

Camera On or Off?

A Dilemma Choice of Virtual Course

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Policy; Student Learning and Development; Technology; University/Higher Education

Setting

From March 2nd to July 15th, 2020, schools in China were closed due to COVID-19, with physical classes closed too. School business was required to be carried on in terms of its original schedule, thus requiring teachers and students to get their work done in time. This presented many challenges for both. Thanks to the internet, teachers could cross great distances to offer their students a live virtual course with the help of a meeting app, such as, Zoom, Tencent Meeting, and so on, making some teachers internet celebrities and allowing some students to enjoy being live audiences from home.

This case is set at Xuhui University in Shanghai. In early March 2020, when online classes first started, teachers expected to see all of their students' faces on the screen, but to their surprise, they only saw some students' faces interacting with them during the lesson.

Case

Xuhui University didn't set the rule to mandate students to have their cameras on during the online class. Some students turned on their cameras and some students turned off their cameras based on their own preferences.

On one hand, teachers thought that utilizing students' cameras during the live online courses would be helpful. They could observe the involvement of students. Thus, teachers could instantly revise courses to meet students' requirements and expectations. They hoped the students would turn on their cameras during the live online class.

On the other hand, students who were against keeping their cameras on during the live online class believed that:

1. They would reveal their privacy if they kept their cameras on. When the camera is turned on, the real scene of one's own home behind the lens is exposed to all students' eyes, and to some extent, it would reveal the private information about whether one's home is rich or not rich, clean or not clean, tidy or not tidy, and so on. That was one reason why they turned off their cameras during the live online classes.
2. They were too shy to show up on the screen due to the shyness of Chinese culture. The traditional Confucian culture, which advocates that people should be humble, low-key, and introverted, and don't stand out, has a profound influence. For this reason, students were reluctant to turn on the camera.
3. They were unwilling to appear publicly if they didn't dress up or put on make up because they wanted to present their best images in front of the camera. However, they were too lazy to spend time dressing up or putting on make up or they don't have enough time before class. This could be due to getting up late, answering phone calls, unexpected things occurring, and so on. In short, what they were concerned about is that their image would be imperfect if they were not ready to be seen in public.
4. They feared being exposed to the camera. With the camera off, they didn't have to worry that the teacher would observe them, so they could do what they wanted, such as, reading their favorite book, listening to music, playing games, and so on, to escape the pressure of learning.
5. They were concerned that turning on the camera would reduce the quality of the sound-transmission because having the camera on consumes broadband data. Some of the students come from underdeveloped areas in China, where the internet facilities are not well-built. If they turned off the camera during the live online class, the internet would become more stable, so that they could hear the teacher clearly.

The next term begins soon. Xuhui University encourages both faculty and students to use the live online courses or a hybrid online courses and offline ones. The institution must decide whether to allow students the choice to have their camera on or off.

Discussion Questions

If you are a leader of a school, discuss:

- What role does a camera play when it comes to a live online course?
- Are students more engaged when they have their cameras on during a live online course? Why?
- Could the course objectives be affected by whether cameras are turned on or off? Why?

- Should the expectations for classroom performance be the same for online and offline courses? Why?
- Could teacher performance be affected by the students having their cameras on or off? How?
- Should teachers be able to mandate that students have their cameras on during a live online course?
- Should there be an institution wide policy to have students' cameras on or off before teaching a live online course? Why or why not?