

Engaging Students in Virtual Instruction With the Camera Off

Giving students the option to turn their cameras off may make them more comfortable and open up new possibilities for teaching.

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As remote learning became the norm, some of my students began to not-so-subtly indicate that something was wrong. During a guest lecture on Zoom, several typically engaged students had their cameras turned off. One student stopped attending synchronous class meetings, and another stopped submitting assignments.

In conversation, it became apparent that these students wanted to remain engaged with learning—but didn't want cameras on. I realized that I needed to reassess how I determined students' engagement: by looking at their faces.

Here are some ways I've found to maintain community during virtual learning—while allowing students to make a choice about whether or not to turn on their cameras.

HOW TO MAKE VIDEO OPTIONAL

Running video-optional Socratic seminars: For small group discussions, I allowed students to meet on their own time—but asked that they submit a video recording to check for understanding. One group submitted a video even though students' cameras were off; nothing was lost in my ability to assess their ability to hold a discussion.

Initially, I had abandoned replicating a Socratic seminar virtually. Following the lead of this group, however, I was inspired to embrace an experiment. I conducted a virtual [Socratic seminar](#) in which the outer circle turned off their cameras and only the inner-circle students spoke with video and cameras on.

Students in the outer circle, who typically would be [evaluating](#) the participation of their peers in the inner circle, used the chat feature to echo powerful comments they heard and ask questions of the inner-circle group. In our brick-and-mortar classroom, they would have done this by writing notes on the whiteboard or passing notes to their partners in the inner circle. Having their video off did not inhibit student participation after all. In fact, embracing this approach actually opened up a discussion technique that I thought would not work in the remote-learning world.

Providing choice: For this coming year, I am proactively planning opportunities for video-off and video-optional moments. To build student agency, I offer students a choice about how they want to demonstrate their learning. For asynchronous reading assignments, for instance, I plan to offer the options of submitting a typed reading journal, writing an oral response on Flipgrid (with the settings

changed so that only the teacher views the videos), or posting a photo of a creative response completed with pen and paper.

When using Flipgrid, I will give students the option of blocking the camera or turning the screen away so that just their voice is audible. For synchronous video meetings, my students will be able to choose whether to participate with chat, video, or just audio. As I found helpful last spring, I will continue to find ways to [build in breaks](#) with the camera off, asking students to work independently off-camera and then return to small group or whole-class work with active participation.

Fostering deep engagement in multiple formats: I plan to incorporate various tools to build rapport, engage 100 percent of students 100 percent of the time, and assess their progress—even while students' cameras are off. Polling tools, whether [separate](#) or within [Zoom](#), can serve as [effective](#) formative assessments. They can be used to ask students how they're feeling, use a silly icebreaker question, or give a multiple choice quiz.

Teachers might have students draw or use a personal whiteboard in the classroom to check for understanding: Students can hold up a paper or whiteboard to the screen without needing to show their home or face.

Setting up video-optional small group work: As I examine lessons I've used in in-person teaching, I'm struck that protocols I have used for deep textual analysis and reflection might work even better in the virtual realm. In the past, I've

taught activities that had a required reflection time; some students found this awkward and rushed to the next step. With the break from the constant gaze of the camera, I plan to experiment with this same lesson in breakout rooms this fall.

As an education leader has reiterated to me, a student who previously had video on and subsequently disappeared should always be greeted with, “I noticed your video has been off; how can I help you be present in this online community?” Just as we would check in on a student with a chat after class in the hall, these demonstrations of care may even open up student-generated modes of participation.