



# .....Is Anybody There?

LISA WAKEFIELD 

**PRACTICE-BASED  
PAPER**



## ABSTRACT

A personal reflection of teaching methods used to increase engagement and participation of students without the need to communicate verbally.

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**KEYWORDS:**

synchronous teaching;  
engagement; communication;  
non-verbal communication

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Wakefield, L. 2021. ....Is Anybody There? *Gateway Papers*, 2(1): 7, pp. 1–3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.31>

Over the last year I've found myself sat talking to a wall of blank generic icons, with students sat on mute. I'm not however concerned that any of the students have logged on and disappeared to do something else. They are consistently engaged in the session, they just chose not to do it via spoken word.

One of the most important lessons I've learnt is that I needed to create an environment where students feel comfortable and listen to how they want their synchronous session to run. By spending time at the beginning of the first session explaining the functionality of Blackboard Collaborate and discussing how we as a group wanted online sessions to run, we established our ground rules. These have then adapted through the year varying slightly by group, but are based on the same basic principles and understanding.

So how do we encourage engagement, while at the same time recognising the reasons why students won't turn their cameras on or contribute to session via spoken word?

By agreeing to keep all cameras off for the majority of sessions we've created equality in the group. While some students don't turn their cameras on because they are have just woken up and are in their beds wearing their PJs, for others it creates security. The anonymity means a lack of embarrassment for students studying from a shared bedroom using the data on their phone or in their parked car.

This also helps to create equality in terms of digital connectivity (The Sutton Trust, 2021). The ONS (Serafino, 2019) estimates that 51% of the lowest income families do not have access to the internet through wired broadband connections. By minimising the band width required to engage with the session this allows more students to engage with the technical content without the session breaking up. This also appears to reduce the lag in data receipt for those studying overseas so they can participate and ask questions in the same time scale as UK based students.

The second major consideration is that our current students inherently communicate through text. They grew up with smart phones and are more comfortable communicating electronically than verbally. According to research by LivePerson (Bradbury, 2018; see also, Ofcom, 2020), 75% of generation Z would rather conduct all communication talk via text than verbally. It should not come as a shock that they chose not to turn on their microphones.

By adapting communication methods to only use non-verbal communication different responses and styles of discussion can occur. Icons, emojis and polls can be used for quick responses to direct questions. Chat boxes can be used for more complex answers and descriptions of technical concepts. Private chat allows students to ask questions without their peers knowing. The private chat also allows individual support and pastoral guidance to be provided for those who need it.

Have the changes worked? Yes, whereas a 9 am Monday morning seminar on campus would only attract a few keen students, now there are consistently 20 students in the virtual room engaging with the material and each other.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Wakefield, L. 2021. ....Is Anybody There? *Gateway Papers*, 2(1): 7, pp. 1–3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.31>

Submitted: 03 March 2021

Accepted: 22 March 2021

Published: 17 August 2021

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