self-conscious, they won't learn well and won't speak much.

Are there other reasons for keeping the cameras on? We might think that seeing each other's faces improves communication. In non-virtual face-to-face interactions, it does. Without noticing it, we process and interpret a flood of subtle facial cues, adding to what we learn from the other person's words and tone of voice. But on Zoom, the imperfect video feed obscures those crucial small cues. We just don't see the faces well enough, and so, we get faulty cues which can mislead us. We might communicate better with the cameras off.

Requiring cameras to be on probably helps some students pay attention and the cameras allow us to see that our students are still there. But seeing their faces probably doesn't improve our conversations, and the cameras make other students self-conscious, and thus less likely to participate and pay attention.

So, can we find other ways of checking that our students are paying attention? I think so. In my class, we'll develop a set of norms together. I plan to ask them: *How do we normally show each other that we're paying attention and that what others are saying matters to us? If we have cameras off, most of our usual 'I'm listening' signals won't work, so what should we do instead?* I'm looking forward to seeing what they come up with! In the meantime, here are some ideas of my own for confirming that they are paying attention:

1. Gentle cold calling (soft-ball questions).
2. Have them type questions, comments, and answers to questions in the chat.
3. Mini quizzes or mini papers partway through class.
4. Exit slip at the end of class: "What was the most important thing you learned in class today and what question do you have?"

All of these will be low-stakes assignments; and students will get full credit if it looks like they paid attention.

Like the rest of us, I am looking forward to seeing my students' faces again, but my Zoom class is not the right time for that. I'll save that for office hours and small group discussions. In class, I'll settle for their profile pictures and their voices.

Note: I wish the idea about developing a set of norms was my own, but I got it from one of my esteemed colleagues at Stonehill.

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