11 things you can do to tackle 'Cameras off'

"When I start my online sessions, it always feels really awkward. No one is talking and their cameras are always off."

You might think 'cameras off' is a new phenomenon in teaching.

It isn't.

It just reflects what many students have always felt about engaging with education and its teaching spaces: uncertain, self-conscious, and unwilling to look foolish in front of others.

What's really going on is one of the oldest questions in education: how can you help a group of individuals feel more comfortable together so they can learn together?

We think you can best tackle the problem of 'cameras off' by prioritising activities that help students feel welcome and increase their sense of community.

The 11 tips in Ding's quick takeaway guide show you why students keep their cameras off, and what you can do about it.

Create a welcoming environment.

#1

Imagine you enter a restaurant and all the other diners are sitting in complete silence. Do you feel inclined to kick off the conversation? Probably not.

Now imagine your food arrives the very moment you first walk through the door. How would you feel? Rushed? Ambushed? Under pressure to respond?

Environment influences performance - and online environments are no different. If we don't pay attention to the quality of our online teaching environment, we can't expect our students to feel comfortable there.

Play some relaxing music

- Start your session 10 minutes early, and have some relaxing music playing when your students arrive.
- Don't choose something too intense. You're trying to set a mood that supports effective learning!
- Keep the volume at a low level so your students can still hear you talking over the top.
- If you're sharing music from YouTube, be mindful of adverts. Sharing from iTunes or Spotify is better.

Create a welcoming environment continued.

Tip #2

Share a relaxing image

- Sharing your screen means students don't suddenly find themselves in front of the whole class.
- The website Unsplash.com has fantastic, high-quality royalty-free images – just search for 'relax' or 'peaceful', download the image, and share your screen.
- You could also share images of students' work to showcase good practice.

Tip #3

Use the chat to 'warm up'

- Starting your session with a question for students discuss in the chat can help them 'warm up'.
- Create a Powerpoint slide which contains a question for your students to answer, and the instruction 'share your answers in the chat'.
- Keep it light e.g. 'what is your dream job?' or 'what was the most/least important thing you learned last session?'

Tip #4

Start with breakout groups

- Beginning with a breakout activity eases the pressure on students and is another way to help them warm up.
- Give your students a simple problem or question to discuss related to your session, then automatically assign them into breakout groups for 5 minutes.
- When you recall the groups, ask each group to summarise the key points of their discussion.

What does the research say?

"Hey Nicholas, back when I was teaching, my students would always sit about in deathly silence in the few minutes before their classes started. I started popping on some music or having a film playing, something to break the ice a bit. I noticed students were then much happier to talk to each other, and also that other students were much more likely to enter the room in the first place. I think the space just felt much more welcoming that way."

"Hey Phil, you're absolutely right – the theory of behaviourism shows us we can influence what people do through careful use of environments.

Taking positive action to to create a welcoming environment can help reduce students' anxiety. Everything you can do to help your students feel more comfortable is likely to help produce the desired behaviour of switching on cameras.

Few people like the feeling of being stared at when they walk into a room. The same dynamic occurs in online spaces - research shows that synchronous online learning can increase social anxiety and stress, and have a negative impact on concentration, motivation and performance (Besser, Flett & Ziegler-Hill, 2020).

Environment influences performance.

Increase students' sense of community.

We know how unsettling it feels to talk to a screen filled with black rectangles showing 'cameras off'.

When this happens, you might be tempted to characterise your students as disengaged. Someone turning off their camera during your session can feel dismissive, resistant, even hostile. Experiencing these thoughts while you're teaching can exploit existing insecurities, or establish new ones.

But, chances are, it's not about you.

'Cameras off' is an indication that students feel self-conscious, under-confident and exposed – just as they can do in a lecture theatre.

So what can you do about it?

Negotiate the rules of engagement

- Have a conversation with your students about the role of cameras in effective participation and develop shared community rules and expectations.
- For example, explain how switching their camera off can send a message they're not interested and don't want to participate.
- Also explain every student is an important part of the class community, and a successful community is based on being able to see and communicate with each other.
- Remind students an important aspect of education is empowering them professionally, and getting comfortable with having their camera on is a key expectation in interviews and employment.

Increase students' sense of community continued.

Tip #6

Give students worksheets

- Create a worksheet of questions for students to complete as you move through a session.
- You could also include answers to FAQs and a glossary of terms to give students more confidence, keep them engaged and reduce anxiety
- Developing your students' confidence is key to creating the conditions for a successful community.

Tip #7

Use polls

- A poll can help you check how much your students have understood.
- Because polls are anonymous, students feel safe to signal they need more help with a topic. Students can show they need more help without having to admit this in front of everyone.
- Think of a poll as regularly 'taking the pulse of your community' to check members are engaged and on track.

Tip #8

Use the chat

- Set clear expectations for how you want your students to use the chat, and when.
- Ask questions your students can answer quickly with a yes/no or short phrase.
- Ask students to post questions during the session and respond to them at regular intervals.
- If you're teaching international students, ask them to use a language you and all students can understand.

Increase students' sense of community continued.

Tip #9

Use breakout rooms

- Not all students want to talk in from of the whole class – breakout rooms reduce this pressure.
- Breakout room activities enable students to socialise in smaller groups and learn through discussion.
- This can strengthen students' sense of community as they solve problems with each other's help.

Tip #10

Use team-based activities

- Putting students into teams for a period of time can build social relationships and community ties.
- Teams can help international students develop their language skills as they become more confident working with peers.
- Try and keep teams the same for a number of sessions so students get to know each other.

Tip #11

Check in with your students

- Sending a message to each student individually after a session helps them feel noticed, valued and cared for.
- Keep it friendly, and show you're genuinely interested in their wellbeing.
- In your next session, present a summary of responses to the class (keeping responses anonymous). This helps build empathy by showing students how others are feeling.

What does the research say?

"Hey Tony, I always found, once I'd established a community around my course, many issues to do with student engagement and participation became easier to fix. Creating a healthy community seemed to provide a kind of 'safety valve' that reduced the pressures many students faced regarding self-confidence, anxiety and nervousness. What does the research tell us about this?

"Hey Phil, the research absolutely supports your experience that community plays a key role in effective learning. Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice (1998) proposes learning is a social activity. If we view ourselves, our students and our course as a community, it refocuses our attention on the importance of belonging and identity in learning. By nurturing and developing a functioning community, we create a supportive environment that can reduce many of the barriers to learning that students experience.

Meyer and Land's theory of Threshold Concepts (2005) also helps us understand the anxiety bound up with the 'liminality' of transformative learning. Effective communities can play a key role in helping students acquire and practice the new language and terminology that comes with learning. Communities can help reduce students' anxiety, develop their confidence and support their evolving identity.

Community enhances performance.

"Liminality, we argue, can provide a useful metaphor in aiding our understanding of the conceptual transformations students undergo, or find difficulty and anxiety in undergoing, particularly in relation to notions of being 'stuck'" (Meyer and Land, 2005)

"Cameras off*, we argue, can provide a useful metaphor in aiding our understanding of the conceptual transformations students undergo, or find difficulty and anxiety in undergoing, particularly in relation to notions of **learning online**"* (Ding, 2020, adapted from Meyer and Land, 2005)
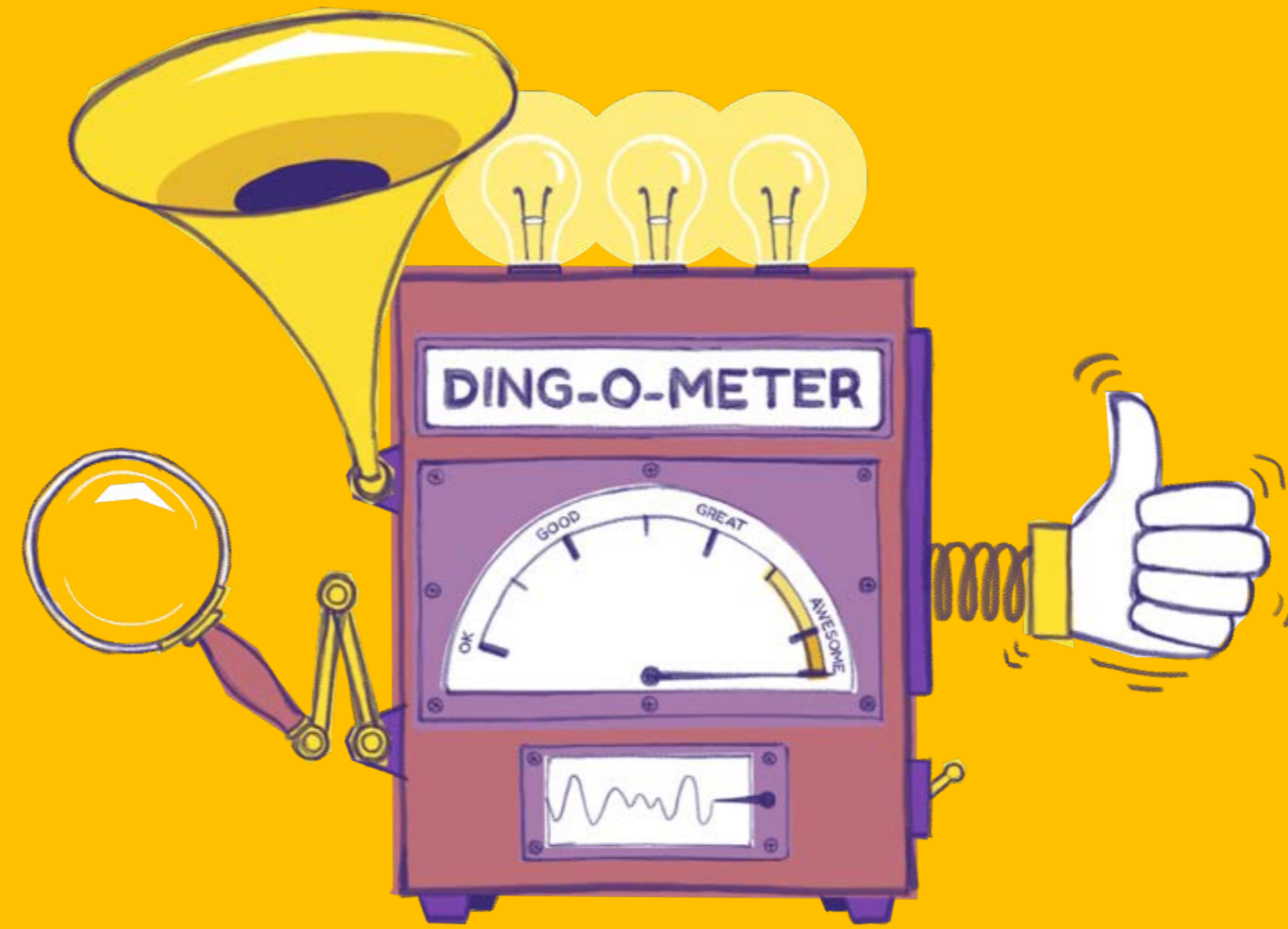
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