

Remote Control: Blurred Boundaries in the Zoom Classroom

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This case is set in the United States of America at a public (i.e., state-funded) school for children aged 5-11. The fourth grade students in this case are likely 9 or 10 years old. During the Covid-19 pandemic, public schools across the United States closed to in-person learning in March 2020. When schools reopened in Fall 2020, many relied on either remote instruction or hybrid learning, in which students learned from home some days and at school on others. While most schools across the country were fully reopened for in-person learning by Fall 2021, some districts continued to offer remote learning options. Other districts looked for ways to continue the hybrid model of learning. For example, some districts decided that students would learn remotely when extreme weather forced schools to close, or when widespread illness made in-person learning challenging or unsafe.¹ Other districts, like the fictional one in this case, looked to remote learning for part of the school week as a way to address teacher shortages, which were exacerbated by the pandemic.² Also exacerbated by the pandemic was the “dual pandemic” of systemic racism in the United States.³ In the U.S. and around the world, the “Black Lives Matter” movement gained momentum during the pandemic, generating a widespread call for racial justice in the face of systemic racism. In the U.S. and elsewhere, “All Lives Matter” has evolved as a charged response to Black Lives Matter, both the phrase and the social movement.

“You’re muted, Sarah,” said Emir, the grade representative for the 4th grade at Riverside Elementary.

“...right at 1pm today... Oh no! Sorry! Can you hear me now?” responded Sarah.

“No problem,” Emir chuckled. “You were saying?” Even after all their time meeting in Zoom rooms during the Covid-19 pandemic-related transition to virtual instruction, there was always some incident involving the mute button.

“Oh, I was just asking how long we were going to meet. I have to get my kids from camp at 1pm,” said Sarah.

This was the second preparation meeting for Riverside’s 4th grade team. Over the summer, their district had decided to adopt what they were calling “Virtual Fridays”—a one-day-a-week practice of online instruction. On Virtual Fridays, teachers were expected to teach synchronously during the mornings, with the afternoons reserved for student and family conferencing, professional development, and/or planning. There were a handful of reasons for this decision, though staffing shortages and teacher burnout were two of the biggest ones. Coming out of emergency remote instruction during the pandemic, schools across the district—and across the country—had lost a number of veteran teachers and were having trouble filling all of their vacancies.⁴ While other places had adopted a four-day week to attract teachers and manage burnout, the district worried that such a move would exacerbate

¹ <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2023-01-24-under-the-right-conditions-can-remote-learning-be-an-asset>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/29/us/schools-teacher-shortages.html>

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34591591/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/29/us/schools-teacher-shortages.html>

pandemic-related learning loss.⁵ School and district leaders believed their plan constituted a smart middle ground.⁶

Staffing issues, however, were only one set of reasons that Riverside was embracing Virtual Fridays. Ultimately, remote instruction, in one form or another, was here to stay. First and foremost, some students and their families found that remote instruction actually worked for them. In fact, this success had prompted the district to create an online-only school available to all families.⁷ Additionally, their new inclement weather policy explicitly named synchronous remote instruction as a key strategy for ensuring students met state-mandated instructional time targets. And, of course, no one could guarantee that a new variant wouldn't emerge, prompting a new round of school closures.

While teachers had been given opportunities to provide feedback and express concerns about the new policy, now that the decision was final and before the school year officially began, school teams needed to create policies and practices that would structure Virtual Fridays. Building on previous conversations about classroom rules on Zoom, the purpose of today's meeting was to recommend a camera policy to the school principal.

"Ok", said Emir, "we only have an hour, so I want to get straight to it. Principal Jones has asked each grade's instructional team for feedback on some of the proposed policies around Zoom norms. I know that we've previously had some disagreement about whether we should have a camera policy, but I'm hoping we can come to a consensus by the end of this meeting."

"Hold on," said Ana, a veteran teacher at Riverside. "I thought we'd already agreed that on Virtual Fridays we were going to require students to keep cameras on?"

"Technically, that's true...but we know that in the past this has been challenging for everyone to implement," replied Emir.

"Yes!" said Grace, one of Riverside's newest teachers. "I was ready to pull my hair out with some of my students. Despite my reminders, Nadia was constantly turning her camera off. She was one of the students who received a laptop and had internet enabled at home through the district last year, so I knew it wasn't a technical issue."

"Exactly!" Ana replied. "We were inconsistent in our camera policies last year. We really need to avoid making that mistake again this year."

Sarah's face scrunched. "I hear that concern, but I worry that being really consistent with this issue is easier said than done."

Like Ana, Sarah had been at the school for a long time, and the other teachers often looked to her for guidance. This wouldn't be the first time she and Ana had disagreed, but they were good friends and respected each other's often divergent positions.

⁵ Evidence on the impact of the four-day week in schools is still sparse. See:

<https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-seven-new-studies-on-the-impact-of-a-four-day-school-week/>

⁶ The number of schools adopting a four-day week has approached 25% in some states,

<https://www.kcur.org/education/2022-06-11/four-day-school-week-in-rural-missouri-more-districts-see-it-as-a-way-to-recruit-teachers>

⁷ Boston, for example, has opted to open a virtual school in part due to the success some students had during remote instruction,

<https://www.wgbh.org/news/education/2021/05/14/13-mass-school-districts-propose-offering-an-all-virtual-school-option-next-year>; More broadly, remote schools have become an increasingly common practice in many big school districts,

<https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/6/6/23153483/big-school-districts-virtual-learning-fall-2022>

Sarah continued, “Last year, I found out that one of my students, Rodney, was keeping his camera off on his mother’s orders. I did talk to his mom, but she was adamant, and I honestly wasn’t sure what else to do.”

“Did Rodney’s mother offer any explanation?” asked Emir.

“She just kept saying she didn’t want a camera transmitting the inside of her home for hours a day. Honestly, I didn’t fault her. Frankly, it felt weird and invasive that we required students – and their families – to comply with a school policy that is essentially exercising authority over their homes.”

“But, remote instruction means that we have to treat them as if they are at school, otherwise we’re just giving them a three-day weekend!” said Ana. “I don’t love that going virtual gives the students an intimate view of my kitchen, but that’s just the way it is. Our chief concern has to be the quality of their instruction. If we can’t even see students, how can we tell if they are present or paying attention?”

“I hear you, Ana. I really do,” responded Emir. “Grace, do you want to talk about the incident with Chris last year? I feel like that’s really relevant to this question.”

“Oof, yeah,” responded Grace. “We had a tricky situation with Chris during the pandemic. At one point, he was doing classes in the living room, and I noticed an ‘All Lives Matter’ flag on the wall. Now, I would never place or even allow something like that on our classroom walls, but I hesitated to do anything. People can have whatever they want on the walls in their homes, right? It seems weird to try to control that – even if it ran against the class norms I was working to set up. Luckily, he went back to calling in from his bedroom, and the situation resolved itself. Honestly, I can’t imagine what I would have done if other students or their parents noticed that.”

“You keep teaching!” Ana shot back. “Look, I don’t think an ‘All Lives Matter’ flag in someone’s house has to be a problem. Some people would be fine with placing it on a school wall to communicate that everyone is welcome and valued. Even if you, or me, or another teacher disagrees with that phrasing, people have a right to express themselves in their homes. I’m not sure why we’re fretting about one poster that didn’t even cause any problems!”

“Come on, Ana!” Sarah exclaimed. “What if a kid’s parent had a poster with sexually explicit or violent content on the wall? If we’re actually going to take your idea seriously—that we treat kids like they’re at school during remote instruction—we need to think about issues like this.”

Listening to Sarah and Ana, it was hard not to be drawn back to the memories of the early days of emergency remote instruction. Emir loved his job, but teaching virtually during the first two years of the pandemic was like pulling teeth. He felt like he couldn’t connect with students anymore, and desperately missed all the little moments – the conversations between classes, run-ins in the hallways, eating lunch together.... Teaching had been his passion, but teaching remotely felt purely transactional.

“Consistency and instructional quality are the priorities,” Ana replied slowly and deliberately. “We can’t treat turning your camera off differently from breaking any other school rule. We need to make sure we’re all holding the line on this, so kids aren’t getting different messages. ”

After a pause, she added, “And we can’t let small political differences get in our way.”

Among the matrix of faces on the screen, there were roughly equal amounts of head nodding and frowning following Ana’s statement. Ana’s reputation for strictness was well known among students and teachers. While students often grumbled about her toughness, they knew it came from an unwavering commitment to their best interests. The walls of her office were filled with cards and tokens of appreciation from her students, many of whom returned to visit her, even years after moving on to middle and high school.

“I do agree with Ana that we need to be consistent,” Emir jumped in. “I’m also thinking about what might happen if we had to go back to virtual learning for longer periods of time. My daughter Julie just found out that her fall semester of college is going to be mostly online— a huge hurricane this summer destroyed much of that area, and they’re not sure exactly when they can bring students back to campus. We had a few worrying storms last year here, too, and I can imagine us being in a similar position at some point in the future. Unfortunately, extreme weather events are now just something we need to keep in the back of our heads when we do our contingency planning.”

Sarah looked concerned.

“O.K., but can we be consistent here? I mean, isn’t the fact that we all struggled with this issue indicative that maybe it wasn’t the right approach? As much as we try to treat all kids the same ways in school, we’ve always known that our kids are coming from different circumstances and have different choices. And honestly, remote learning highlighted those inconsistencies like never before – the students could see it too!

“I remember when Dmitri gave us a tour of his parents’ basement. They had just refurbished it a few months before, and it was the perfect place for him to do his classes virtually. He had a ton of space down there. They even have a foosball table – you can imagine the looks on the other kids’ faces when they saw that!”

The teachers chuckled.

“And then I compare that to Troy, sitting at the kitchen table with both of his siblings. Whenever he unmuted, we could hear his brother or sister in the background doing their own classes. The kids’ grandmother lives with them, too. It’s such a full house! I worry about how Troy can focus when we’re virtual. I don’t know how Troy feels about showing the rest of the class how cramped his house is, but I have to believe that navigating his home and his classmate’s perceptions must be a distraction!”

Emir half-smiled to himself, thinking of his own efforts to curate the perfect Zoom background. If this was something that he was aware of, it was hard to believe the students wouldn’t be self-conscious about what their classmates were seeing, too. Although teachers had tried last to encourage students to use the background blur feature, they quickly found that strategy didn’t work for students using older computers. Too often, those students would find their own faces or torsos blurred along with everything else. In his own experiments with background blur, Emir had no technical troubles but quickly found seeing his own image staring back at him against a mostly blank border too distracting to be worth it.

“For me,” Sarah continued, “the differences between students’ home situations make it hard to know how to respond when the usual rules – or these new ones – are broken. How can I hold all students to the same expectation, when I know that the remote camera policy carries such different weight for them?”

The group seemed thoughtful. After a brief pause, Sarah finished.

“It’s always been true that factors at home influence what happens in our classrooms, but now, at least on Fridays, what’s happening at home is what’s happening in our classrooms.”

“I think that last point is particularly critical,” admitted Grace. “When we employ remote instruction, the student’s home becomes an extension of the classroom. That’s a fundamental issue. I’m really worried about the prospect of teaching to a bunch of black boxes, but we need to think about how to manage this. I mean, I still don’t know what I’ll say to Chris’s family if that poster pops up again.”

“I think we should be able to say to the family that that sign isn’t an appropriate Zoom background. Is that taking a political stance? Sure! But the more I think about it, the more I realize we just need to now!” Sarah stated.

“I don’t know,” said Emir. “That worries me a little.”

“Let’s be real here,” Ana said, barely concealing her exasperation. “We have to focus on helping the kids make academic progress. They’ve lost a ton of instructional time in the last few years, and I don’t know how to help them meet grade-level benchmarks on time if we start holding students to different standards, or picking unnecessary political fights. Flexibility has its advantages, but relaxing our expectations isn’t good for anybody, least of all our kiddos who have fallen furthest behind.”

“Ok, so... say we decide that our official policy is to keep cameras on, but kids’ parents are telling them not to...what can we do?” asked Grace.

“We have rules for a reason. I’m sorry that some parents are telling their kids not to follow school rules, but the right response is simple: ‘Breaking the rules results in consequences: end of story,’” replied Ana.

“Consequences for whom?” asked Sarah. “If the child is following their parent’s instructions, is it really fair to punish them for that? We don’t punish them for coming to school late, because we know that’s out of their control. How is this different?”

Ana leaned closer to the camera. “What are you suggesting, Sarah? That we make the rules optional? Doesn’t that set a dangerous precedent? If we let students—or their parents—choose whether or not they want to follow our remote learning policies, how can we require all students to wear the same uniform, or do the same assignments, or even accept the same curriculum?”

It was almost 1 pm, and Emir knew the teachers would have to sign off in a minute. He’d anticipated some disagreement but had hoped that they’d be able to reach consensus by the end of the meeting. Instead, it seemed like discussing the school’s “camera on” policy had suddenly spiraled into a constellation of new issues. Was the Zoom classroom an extension of the school building? Should the school hold students accountable to school rules while in their homes? How should teachers navigate situations where school policies and standards were in tension with students’ families’ expectations?

“So what should we recommend?” Emir asked.