



To Webcam, Or Not To Webcam...

The Webcam Debate

As schools across the country start the school year in fully remote or hybrid learning, whether or not to require students to have their webcams on has become a hot topic, and a controversial one. The arguments are compelling on both sides.

PRO-WEBCAM	CON-WEBCAM
All webcams on allows teachers to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ assess student engagement & attention▶ hold students accountable for participating▶ build relationships and classroom community	All webcams on can result in: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ excessive stress and/or trauma▶ screen overload/fatigue▶ social/personal anxiety

As we consider the two sides of this debate, one has to wonder if the best course of action might fall somewhere in between. Just as effective educators strike the difficult balance of being simultaneously soft and firm, structured and flexible, in-charge and in-relationship, an effective webcam policy may also need to **strike a balance** between extremes.

Balanced Webcam Solutions

Let's begin by recognizing that **nobody actually knows** what the best policy is yet. We are all embarking on a great experiment in education. Our action research begins now. It will be many months before enough data has been collected - both anecdotal and statistical - to say with any confidence what works and what doesn't. Nevertheless, we still have to start somewhere.

One place to start would be to set an expectation that all students will have their webcams on at all times (to maximize engagement and accountability), with individual, tailored accommodations being made on a case-by-case basis for those students who really need it.

Below are the most common reasons students resist turning on their webcams and the accommodations that might help you find the balance between what students need and what students want.



Reason Webcam Off	Possible Solutions	Additional Thoughts
<p>Webcam broken</p> <p>(or)</p> <p>No webcam</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Use cell phone or other device with camera instead ▶ Provide a new webcam ▶ Discuss options with parents <p>PRO TIP: <i>If your school isn't planning to provide technology for students, start a Donor's Choose page for 10- 20 inexpensive (\$25-\$30 each) webcams.</i></p>	<p>"My webcam is broken" is often code for "I don't want to turn my webcam on because then it's harder for me to multi-task while you teach." Webcams are rarely broken. However, it does occasionally happen. And students with desktop computers sometimes actually don't have one.</p> <p>Whatever the case, we can assume the best, offer options, and even provide students with a new webcam when necessary.</p>
<p>Home is loud</p>	<p>Allow student to be muted at all times and use the chat box and/or pre-arranged visual cues and hand signals to communicate, instead of using audio.</p>	<p>Behind the scenes, reach out to the family to discuss options for providing quiet time/space for their child while they are logged on for live lessons. Often times just letting the family know that that household noise level is an issue solves the problem.</p>
<p>Self-conscious about physical appearance</p> <p>(or)</p> <p>Experiencing screen fatigue</p>	<p>Allow for staggered time off camera. For example, on camera during class discussion, guided instruction, and breakout groups, but off camera for direct instruction and independent work.</p> <p>PRO TIP: <i>Have them create an amusing screen avatar for when they are off camera. Check out LoomieLive, Bitmoji, and Memoji.</i></p>	<p>Make sure that alternative engagement options are provided for whenever the student is off camera and that they understand they are responsible for using them. For example: If, during direct instruction, the teacher asks the class to use a visual participation strategy (ex: hand up/color card/show notes to camera), students with a webcam accommodation should use the chat bar to show that they are paying attention and participating.</p>

<p>Self-conscious about home environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Sit with back to a wall ▶ Hang a sheet behind ▶ Allow use of built in virtual background features 	<p>Students not wanting to reveal their home environment publicly is something to be sensitive to. Brainstorm ways that they can control or limit what is being seen.</p>
<p>Intermittently self-conscious about being on screen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Slept badly ▶ Not showered ▶ Not feeling well 	<p>Give student one "camera-free" pass to use each week. Student gets to choose which day and/or during which learning block they want to use it each week.</p> <p>PRO TIP: Have student create a specific screen avatar or selfie photo they use when they are using their free pass. As soon as they login with that specific avatar you will know they are having a bad day and that they are using their pass, without having to ask them.</p>	<p>We all have bad days, but some kids have them more frequently than others due to their home situations and/or their mental health status.</p> <p>PRO TIP:: If student has a good week and doesn't use their free pass, allow them to "bank" it and use it another time.</p> <p>PRO TIP: When a student uses their pass, reach out to the student through private chat to ask them if they are okay and to see if there is anything you can do for them. Also remind them how to use the alternate engagement features throughout the lesson so they can still show that they are participating.</p>
<p>Serious trauma or social anxiety makes it impossible to be on screen and maintain mental health</p>	<p>Allow them to keep their webcam off.</p> <p>PRO TIP: Have them create a different screen avatar for each week. Encourage them to choose amusing images.</p>	<p>Make sure that alternative engagement options are provided at all times. Any time the class is asked to participate or use a webcam-based engagement feature, an alternate engagement feature needs to be used by the off-camera student, so they can show they are also paying attention and participating.</p>

Class-Wide Concerns

A common concern that arises when making accommodations for a single student is what to do/say when other students notice the accommodation and comment on it. One way to handle this is respond with something along the lines of:

“ Class, each of you is going to get exactly what you need to be successful in my class this year. What you need and what someone else needs might not be the same thing, though, because you are each unique individuals with different strengths. Sometimes you might notice that one student is allowed to do something you are not. That is because it is what they need, but not what you need. I assure you that you will get what you need, too. If you want to discuss this further, make an appointment to talk with me during office hours, or stay logged in after class today, and I will be happy to discuss your specific needs with you. ”

A Metacognitive Experiment

Finally, let's return to the idea of **action research**. Consider enlisting your class in explicitly participating in a metacognitive experiment about their own learning.

Every 3 weeks alter your webcam policy slightly and have students assess how it affects their attention, participation, performance, and mental health. For example, start with an “all webcams on all the time” policy (except for students being given individual modifications). After 3 weeks, switch to “webcams off during direct instruction,” but webcams on the rest of the time. After 3 weeks, switch to “webcams off during both direct instruction and independent work.” After 3 weeks, go back to “all webcams on all the time,” but give each student a “1-hour webcam pass” that can be used once per week at a time of their choosing.

At the end of each 3-week experiment, have the class self-assess their engagement, attention, learning, and anxiety level on a simple 1-5 scale. After 12 weeks (4 rounds of experimentation), discuss the results as a class and decide on the best general policy moving forward.

Don't forget to **share the results** of your experiment with your colleagues and with us at Conscious Teaching!

