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Let's talk about webcams, and a pedagogy of kindness

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Abstract

With the move to online and blended learning, there has been much focus amongst educators on webcam use in online classes. Mandatory webcam policies and privileging use of webcams as the preferred form of engagement disregard the COVID-19 context – in which students have had limited choice about learning in blended or online modes – and significantly undermine trust. This piece argues for the adoption of a pedagogy of kindness, through teaching and learning practices that are sensitive to the material experience of diverse groups of students, and considers some of the complex reasons why insisting on webcam use may exacerbate inequalities.

Keywords: webcams; pedagogy of kindness; online learning; compassion; inclusion

The context of COVID-19 has seen many higher education teachers embrace synchronous online teaching via various web-conferencing platforms, but this practice has been accompanied by discussion about – possibly even an “*obsession*” (Bali, 2020) with – the setting of expectations for student use of webcams and rules and policies associated with deploying web camera technology. Such approaches go well beyond supportive encouragement of webcam use and acceptance of varying types of online participation and may in fact serve to create barriers to participation, generate unnecessary stress and contribute to an environment of distrust that undermines learning (Denial, 2020). Here, I urge educators to consider their viewpoint on webcams and take into account kindness as a pedagogical practice.

There are positive sentiments driving support for webcam use. When teaching online, seeing the faces of your students via their webcams can assist teacher awareness of body language and non-verbal cues – those helpful indicators in face-to-face teaching often cited as supporting reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) and enhancing our ability to be responsive and reflexive teachers. There are benefits too from a wellbeing perspective. When we can see our students, changes in their demeanour can be visible and lead us to recognise all is not well with individual students. It can enable us to identify students who may be experiencing difficulties for any number of reasons and who may be in need of additional support. Many advocating the use of webcams do so from their perspective as teachers: it is more encouraging to look at videos of our students than at a blank screen (Cheetham and Thomson, 2020). However, I have heard the webcam debate conflated with the challenge of active student engagement in online sessions, where expressed desire for webcam use is an indicator of participation: ‘How do I know my students are there?’ or ‘Have they logged in, but aren’t listening?’ I understand this desire to know, yet it belongs with the more problematic reasons for requesting or mandating webcam use fuelled by notions of presenteeism, performativity and surveillance, all of which undermine learning and – more

significantly – trust. So, let us consider the issue of webcams through the lens of a “*pedagogy of kindness*” that “*asks us to apply compassion in every situation we can, and not to default to suspicion or anger*” (Denial, 2020, p.217).

For many teachers and students, live online classes are relatively new to us: the technology, format, and ways of participating. The processes of orientation and socialisation (Salmon, 2013) to online participation should support students to become effective learners in digital spaces. However, a recent Jisc survey indicated that just 51% of students agreed “*they received guidance about the digital skills they needed for their course*” (2020, p.3) and only 7% considered themselves to have been “*supported to manage their digital identity*” (2020, p.12). Supporting the development of digital literacies is not the sole responsibility of student academic support colleagues. Our role as teachers includes supporting our students’ digital personas and devising practical strategies for managing learning in a digital environment. For example, discussion on webcams should be a joint opportunity for staff and students to explore managing online privacy and making use of virtual backgrounds to foster understanding of effective and safe ways of participating digitally.

Fundamentally, in traditional campus-based universities with restrictions imposed because of COVID-19, we did not *choose* to follow the blended and online teaching models that were adopted; nor did our students *choose* to learn that way. Students may be joining online classes from environments not conducive to webcam use. International students, owing to differences of time zone, may be joining live sessions at times when other household members are in bed; their places of study may be cramped. Student carers may be reluctant to use webcams because they fear that their children may accidentally appear on camera. Students who are first in family to attend university may be in the presence of relatives who, being unfamiliar with the conventions of joining an academic class, may possibly intrude. Students joining classes do so from their personal environment and some have no choice but to join from the spaces in which they sleep and even from their beds, on account of heating costs. To insist on webcam use may pressure students to reveal to all of their peers the context in which they live – and having to do so may cause anxiety, embarrassment or even fears of bullying. For me, this lack of choice and infringement of privacy are key in the webcam debate: they provide a central counter-argument to the insistence on webcam use during online classes.

The absence of choice is even more pertinent when social-distancing measures on university campuses limit access to IT or other facilities. COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities. Universities celebrate the diversity of their academic communities, but, when we know that our student body is diverse (particularly if our institution has a strong commitment to widening participation), we must acknowledge social disadvantage. The lived, material experience of our students determines how readily they may access online classes: availability of suitable IT equipment and reliable broadband is essential. The student who joins online classes on a mobile phone and from a car may be doing so to access Wi-Fi while parked outside a local café. Video can sever or hamper a weak internet connection, making following the class, let alone participating actively in it, extremely difficult; it is therefore unreasonable to insist on video use for everyone.

Central to a pedagogy of kindness is compassion, defined as, “*the noticing of social or physical distress to others and the commitment to reduce or prevent that distress*” (Gilbert,

2017, p.189). This being so, we as educators should be aware of when our actions may be requesting modes of participation that may ultimately cause distress. Many arguments for the use of webcams are not about genuinely supporting interaction or engagement but reflect an obsession with 'seeing'. 'Being seen' can be a source of anxiety for students (Moses, 2020) and mandated webcam use has resulted in students reporting feeling "[a]nxious, worried, like I am being watched" (engineering student cited by Bali, 2021). An expressed counter-argument is that being seen by others online should be no different from being visible in a face-to-face class on campus. However, in such classes, you do not see yourself as you do online: an image on display to the entire class. I do not experience anxiety when using my webcam, but sometimes when I joined online meetings during the United Kingdom spring 2020 lockdown and caught sight of myself, I was uncomfortably reminded of the physical toll of the lockdown and consequently turned off my camera. Significantly, for neurodivergent learners, awareness of being seen can fuel anxiety, as well as create difficulties about where to direct attention (Exceptional Individuals, 2020) – a reminder, if needed, that allowing students choice about using webcams and variously supporting active online participation does help students to avoid being overwhelmed, distracted and disconnected or suffering what has been called "Zoom fatigue": fatigue caused by video engagement (Moses, 2020; Ray, 2020).

For us as educators led by compassion, adopting a pedagogy of kindness is ultimately shaped by reflecting on our own positionality and considering with care our interactions with students (Denial, 2020). Stommel, Friend and Morris (2020, p.6) remind us:

"A compassionate pedagogy is more necessary now than ever before: to see the student beyond the screen, to recognize the limits and affordances of body, space, and technology, to identify issues of privacy in an increasingly surveilled digital world, and to be conscious of the basic needs of students which must be met to make learning possible."

One of the main things to come out of the experience of teaching during this pandemic is raised awareness of the material and lived experiences of a diverse student body accessing education away from campus. Our students have complex lives that can present many barriers to access; they may also lack proficiency in the digital literacies necessary for effective engagement in online classes. Adopting a pedagogy of kindness, we should focus on ensuring that our learning and teaching practices do not create barriers or intensify them. Our desire to 'see' our students in online classes is powerful, but this should be driven by pedagogical necessity, such as physical or demonstration aspects that have to be performed live. Such exceptions aside, we must distinguish between 1) our desire for presenteeism and performativity and 2) supporting inclusive engagement. Active engagement does not depend on having your camera on and, in fact, it ought to be supported in a range of ways, all valued equally; also, development of student digital literacies should be scaffolded. At worst, mandating webcam use – or, at best prioritising it – as the preferred form of engagement cuts across a commitment to inclusive teaching and virtual classrooms premised on trust.

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