UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

A spotlight on...

Webinars: webcams off or on?

Centre for Innovation in Education

Overview

As we teach more online synchronous learning, the debate about whether we ask students to turn on their webcams has flourished. Overall, most experts agree that students should not be required to activate their cameras. We need to consider the diverse circumstances of students and respect their choices. However, encouraging (rather than requiring) cameras may be beneficial, so help your students understand that turning on their cameras (where they feel able to do so safely) may benefit fellow students and build their sense of community with others.

Why might teachers want cameras on?

- Many of us find it uncomfortable to teach to a blank screen, where we have to imagine the people we are speaking to.
- Visual cues can help us assess students' understanding and adapt our teaching accordingly.
- Students being able to see one another can help build a sense of cohort.
- Students who lip read may rely on cameras to access their peers' spoken contributions (but Teams allows individuals to turn on auto-captioning instead).

Why having cameras on shouldn't be a requirement

Privacy. It can be an invasion of privacy (Young, 2020) and may also risk cyber-bullying if a fellow student takes a screenshot (Trust, 2020). If you are recording the seminar, students may well not wish their images and contributions to be captured for posterity.

WiFi and digital equity. Video eats up bandwidth, making it more likely students with poor or shared broadband will experience a patchy connection. Not everyone has a webcam.

Study space. Noisy or busy home environments mean that students face embarrassment and/or may unwillingly disrupt the whole class with sounds in their background (Bali, 2020).

Disability and Wellbeing. Some students find being on camera, exposed to the scrutiny of the whole class, emotionally difficult or impossible (BlendEd, 2020; Costa, 2020; Lee, 2020); on campus, they may sit at the back to create a level of invisibility. Students with dissociative disorders may experience particular stress (Schaflein et al, 2018).

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Equality. Coulson (2020) notes that students 'may have a different role at home because of traditional values within their household'. Engaging with the webinar 'out loud' may result in self-censorship because home vs university social or cultural norms may collide.

Distraction. Students have argued that they experience cameras-on as both exhausting and distracting and fear that they are used simply to monitor behaviour (Nicandro, et al, 2020).

Mitigating some of the issues

While we'd advise never mandating webcams, you can help students to feel increasingly comfortable connecting visually and/or orally.

- Build a sense of community with icebreakers and activities.
- Try a nudge approach: 'Welcome! We wish we could see all of you in person, but we're so glad you're here.'
- Tell students about turning off self-view in Zoom, in case that helps.
- Suggest students either blur or use Teams or Zoom backgrounds (BlendEd 2020). This helps maintain some privacy, though it's not a guarantee and doesn't solve problems of ambient sound. In addition it may not be possible on mobile devices (Young, 2020).
- Give students the option to creatively choose a background relevant to the topic of the webinar using copyright free images.

Engaging beyond the camera

There are many ways to engage without a webcam, allowing students to establish a positive social presence within their cohort and to make their learning 'visible' (Webster, 2020). Devise activities such as polls and quizzes, or pose questions students respond to in the chat to show you how they are understanding (Bali, 2020, Blake 2020). You can also suggest that students:

- Use profile pictures: selfies, emojis, or even images of their pets.
- Post a picture/video introduction to themselves so you can put a face to a name (Bali, 2020) and students can get to know classmates.
- Respond to the class so far with a smiley, thumbs up, clapping hands or other emoji.
- Use audio-only and/or consider using cameras in smaller breakout rooms, even if they don't turn them on in the whole group.

In Summary

Teaching online synchronous sessions can feel daunting and lonely when there is no 'audience' and so whilst it might be desirable for the teacher if the students have their cameras on, we must ultimately recognise that this should be individual student choice (Thomson, 2020).

It can be useful to outline this early on in your teaching so that the students understand why having cameras on might be beneficial to you as the teacher and then as the student and encouraging them to do so, but allaying any fears that this is a requirement and reinforcing that the choice is theirs.

Additional Resources & References

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at cie@liverpool.ac.uk

A full list of references are available on the Centre for Innovation in Education website.

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