

Strategies to Encourage Students to Turn Their Cameras On

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Student Engagement

Incorporating SEL approaches, playing games, and giving students options can inspire them to show their faces.

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While there is a tremendous amount of value to being able to see your students' faces during distance learning, we can't force them to be on camera, just as during in-person teaching, we can't force unengaged students to lift their heads or remove hats or hoodies that obscure their faces.

With experimentation and persistence, however, you can arrive at strategies that work. Whether they need options, encouragement, or trust in order to turn their cameras on, there's likely a solution that is the right fit for your classroom, circumstances, lessons, and students.

SEL Strategies to Encourage Camera Use

If you want to incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies to prompt camera use among your students, start with the recognition that words matter: Our communication with our students needs to be rooted in community, not compliance.

From there, you could leverage any number of SEL approaches.

Build relationships. Focus on trust, both teacher to student and student to student. Students who know they are safe and cared for by their community will be more comfortable having their cameras on.

Survey students. Ask students individually or in a Google form what deters them from using a camera and what would make them comfortable. Once you identify the barriers to camera use, you can collaborate with students to reduce or remove those barriers.

Use icebreakers. Try community-building activities that encourage camera use. For example, prompt students to “find the largest yellow thing in your house that you can safely bring back to the camera.” As a variation, try within reach. Pass the pen is also a playful approach to building community remotely.

Play games. Rock, paper, scissors works well in a remote classroom setting, as do Pictionary and charades. Explore 25 games to play on Zoom, which includes options that work for different ages.

Visually vote or share understanding. Have students vote with their thumbs up or down on a topic, or poll the class with a Fist-to-Five, a simple signaling system that can engage reluctant students and build consensus within a group.

Encourage students who have social capital to use their cameras. The best role models are likely in your classroom already. Consider using a Google form to ask students to name three classmates with whom they would most like to be in a breakout room or with whom they would most like to work on a group project. The students with the most requests are likely the students with the most social capital and can be positive role models for camera-on activities. You can also consider using a sociogram to identify the best role models when it comes to camera use.

Be empathetic. Share with your students times when you haven’t felt like being on camera in a meeting. Talk about how you prepare yourself to turn on the camera, even when you’re not in the mood. If you’re self-conscious about looking prepared or about multitasking while on camera, talk about it. Sharing will bring out your humanness.

Zoom Tips to Encourage Camera Use

Admit students into class one by one. Arrive to class five minutes early and enable the waiting room. As students arrive, admit and greet them individually, and check in with them about camera use. You might be able to check in with only a few students before needing to “admit all,” but those who arrive early and have their cameras on will gain comfort from being in a small group to start. Plus, as the other students enter, they will register that some cameras are already on.

Use the “Ask to Start Video” option. As the host, you can invite participants to turn on their cameras by clicking the participant’s black screen; then click the horizontal “...” and select “Ask to Start Video.”

Send a private message in the chat. Use the chat feature to welcome the student, check in with them, and encourage them to turn on their camera.

Encourage virtual backgrounds. It could be that a student is resistant to using their camera because of their home environment, so teach them how to use [Zoom virtual backgrounds](#) or introduce them to [Unscreen](#).

Instructional Tips to Encourage Camera Use

Let students know when cameras can be optional. Brainstorm with your class times when it is fine to have the camera off and when it's best to have it on. Discussing [camera-optional policies](#) and having camera routines provide students with predictability and autonomy.

Allow students to show only part of their body or space on camera. Some students are particularly self-conscious about exposing their face on camera. Consider allowing students to dip their toe into their onscreen time by encouraging them to turn the camera so that only a portion of their body appears.

Provide options for rubrics that include camera usage. At the onset of a lesson or unit, share rubrics or criteria for success for a given objective. If having the camera on is relevant to your objective, then consider including it as a criterion for success. Many students will align themselves with the rubric if they know the expectations upfront before instruction begins. To avoid forced compliance, consider providing options for students to create their own rubric based on the objective.

Have students submit a prerecorded video demonstrating skill or objective. If students need to visibly demonstrate a skill, allow them to make a recorded video. While the whole class won't see it, you can still assess the student and build their comfort with being on camera.

Ask students to suggest alternatives. Your students might have insights into other ways to participate and share their learning visually. Many educators have found that students will share videos on TikTok, Vimeo, or private YouTube channels or Instagram accounts.