Setting up our shared space

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Introduction

This document provides guidance for staff and students on engaging in a shared online teaching space. It articulates the issues as experienced by both staff and students. It does not try to provide a solution but rather it offers suggestions on how staff and students can continue the discussions about what would be a comfortable learning and teaching experience for all concerned.

Student Considerations

The move to Dual Mode delivery presented students and staff with a host of new challenges to address and overcome during what remains a relentless effort. More often than not the situations we face have no readily available solutions and whilst the method of trial and error works, the enthusiasm to do so can fade quickly if engagement drops off. This sums up one of the greatest challenges we face in an online setting – preserving the student learning experience. Often this discussion centres around the new lecture format wherein the conventional in-person lecture is replaced with an online version and the various challenges associated with this. One of the key challenges being the question *"should students be required to have their cameras on?"*.

Unfortunately, as with much of the issues in the pandemic there is no set answer, however the following is a list of considerations and feedback raised by students so far that factors into a student's decision as to whether they turn their camera on:

- **Mental Health** - The global pandemic has stripped away many of the support networks students have relied upon increasing anxiety and the prevalence of mental health issues.
    - ○ **Students who disclose a disability -** Not all students who disclose disabilities benefit from having cameras on. Some disclosed disabilities can actually be exacerbated in online contexts, for example anxiety disorder and other disabilities, including but not restricted to, those associated with perceived eye contact (in an online context, it can sometimes feel as though everyone is looking at you).
- **Online fatigue** - Students do not like being visible to the rest of the class during the lecture or that they can be watched in the recording afterwards. The feeling of being watched is often a key factor that has students turn their cameras off as it can be tiring and feed into pre-existing mental health issues as well as pulling the focus away from the lecture content.
- **Technology** - There is the additional consideration that students face if family members are working from home in that having their camera on and receiving incoming video puts pressure on the hub and can result in lower quality connection. The same is true for flat sharing on campus.
- **Shared space** - Students might be in the situation where they are joining a lecture from a shared space and wish to keep flatmates or family out of view.
- **Privacy** - Students might have their camera off for general privacy reasons and wish not to share their home space with their peers.
- **Personal choice** - Many students do not feel comfortable turning their cameras on for personal reasons and forcing them to do so would be inappropriate.
- **The new normal?** - Some students feel that the fact cameras are turned off in online lectures is simply a feature of online learning and something we need to accept. In a

normal lecture the focus is on the lecturer and content, not the students, so why should this be any different in an online setting?

In amongst all of this there are unresolved issues where the collective decision of the class very much influences the student learning experience:

- **Disabilities** - Students for example those who disclose an audio processing disability report that they find it challenging when they are unable to view the lecturer's or peer's mouth when they are speaking. This increases the amount of time students have to spend going back through material to ensure they have a complete understanding. There are also neurodivergent students who rely on social indicators and verbal cues in tutorial settings to engage in discussion at the appropriate time and find it stressful or impossible to engage when they cannot see their peers and tutor.
- **Camera Split -** Students find it uncomfortable when there is a split in the class of having cameras on or off and report dissatisfaction with the mixed experience.
  - o Students with their cameras on report frustration that their peers are not necessarily engaging or investing in the online environment in the way that they are.
  - o Students with their cameras off cite that they do not want to be the only student with their camera on or be singled out. As students turn their cameras off more follow and end up creating a culture of cameras being off in that setting. At this point it is unlikely students will turn their cameras back on without good reason or intervention.
- **Hybrid Teaching** - In a situation where you have remote students joining an in-person lecture they report that they do not feel comfortable engaging in group discussion (or asking questions) and feel uncomfortable with the fact that in the lecture recording they are visible whilst the in-person students are not.

Whilst there is no one size fits all solution most students will agree that:

- Singling out students in an effort to force them to turn their cameras on is counterproductive and leads increased levels of anxiety and a reduction in willingness to engage with staff.
- Students need to be given a reason to have their cameras on whether it be through a mutual understanding or for a purpose-built activity where visual student engagement is preferable.
- By fostering a sense of an inclusive community at the beginning of the semester you can build trust between the students and staff increasing the comfort level in the shared space.

Staff Considerations

Staff have found it challenging when students do not put their cameras on but feel uncertain whether it is appropriate to insist upon it. Without the normal visual cues, it is difficult to gauge engagement and respond to the mood of the virtual 'room'. We wish to encourage and support our students to make full use of our virtual spaces but understand that there are many reasons why students may be either reluctant, or unable, to put their cameras on (Dost et al., 2020; Heaton, 2020). It is important to be clear about your expectation that students will put their cameras on and explain to students why you feel it is important, but beyond that it is up to them.

When we are in the same physical space as our students, we attend to how the room is set up and are conscious of group dynamics. Rather than focusing too much on whether students do or do not put their camera on, we suggest investing time cultivating a supportive shared space.

An extremely useful [overview](#) for supporting engagement and making online teaching spaces safe and inclusive is already available. Below, we build on this work and suggest a few ideas which may help you explore your shared values and expectations.

Setting up the space

The technology

It is easy to assume that students will automatically feel comfortable using online learning platforms, but that is not always the case.

- Ensure that everyone is aware of the various options available to them, such as blurring their backgrounds, as this may make students feel more comfortable.
  - You could set a series of challenges, such as picking the ugliest background or testing out the blur function.
- If using Teams, you could put everyone into breakout groups to say hello to one another, and perhaps ask them to complete a small task, then feedback in the chat to the larger group. This would introduce students to the breakout groups and get them used to speaking with their cameras on.
  - This is a new feature, so it would be a nice excuse to get students chatting to one another in smaller groups.
- Take time to introduce any new tools and approaches you will be using and check in to ensure students feel comfortable using them. This could be done via an anonymous poll.

Shared space

You may find it useful to spend some time exploring what made students feel most connected and engaged during synchronous online teaching last year. It will take a little time, but it will give you important information about what your group values and what they need to feel supported.

- In small groups (using break out functionality if necessary), ask students to take a few minutes to reflect on:
  - When they felt most connected and engaged with synchronous online teaching
    - What factors were at play?
      - Technology, staff, peers, self, subject, time, something else?
  - Challenges with synchronous online teaching
    - What factors were at play?
      - Technology, staff, peers, self, subject, time, something else?
  - What could staff & students each do to create a greater sense of connection and community?
- You could invite students to share bullet points in a shared document or wiki, then have a discussion with the bigger group. You could seek feedback via polls or the chat function.

This generates 'group wisdom' about what works best for your students. It also gives everyone a sense of shared ownership in terms of how you would like to work together. Sharing the collective response and ideas in a common place (e.g. Moodle page, Teams group) helps remind students of the support options available.

Your shared values and ground rules are likely to emerge from the exercise above, but you could do a more traditional exercise exploring shared values and establishing ground rules if necessary. This could be done in a similar fashion, with another breakout group, or using the chat box.

You may find it helpful to set a few touch points throughout the semester, where you check back in with students to get a sense of how things are going. You could use a similar

approach. That provides you with the opportunity to have an open conversation with your students and adjust things where feasible. Of course, this will not always be possible, but it gives you the opportunity to have an open conversation about it.

If during the semester enthusiasm fades, to avoid blank screens through an online lecture, you could come to an agreement with the class to only have cameras on at key discussion points where student engagement is particularly important. This affords students a rest from being on the screen and focuses attention much in the way a breakout in a lecture theatre would have.

Finally, it would be helpful to ask students to avoid taking 'screen shots' or 'print screens' during online classes, and instead advise students that you welcome requests for specific information they may be trying to capture (for example, a reference on the slide, or image, resources, pictures, materials etc.). You can then distribute the resources in a safe way, either by sending the original resource or in instances where you are using white board functionality etc. they can take a print screen and edit/crop students out before dissemination.

Resources
CREDI event: "inclusive and equitable teaching with technology: welcoming and supporting all our students".

References

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