WHAT THE PANDEMIC HAS TAUGHT US – HOW TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO KEEP THEIR CAMERAS ON

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Abstract: Enhancing interaction in the online classroom is a major consideration in ensuring that students actively participate to create their own knowledge and reach a high level of achievement in learning Romanian as a foreign language. This idea came to my mind during an online conference where a colleague stated that it is ok for students to keep their cameras closed and that teachers do not have the right to pry into students' lives. While agreeing with the latter, I asked myself why I need students to open cameras and why it is crucial for me to see them. I also thought that until now no teacher would have thought of strategies of encouraging their students to be more involved in the remote classes. This is a novelty for teachers worldwide and I took it as a great advantage and an opportunity to learn new things related to my profession.

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Introduction

Enhancing interaction in the online classroom is a major consideration in ensuring that students actively participate to create their own knowledge and reach a high level of achievement in learning Romanian as a foreign language. This idea came to my mind during an online conference where a colleague stated that it is ok for students to keep their cameras closed and that teachers do not have the right to pry into students' lives. While agreeing with the latter, I asked myself why I need students to open cameras and why it is crucial for me to see them. I also thought that until now no teacher would have thought of strategies of encouraging their students to be more involved in the remote classes. This is a novelty for teachers worldwide and I took it as a great advantage and an opportunity to learn new things related to my profession.

I would like to start by describing the first days of teaching remote. All cameras off, I was talking into an abyss, I felt that an icebreaker hiding behind the screens could hit me anytime. When I asked them to turn cameras on, they were all wearing their pajamas in bed. I could see that they had barely woken up. What to do in these circumstances? Not much. I told them that I am so happy to see them even if it is evident I woke them up for the class, and I do not know whether I should apologize for the inconvenience or not. I said I would give them 15 minutes to arrange the bed, make a cup of coffee, put on a t-shirt and we will resume class afterwards. After 15 minutes on the dot, almost all of them had cameras on, and were holding a cup of coffee. Next step: I asked them why, in their opinion, I insist on keeping cameras on, why it is important to maintain a certain appearance even though we are behind a screen. A very interesting debate emerged, and I was so happy to see I stirred them to speak Romanian, even though it was clear some of them were totally against teachers 'controlling' them.

When insisting on students keeping cameras on, there was no single moment without having doubts, without asking myself if what I require from students is ethical or not, if I have the right to pry into their lives. I even had colleagues who totally disagreed with my, suggesting that working without seeing students does not affect education too much, and that we must

adapt to the circumstances. This has really made me think about why I am not happy with this statement and why I feel that not seeing my students is extremely damaging. This year has been a very special one in many ways, and in an exceptional way: my very first year in my teaching career when I have not met my students in person.

Context

How to keep students motivated during online classes and without face-to-face support from teachers or their peers is challenging for teachers. I took this as a new challenge that remote teaching has brought into our lives, as an ideal opportunity for me to try new ways of teaching and enable students to become independent learners.

In face-to-face classes I can respond quickly to make sure students are on the right track and getting the support they need. When teaching remotely, virtual monitoring is difficult and it can take time. I think that as teachers need time to learn and to adapt to new ways of teaching, learners as well need time to learn a new way of learning and feeling comfortable with. I have noticed that interaction between peers can be extremely difficult. Technical issues related to learning or teaching online can be extremely frustrating. But again, I took this as a way of interacting with my students, and learning from them has created a wonderful bond between us. Young people react in a very positive way when they are asked to provide support. And teachers should not be afraid of showing their vulnerabilities, their fears and frustrations. Showing students that we have things to learn, that we are not best at everything can rise our students' level of empathy.

Asking students what they think would help them learn better in a virtual context and feel more motivated can be a wonderful way of communicating with them. I have asked them for ideas on how to do an activity, they voted on the lesson they liked the best and they also suggested ways in which future lessons can be taught.

Unlike English classes that last 2 hours, Romanian lessons to foreigners are longer (between 4 to 6 hours daily, 5 days per week). In a virtual context this can extremely tiresome and, why not say it, boring. I have tried to vary lesson types and devised various structures: for one lesson topic I have used a flipped approach where I asked students to read a text beforehand and then follow up on language and comprehension in class. Keeping our sense of humor is essential in teaching irrespective of the context. But it can also be a great strategy of keeping students engaged online.

Before expecting all students to turn their cameras on, teachers should create a learning environment where they feel safe and comfortable while exposing their whole lives, where they want to see each other and be seen by the others.

Whenever I notice that students are reluctant and do not want to open their cameras, I first check that they are there behind the screen, then talk to the students and tell them that receiving nonverbal cues from the class such as smiles, frowns, head nods, looks of confusion, and looks of boredom, it can help me evaluate my teaching in real time and adjust the pace accordingly to improve student learning. I start the lesson by saying hello, I ask them how they are, if their families are fine. If I do not get any reaction from certain students, I try to involve them into the conversation and I usually succeed in drawing them into the conversation.

When I asked them why they turned their cameras off, they said because they were concerned about their appearance, their hair was messy, were wearing pajamas, a family member was in the room with them (this moment can be turned into a funny moment of guest appearance) or hadn't yet taken a shower. Many of them said that they were not comfortable when everyone was watching them, and this was creating a sensation of awkward self-consciousness. This was another challenge for me so I told them we can organize thematic background days, that is every day we met, we chose a thematic background: one day it was the ocean day (and they had to find the most extraordinary ocean photos and use them as backgrounds), another day was green day (and here their options reached the sky), another day

was dedicated to their favorite musicians (they used their photos as backgrounds). I used this opportunity to have them talk about their choices, e.g. why they chose that particular background, where they were in the world, who that musician was. They immediately participated in the game and asked each other endless questions. This was also an occasion for them to get to know their colleagues. And their teacher. I never exclude myself from these activities, and I have noticed that they appreciate this very much. Students have many questions about us, it is just that they are shy to do it. Teachers should not be afraid of revealing their true selves in front of students. Unlike us, our students are less likely to misjudge us and I find them more tolerant than we teachers are.

Here are some issues that I have noticed might work during this unprecedented period. One sure secret to success is never to set very high expectations from oneself or from students. Teachers can be very harsh on themselves at times.

Let Go of your Ego, teacher

If we want to survive, we must admit that we cannot control what students do inside their homes, and even if we had some control over things, this would not enhance student engagement. Being over controlling and wanting to know what they are doing when cameras are off is more likely to build resentment and frustration rather than build trust and strengthen relationships. So trust is the only solution we have.

Reshape the Image of Participation

Thinking that when students keep cameras on and the teacher can tell whether they are involved actively by merely looking at their faces is a mere assumption. It is true that a student who is staring directly at the screen may prove he is listening. But a student who is taking notes or looking for his pen under the desk may also be engaged. It has happened to me many times to think that a certain student was not paying attention only because he was looking at the cell phone. Well, I could not be more wrong. Very often I gave a certain student a task, he provided the answer, but it only happened it was the wrong choice. Instead of correcting him/her, I used mimic (raising eyebrows, a forced smile, etc). This meant that if he was not following me on the camera, I could have noticed. It took him a while to understand what was going on, but he eventually realized that I was waiting for another try from him.

Check IN with Students so they don't check OUT

In addition to checking in on our own expectations and emotions, we need to ask our students how they feel about being on camera. I have also asked them to think of some reasons why teachers insist that everyone keeps cameras on. Here are some of them:

- Teachers want to have control over their private lives;
- Teachers want to make sure they focus on activities, not playing computer games in the same time;

I thanked them for their try, but I said I could not agree with them. I do not want them to keep their cameras on because I want to have control of their lives. Teachers, before anything, are building communities of students. In s face-to-face context, a small gesture can make all the difference. Well, in a remote class we do not have that. So, we must find new ways of reaching our students and creating a bond. I hope my answer was convincing. What I noticed was that the ones who kept cameras off turned them on eventually.

Try to find out the real circumstances students are connecting from. For example, if I realize that many of my students will be joining class from the same room as siblings and it might get loud, I might build in more quiet, chat-based activities so that students don't have to mute and unmute as much. If I learn that many of my students are anxious about bullying or being judged by peers, I can address that by intentionally building community, being mindful that it takes time to cultivate trust.

Get (more) creative

Now, more than ever before it is time we made greater efforts and be creative. By thinking flexibly, we can find multiple ways to engage students—whether cameras are on or off. I sometimes have the impression that students notice when I improvise on the spot, when I use a certain situation as an opportunity to teach, enhance a new issue.

I also use the chat feature to gather student questions or ask for quick responses. I sometimes select one question in the chat, use breakout rooms for small-group discussions, where students may feel more comfortable interacting on camera and tackle the issue there. I feel it is a safer environment for many and their feedback is a confirmation.

Be Genuine

Teachers should show their vulnerabilities in front of their students. Our fears make us humans and students should be made aware of our vulnerable side. Teachers can support students by being authentic and conveying the message that it's normal to just be yourself on video. I usually log on from school and this can be frustrating at times. I am not in the comfort of my own house where I have control over things more or less. I thus embrace the fun and silly moments when colleagues make guest appearances. I never shy from asking support from students when dealing with new gadgets/platforms that they are extremely with. We must never underestimate this new generation of young people and try to step into their mysterious world.

Teachers and students together should be aware that what they are trying to do virtually is build a community and now more than ever before teachers should make sure that students feel safe and connected in the online classes. I use Facebook group as a way of interacting with them. I post music and ask for feedback, I take photos of graffitis in town and ask them to help them with the translation. I usually challenge them by posting photos of famous buildings in town, or popular locations and I organize a competition: the first to guess the correct answer will get a virtual medal, chocolate, etc.

Make eye contact by looking at the camera lens

These are difficult times for the humans. Our faces are covered with masks, we only have our eyes left to communicate with each other. No smiles, no facial expressions. So, look directly into the camera lens rather than at the screen. Students will feel you are looking them in the eye. They always do.

I used this strategy when we learnt colors and we described each other (Kejsi has got blue eyes, Hussein has got black hair).

Voice is an extremely important factor in teaching. In remote teaching this has become crucial so we must be careful at how we use it. If students feel that our voice is patronizing or monotonous, then they make think we are irritated, or even worse: bored. If our voice is lively and encouraging, this might help them take a greater interest in the lesson. I use variations in my voice (I increase or decrease the volume when speaking) and this will help them pay more attention to me.

Consider the pace of your voice. Be aware of when and for how long you pause, and how quickly or slowly you speak. The rate you speak should be tailored to the level of your learners. Speak more slowly to beginners, and at a more natural pace to advanced learners.

Realia has become more important than ever. Most of my students studying Romanian are complete beginners. When I teach vocabulary, I use my own realia, or I ask them to bring them in front of the camera. When we learnt kitchen utensils this strategy was very fun.

With more advanced students, I brought some puppets and gave them names of famous people (president of the USA, a famous singer that is in fashion among teenagers) and with the help of some prompts I provided they had to interview these celebrities.

What I have noticed in my career (and even more since teaching remote) is that students appreciate the effort we put into making lessons more active and creative. So we should never be afraid of experimenting new tricks.

Many teachers have told me that requiring cameras would affect students from low-income families or students of color and this gap would be insurmountable in a virtual context. Many students might not want their classmates and teachers to see inside their homes, especially if they don't have a private work space. There are also cultural considerations I must confess I had not thought before: female students who wear hijab don't typically cover their heads in the privacy of their homes—but they would have to put on the covering before turning their cameras on. I had a student from Spain who refused to open her camera during the first few classes. When she eventually decided to reveal herself, she was wearing a veil. I complimented her and told her I am very happy to be able to eventually see her eyes, her smile. She told me (with all the other students connected) that at first she was afraid I might judge her for being a Muslim and that after she got to know me/us, she got the courage to show her face. This was probably one of the most comforting gesture my students have done in my entire career. We all need time to know one another, so we must give it time.

And from the previous strategies my last one ensues:

Teachers must be empathetic and reveal their true selves.

I share my fears with my students and talk about the times when I am not comfortable being on camera in a meeting. I tell them about how I prepare before logging on for the lesson, how their presence online boosts my energy. All these confessions will bring out the humanness in us.

Conclusion

The greatest mistake a teacher can make is to underestimate students. Some students asked me once if I am afraid of them. When I said I am, they were surprised and wanted to know why. I told them that according to my opinion they hold the power, that the success of the lesson depends on them too, that we are an indestructible team and that a teacher is powerless without their support. In a virtual world where we can be anything behind a screen, a real teacher's duty is to be humane and understating, his duty is to make students believe that this period is only temporary, that viruses and economic crises are not a novelty, but that what has made us move onwards was the fact that we stuck together as humans, we showed our support and humanity.

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