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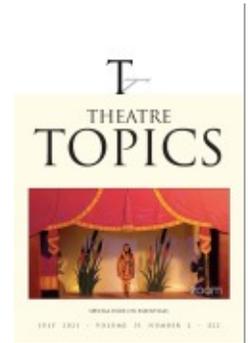
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Consent and Cameras in the Great Digital Pivot

Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard

Consent is essential. As teachers of embodied practice, theatre educators have redefined flexibility, ingenuity, and resilience in the emergency shift to online education. Many months into this new frontier, there are still gaps in our pedagogy. In spite of the best efforts of many educators, consent-based practices were left behind in the Great Digital Pivot.

In our defense: most theatre educators were not trained to teach online, and few if any of us ever thought we would be teaching in a pandemic.

In March 2020, a nationwide triage operation began as educators sprang into action in an attempt to salvage carefully planned semesters at the onset of a pandemic. Professors and students alike struggled with uncertainty, poor internet access, new platforms, and ever-shifting circumstances. Gently removing camera-obstructing cats from Zoom windows and pausing to care for family members became a part of the classroom and meeting landscape.

Scholars and experienced facilitators of online teaching and learning offered guidance, but they also made it clear that what so many theatre educators were offering in the spring 2020 semester was not an “online class,” but an in-person class dropped into a WebEx room (Skallerup Bessette et al.). As educators grappled with webcams, students shouted for understanding and were met with empathy and panic in equal measures. Class projects and internet connections crashed and burned. Assignments were scrapped. Our entire professional worlds went on hiatus. People became ill. People died.

The spring 2020 semester ended, and students and faculty alike collapsed into grief. We mourned the semester, the graduation, the production, the birthday party, the baby shower, the people that we lost. And while we were still grieving, the planning began. The fall 2020 semester began with best-laid plans after a summer of great anxiety and little rest.

We have been in survival mode since March 2020. And when we are struggling to stay above water, we do not pause to consider details; we just do whatever we can to stay afloat. Maya Angelou says, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” We did our best under extraordinary circumstances, but as we adjust to this new “normal,” it is time for us to refocus and remember what we know about doing better by our students and ourselves. Doing better begins with remembering what we know about consent.

Consent is conditional, contextual, and revocable permission. It is essential, especially in crisis. First, look to the conditions in which students encounter their classes. The pandemic has pushed educators and students alike out of the neutral zone of the rehearsal studio and into the home space of the students (and them into ours). Families and pets wander in and out of frame, siblings shout, and children need parenting and teaching. Home may not be a safe place, physically or emotionally, for students whose sole refuge, college, has been ripped from them by a virus. Students call into class from parking lots or wear masks while taking class in the corners of coffee shops. Internet connections falter. The state of the industry is looking grim.

The context of the content we teach hits differently when someone is sitting on their bed or on the other side of a wall from a sleeping parent. Students may be living with significant others. Few students feel as free and unconstrained in their childhood bedroom as they would in a theatrical space. Even if home is your preferred working environment, who wants to imagine life and death circumstances while seeing your child's toys scattered on the floor in front of you?

Revocability might look like a muted mic, a disabled camera, or even a wall of blank screens. These are the given circumstances in which we meet our students each week on Zoom, WebEx, or the terrifyingly named Panopto. These are not the conditions nor the contexts in which anyone prefers to make theatre, but it is our current reality. The vehicle through which we teach has changed to meet the moment, so the way we consider consent must change as well.

In a typical semester, students physically enter the classroom at the top of class. After class, everyone leaves and goes wherever they go next. When we teach remotely, "your classroom" is a construct. Logging in is not equivalent to walking through the classroom doors. The faculty member may be the person to send out the link, but when the meeting begins, the students are not walking through the digital doors of your studio. Rather, when you click "admit" you are mutually entering into one another's homes with the rest of the class in tow.

We don't have a model for how to behave in this space of mutual, scheduled home-invasion with the complication of the instructor–student power dynamic. To begin to understand how we should behave and what fair, consensual expectations for participation look like in this new paradigm, we propose thinking about it as if you were a house guest. Entering someone's home is intimate, and these circumstances are particularly complex. No one expects to host mandatory house guests as a condition of their education or employment. The pandemic has thrust us into one another's homes to teach and learn through the tyrannous glowing rectangles that run our lives (Manovich). And studies show that we are exhausted (Ramachandran).

As we are compulsory guests in one another's homes, the least we can do is be polite about it. When visiting someone's home or when someone visits you, there are boundaries modeled by the host. They do not rifle through your belongings and you do not rifle through theirs. While the burden has been placed rightfully so on educators to model good consent behavior, this is uncharted territory. As we construct the new norms for behavior in digital classrooms, consider the following questions:

- Would what you are asking of students be a reasonable request to make of someone hosting you in their home? Of a guest?
- When you make your request, have you given them as much room to say "no" as you have to say "yes"?

On the latter question, it is important to remember the significance of power dynamics in a classroom. The instructor is in a position of power, and because of that it is more difficult for students to say "no" to the instructor than it is for the instructor to say "no" to the students. It is the educator's responsibility to seek consent from their students and to make peace with their boundaries. In a consent-based practice, it is never the obligation of the students to yield; yielding is bending to pressure, not giving consent. Students, marginalized acting students in particular, often yield for fear of being labeled "hard to work with" (Pace and Rikard 8). Students need to be given enough information to give informed consent and clear options to refuse or revoke consent without fearing retribution.

Digital teaching has taken us out of the neutral ground of the theatre studio, so attempting to replicate the style and methods of teaching in your in-person classroom effectively in someone else's home is unreasonable. We are asking students to engage deeply with high-stakes imaginary circumstances while contending with barking dogs and sick family members in the next room.

Normalcy cannot be the goal in abnormal times. Something needs to give, and frankly, it should be our rigid expectations about the means of participation. That can be a hard pill to swallow, especially when educators have already swallowed so much, but our ability to adapt thus far shows that we can make small adjustments to the way we already teach to be better educators, hosts, and houseguests moving forward.

One of the most troublesome consent- and participation-related issues is that of student cameras. In an in-person class environment, students would enter the studio and be physically present and observable by all participants. In an effort to replicate that, and as a means of measuring student engagement, many faculty are requiring that students keep their cameras on while in class. Some institutions have provided guidance regarding student cameras, but many faculty members have been left in the wilderness to make the call for themselves. While the desire for feedback from the people you are teaching is understandable, requiring student cameras to be active is problematic.

In considering consent-based camera policies and best practices, it might first be helpful to reframe the goal of “presence.” In the before-times, the time before the pandemic pushed us out of the studio and into our homes, it was common to find class policies that required students to be “present” in class. Within a theatrical context, instructors mean more than “in attendance” when referring to someone as present. Theatre practitioners talk about presence to mean not only physical attendance, but mental and emotional preparedness to be open and available to new ideas and impulses. What instructors are actually looking for is *engagement*. Engagement requires doing, just as making theatre requires doing. Being simply present is not enough to put on a show, and there are a multitude of ways to demonstrate engagement. Cameras are the most obvious means for measuring student engagement, and teaching to a wall of blank screens is incredibly difficult. When a camera goes dark during class, it can feel like someone stood up and walked out of the room; it can even feel like a rejection of you as an instructor. When you log on to a wall of black screens, it can feel like you walked in to teach a class and no one showed up. It might make you question your skills as a teacher, the enthusiasm of your students, or the quality of your material. A student who chooses to keep their camera on may feel the pressure of the spotlight if all of their peers’ screens are dark. When you feel adrift, remember that this is not “your classroom”—we are all guests in a shared digital space where the rules are murky. While there is always room for improvement and adaptation in pedagogy, the reasons a student’s camera switches off may have less to do with their engagement and much more with articulating a boundary to support their learning. It is time to release the patriarchal, ableist, classist, and racist vision of a forward-facing, straight-backed, silent, and still model of an attentive, well-behaved student. In an in-person classroom, it is observable that not everyone learns in the same way. Some students may process best aurally and may look away, others will doodle or take notes. Some students stim to aid their focus. Students deserve the benefit of the doubt that they are doing what they need to do to be their best version of being a student.

The way students learn is only one factor in student camera choices. Thinking back to the summer of 2020, there were countless posts on social media of instructors struggling to carve out a corner and asking for help with their online teaching setups. Like many of those instructors, not every student has the privilege of a quiet private space in which to work. Students that do not have such a dedicated space are burdened with the additional labor of having to set up and break down their space for every class, from which their more privileged peers are spared.

There are racial, cultural, social, and gendered differences in the expectations of what it means to be “camera ready.” Family members or roommates who did not sign up to having your class see them in their pajamas may need to be in the space. Different communities and cultures have different relationships to being seen on camera. Camera usage may slow technology to the point that it becomes unusable. We do not know what hardships a student is facing, and while there may not have been a pandemic pay bump for faculty, at least instructors are being paid while they deal with the hassles of remote learning.

In the end, when a student turns off their camera they are establishing and expressing a boundary. It is important to remember that there is no rubric for what makes a valid boundary—a boundary is a boundary, period. Something in the conditions, or context, of this current moment has brought a student to the conclusion that their camera needs to be off for them to be in class. The responsibility of the educator, as the person with the power in this weird liminal space, is to receive and honor that boundary.

We are advocating for giving students the space for consent, the space to honor their boundaries, and the space to succeed. Supporting student boundaries does not mean we are releasing students from the accountability and natural consequences for the choices they make. A student that does not learn their lines cannot present their scene, and a student that does not use their camera for movement work cannot get feedback on their technique. This may mean that this is not the course for them, or even that their grade might suffer. They may not be able to meet the learning objectives for the course and may need to repeat this class in a post-crisis world.

Nevertheless, this is a moment not for rigor and rigidity, but for grace and compassion with our students and ourselves. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them engage with the course material. If you make reasonable accommodations and consider student consent, they still may not rise to the occasion and might not be successful in your course this semester. As unfortunate as it is, this is true even under normal circumstances.

After all of our efforts to make our classes engaging, this can all be very frustrating to already overburdened and under-resourced educators who are trying their absolute hardest to help their students succeed. Faculty, particularly contingent faculty, need more support and resources than ever. That support cannot and should not come from students, but from the institutions.

Requiring cameras on does not guarantee attention. Educators may like to think that they hold students' undivided and rapt attention during class, but only an irrepressible optimist would believe that student attention is never, ever divided. When their cameras go off, students might not be paying attention; but they also may not be paying attention while their cameras are on—remember that this is normal. Regardless of the quality of instruction, outside factors and distractions sometimes pull students' focus away from their classes, even in person. That is doubly true when students are Zooming into class. Who among us has not mentally checked out during a faculty meeting?

Choosing to let go of a mandatory cameras-on policy for the sake of consent-based practice does not mean giving up on participation and engagement. Audio engagement limits the unequal labor a student may need to do to participate while preserving their privacy in their own home. While Millennials are a generation famous for their dislike of phone calls, the current Generation Z college students are often big fans of using voice chat as a means of communication. During the pandemic, students are playing games and watching movies on platforms like Discord that allow them to chat verbally in a group without video. Try asking everyone to turn their cameras off (you too!) and have a conversation about the material. Be sure to check with students about their access needs and request captioning services for deaf and hard-of-hearing participants.

Take audio participation a step further by having students perform their monologues and scenes as if it were a radio play. Encourage students to really focus on their intention and to listen actively to their scene partners. Remind them to stay physically engaged, even if you cannot see them. Share some outtakes of actors recording voiceover as an example of how physical engagement reflects in the voice. Robin Williams is a great example, but there are tons of options on YouTube. You could even assign students to find good examples.

While it can be overwhelming to track the chat and teach at the same time, finding a way to make the chat work for you can increase participation and ease your grading burden. It can be hard

to keep track of verbal participation in a discussion while you are leading it. Structure discussion to include periods of reflection, periods of writing, and periods of reading comments in the chat. Enable chat-saving to make grading participation easier and to make note-taking more collaborative for students. Consider recording classes so that students can participate asynchronously when they will have more time in their homes to focus or move around.

Offering your work to a large group can be intimidating. The think-pair-share approach developed by Frank Lyman is designed to increase participation by giving students time to think about a prompt, time to share their thoughts with a peer, and then time to share those thoughts out with the larger group (Slone and Mitchell 102). Recreate this approach digitally by using breakout rooms. In the main room, give students the prompt or question and a few minutes to develop their own thoughts on it or ask clarifying questions. Then use the breakout-room function to put students in pairs or small groups for a few minutes to share their thoughts. Bring students back to the broader group to share what they discovered.

This approach is not just for discussions. Movement compositions, monologues, and presentations all benefit from time in pairs and small groups before sharing with the entire class. There are many tutorials online for creating breakout rooms with different platforms. If you are going to require students to share their work on camera (with one another or the whole group), be sure to inform them prior to class.

While not as substantive, emoji reactions are available on a number of platforms. If all you need from students is a virtual head nod to indicate listening, the thumbs up emoji might give you what you need. Use emojis in combination with the chat or captioned audio participation to create an inclusive, active discussion.

Cameras are not the enemy. For some courses, there may be no way around using cameras to evaluate student work, and there are several consent-based ways to use cameras. Prerecording is a terrific option for capturing student performances or projects. When material can be prerecorded, students have more choices about when and where to capture footage. They may not have a private space (or a space where they can make a lot of noise) during class time, but if students can choose to do their performances and record them while parents or roommates are not sleeping or working, they may do better work. Allowing students to choose the circumstances under which they are seen creates more opportunities for them to actively consent.

There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to consent-based participation. Some groups might really want cameras on in class. Be in conversation about what works and what does not as the semester progresses. What sounds like a good idea at the beginning of the semester might be exhausting by midterms. Take time periodically throughout the semester to talk about what your community values and needs are regarding modes of participation. If you must insist on on-camera participation during class time, you should disclose that policy specifically on the syllabus, prior to the beginning of the semester—ideally prior to registration. If cameras are required in a synchronous online course, departments should consider waivers or alternative offerings for students who are unable or unwilling to meet that requirement. Because consent is revocable, departments should provide extra care in reminding students about add/drop and withdrawal deadlines. Institutions should, as some have, extend withdrawal deadlines to allow for students to make adjustments without penalization as their circumstances shift. In a course where synchronous camera work is required, be judicious in your requests and take time to remind students in advance of when their cameras are expected to be on. Make your participation guidelines clear; if you expect students to be well-lit, visible head-to-toe, or in a space where they can lie down on the floor, tell them.

No area of academia is as well-prepared to find solutions in this Great Digital Pivot as the performing arts. Theatre artists are creative problem-solvers by nature. Solve the problems of evaluating

student work and participation in a way that meets your needs as an educator, while respecting the boundaries of the students. As we do the work to mind our digital manners, it is our responsibility as educators in positions of relative power to lead by example. Practice patience and give one another grace, space, and enough detail to make consent-based decisions.

Some students will disengage, but not because you respected their boundaries. Being a student right now is hard. Students will appreciate the educators that hold them to a high standard and care about them just as much, if not more, than the content of the lessons. Synchronous or asynchronous, cameras on or cameras off, while we cannot share physical space, the time that students choose to share with us is what is of value right now. There is enormous educational value, both in art and in life, in teaching students that their boundaries matter.

If teaching to a wall of black screens deflates you, make the time to care for yourself. All of the socialization and casual support of colleagues has been replaced with emojis in group texts and empathetic nodding in faculty meetings. You might need more care right now. This is a trust exercise with students—trust that the connection is there on the other side of your screen whether you can see it or not. If a student misuses that trust you might feel a little bruised, but it is their education that suffers.

As marketing emails would put it, these are extraordinary times. This moment calls for educators to consider consent along with content. It is overwhelming to think about making yet another adjustment to the way we teach when we have already adapted so much while juggling increased administrative work, care work, and isolation. Teaching right now is enormously stressful; students are distracted and stressed more than ever before. During these extraordinary times, center consent, because there is no participation policy in the world that can solve the circumstances of the pandemic.

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