Lights! Camera! ... uh, Camera! Hello? Action!

Ten ways to get students to turn on their cameras

THE SUDDEN PIVOT to remote teaching created many instructional obstacles and unexpected teaching experiences. Staring into a grid of black screens became a commonly perceived challenge perplexing teachers seeking classroom community and connection. Then a debate amongst educators began to brew: should students even be required to have their cameras on? Their lives have been upended, why not let them control the camera? Other educators wondered, how would we gauge student learning, engagement, attendance, and create an authentic community without physically seeing students?

My philosophy, as a classroom teacher, is that both sides of the debate can be appeased with universally designed instruction. We can offer students options to show what they know without requiring the camera while also implementing strategies to encourage camera use and community engagement. For example, students can convey their learning by electronically submitting a variety of assignment types, participating in the chat or polls, unmuting themselves, or submitting prerecorded videos. When these options are presented, in most scenarios, cameras don’t have to be on to demonstrate learning.

There are, of course, exceptions for specific learning goals or subjects that require a teacher to visibly see students’ physical capabilities. For the purposes of building classroom community, students would ideally have their cameras on. (We are already physically distanced, do we also have to be physically invisible, too?) Just as we can provide students options to participate that do not involve the camera, we can proactively embed options that encourage camera use. If having cameras on is an important part of your virtual classroom, then consider these strategies to encourage camera use, keeping in mind that engagement and learning is not equated with camera usage.

My top 10 ways to encourage camera use with students during remote instruction:

1. Root your request to turn on cameras in the language of community, not compliance. Avoid using teacher-centric language such as, “I want, I expect...,” and extrinsic motivation like extra credit for camera use. Instead, aim for student-centric language and prompt students to consider what strong classroom engagement might look like.

2. Build relationships with students focused on trust.

Story by Liz Byron Loya, Ed.M.’08
Relationships need to be cultivated between the student and the teacher and among students. In my experience with remote instruction, trust comes into question more among student-to-student interactions: Will my peers record me? Photograph me? As teachers, we need to create a safe space within our virtual classrooms. How to do this? That’s a whole other top 10 list.

3. Survey students.
Ask students what are their barriers to camera use? When you can identify the barrier, you can proactively plan to reduce it. Consider asking students for their ideas for alternatives to camera use.

4. Be empathetic.
Is your camera always on during meetings? Share with your students times when your camera has been off during a meeting and talk about why. Your humanness creates an authentic shared connection.

5. Admit a few students before class starts. “Arrive” to class early and admit 1–4 students for a small group check-in.
Ask to have cameras on for this check-in or inquire why they are off. Students are more likely to turn them on in a small group setting. They also can be camera leaders. When the rest of the class is admitted, students will see several cameras already on and a snowball effect can take place.

6. Use Zoom features.
Try the “ask to start video” feature, which nudges students to turn on cameras, or encourage them to play around with virtual backgrounds.

7. Brainstorm camera use expectations with your students.
Co-create a list of predictable times when it is fine to have the camera off and when it is best to have it on.

8. Allow students to show only a portion of themselves.
Let students dip their toe into on-screen time by adjusting the camera to show only the top of their head or a shoulder. If you call on them, they can give a quick wave or pop their head into the frame.

If students need to visually demonstrate a skill, consider offering the option of individual submissions via a platform of student choice like YouTube, Flipgrid, or even TikTok. If this is an option, it doesn’t mean all students will fill your inbox with video submissions, but those who’d prefer a camera off during whole-class instruction will have a means for demonstrating a skill.

10. Use icebreakers/play games/visually vote.
Consider activities that inadvertently require cameras to be on for participation, everything from rock, paper, scissors to voting with a thumb up or down.

Liz Byron Loya is a pre-K–8 visual art teacher in the Boston Public Schools