



# Communication Pedagogy: The Coronavirus Pandemic

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**Abstract:** In this historical moment defined by the coronavirus (COVID-19), the global community struggles with and against a seemingly invisible foe. Students, faculty, and administrators open the blinds on windows in the morning, witnessing the brightness of the sun and seemingly the clarity of a morning welcome. Yet, there lurks, not in the shadows, but in the brightness of the everyday sunshine, the possibility of sickness and death. This responsive essay weaves together my communicative rejoinders to the coronavirus and its implications for this challenging time in human history. I turn to the autoethnographic insights of Bochner and Ellis (2016) to frame the theoretical rationale for a conversation that rests within the dialectic of fear and tenacious hope.

## Autoethnographic Insights

Autoethnographic insight has a long-standing tradition of attempting to make sense out of existence when meaning seems outside one's knowing discernment. The *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1781; 2000) and Saint Augustine's (397; 1943) *Confessions* illustrate autoethnographic work. In any moment of confusion, the insights of Augustine are contemporary because he engaged a fundamental existential quandary: "I have become a question unto myself" (397; 1943, p. 244).

Autoethnographic inquiry has existential roots. In situations of routine, the world moves with normative assurance; during such times of familiarity, I am not a question unto myself, I am simply busied with the tasks and activities called forth by the day. There are moments, however, in which our human experience

no longer projects linear unreflectiveness about tomorrow, and we sense that much is fundamentally at risk. Typical questions of a young student, such as, “What do you plan to do in five years? Or ten?” seem nonsensical, and one witnesses the shifting conversation about new epicenters of coronavirus danger and despair within the global community.

Scholarly reflection on such existential disruptions makes the autoethnographic scholarship of Bochner and Ellis powerfully salient. They are perhaps the two most well-known communication academics grappling with autoethnographic perceptions. In their book *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*, Bochner and Ellis (2016) provide a historical and personal reflection on this form of research. They discuss the importance of evocative stories that generate questions during points of vulnerability and ethical dilemmas. Such stories announce the precarious nature of uncertain communicative turns, when each direction lacks clarity of promise.

As Bochner reflected on his engagement with the origins of autoethnographic inquiry in communication, he referenced Albert Camus’s (1947; 1991b) novel *The Plague*, indeed appropriate for this historical moment (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 32). He stated that Camus pointed him toward existential understanding, a direction in search of temporal truth, human feeling, empathy, and the recognition of suffering and trauma within the human condition. Autoethnographic inquiry addresses shifts in routine perception, recognizing disrupted stability; such scholarship seeks to record the disrupted, interrupted, and destroyed. Lack of constancy leaves the interpreter to discover meaning in a different paradigmatic configuration; a shifting historical moment demands recognition of a new existential canvas that requires active participation. I applaud Camus’s (1942; 1991a) use of the term “absurd” (p. 28). In such moments of disarray of meaning, humans often manifest an absurd tenacity to carry on. Camus cited Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain, only to have it fall down and then to push it up again (1942; 1991a, p. 119). Somehow, human beings put one foot in front of another with a “tenacious hope” (Arnett, 2012, pp. 77–78) that meaning will eventually resurface from a given moment of eclipse.

Autoethnographic inquiry necessitates bringing educational reflection to an event; it presupposes reading, learning, language study, and the recognition that contextual understanding requires one to encounter the world ever anew. Existentially, the communicative agent must ultimately choose a direction. Autoethnographic scholarship aligns with the heart of existential literature. From this perspective, I understand theories as public stories that attempt to display an answer to relational and historical questions. The relevancy of the theory does not rest with the theory itself but with its temporal answer to a given historical question. Such an insight is profound within everyday engagements. Consider a friend who is deeply, deeply sad, and you know the answer, the very trick that will alter your friend’s mood. You wait, and you wait, and you wait until there is an invitation within the historical moment that permits you to make a suggestion capable of being received with grace. If such a moment does not arise, one simply abides in silence, waiting for another relational and historical invitation that allows one to turn information from a know-it-all insight to a loving gesture to and for another.

Autoethnographic work takes us into the heart of the existential reality of human choice. In Camus’s (1942; 1989) *The Stranger*, there is an odd, painful moment in which the main character, Meursault, fires a gun at another character, simply named “the Arab” (p. 59). Camus’s writing somehow gives the reader the ability to watch that bullet in motion. The constancy of everyday life evaporates quickly and violently; the world of Meursault will never return to its previous dwelling. The coronavirus has functioned like a bullet boring into the heart of everyday routine.

## COVID-19

I now turn to this historical moment of a coronavirus (COVID-19) that functions as a substantive, communicative interruption that demands existential reflection on what really matters. Think of the disruptions in professional life: conferences cancelled, travel money frozen, journals and publishers falling behind in reviews and communication, students languishing at home with responsibilities for a younger brother and a younger sister. For many, this moment is a dreadful burden for study, social responsibility, and fiscal health. There are others finding ways to communicate with people, nationally and internationally, who never anticipated the everyday use of social media; they now embrace terms like Zoom, Blackboard, Google Docs, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, Skype, GoToMeeting, and Microsoft Teams. In such an era, we seek to temper possibilities of despair with reminders about what really matters, the meaningful.

Pearce and Cronen (1980), in their work with the notion of the coordinated management of meaning, provided practical and theoretical comprehension of meaning-making. They remind readers about coordinates of meaning that matter. If I were to write a comprehensive question for a PhD student in communication today, I would suggest the following: “When all around you seems to press contrarily against the normative, the routine, and that which permits an unreflective walk through life, what are the communicative coordinates that actually matter to you?” If one can sort through meaningful communicative coordinates during times of disruption, one just might find greater opportunities when life returns to a new form of normalcy. Communicative coordinates permit one, existentially, to construct a life akin to a house built on a sure foundation—these coordinates will guide no matter what the external conditions may be. It is interesting that in instances of historical transcendence, as we shift from one demanding moment to another, it is not only possible but also essential to be reminded of that which has enduring significance: communicative coordinates that can and should direct a life. When Jacques Ellul was writing, he often critiqued the West for doing things because they can be done, not because they should be done (Ellul, 1964, pp. 79–80; 97; 122–134). Communicative coordinates function as “shoulds,” and the “cans” are intimately linked to what Ellul understood as techniques: routines, systems, and procedures which all assume that a paradigmatic direction will go on forever (Ellul, 1964, p. 127). “Cans” are techniques that keep us from asking fundamental questions.

As I work with students in the midst of this pandemic, the coronavirus invites a “can,” making it more difficult for us, at times, to muster the energy for the “should.” For my students, the immediate turn is to relational connections with one another, something that can be easily accomplished by numerous different configurations of Zoom. In such moments, the question of “why” invades one’s imagination, moving this disrupted imagination to points of seeming futility, making us want to reach out and hover in conversation with others for increasingly greater lengths of time. Educationally, the “should” of Ellul rests with elements of structure, practices, and learning. Ellul, of course, would not discount the relational importance of people in times of peril. However, our task, as educators and as students, is to prepare not just for this moment of invisible and quiet terror, but also for how families, institutions, and businesses are built by what we do, by what we learn, and by what we leave behind. The notion of the “should” is always more demanding, more difficult, and, at times, more heart-wrenching. Being in a time of societal shutdown invites many to follow the path of least resistance. Tomorrow, however, is constructed by today’s work, creative imagination and practices that build what is not yet. Ellul’s “should” is an ethical call, in this moment, to be stronger than a virus, more tenacious than a pandemic, and more committed to those who come after us than to our own fear. Simply put: education is the practice of tomorrow.

## Reflections

Recently, a student and I discussed internal noise that seems to fight for exceptional amounts of space in the mind; the coronavirus carries with it a temptation to go to a dark space too quickly and too often. I am currently working on a book on Dorothy Day.<sup>1</sup> The title of the book is, tentatively, *The Work Matters: Dorothy Day and a Community of Faith*. Day is a champion of a narrative common center: faith, community, and the practices of labor. *How do you help a human being who is momentarily deprived of the resources to carry on? No one should be relationally abandoned, but educators provide opportunities for practices that offer relational assurance as a by-product of the learning.* What a time for educators to begin reading groups, research, collective projects, and activities within a department. I believe Day would have appreciated Hannah Arendt's (1958; 1998) contention that "the social" is a dangerous space where the public and the private blur (p. 69ff.). Arendt was a Jewish woman coming out of Nazi Germany, who recognized that nourishing both public and private life is absolutely necessary for human health. In the practical life of students and organizations, the public and the private do blend. It is educators' public commitment to the practices of education that provides the greatest hope for personal assurance.

Educators invite students into the practices of learning, in writing, reading, and every time they meet with students and talk about ideas. After calling a class together on Zoom and finding that not all of the students were present, we made contact with each of the absent members individually. Nudging them back to the table of educational practices is a communicative obligation. In such a moment, relational care and hope for the other rest with our maintaining educational practices together. One of Arendt's students, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1998), wrote a book on the social called *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Using the image of a 1950s movie, Pitkin suggests how common and, indeed, fear-provoking the notion of the social is within modern society. The social is seductive—it is the place of a facile "can." The social welcomes one into an unreflective space. Neil Postman (1985) understood such unreflective preoccupation as amusing us to death. The "should" requires us to be responsible and make choices each day as educators, to welcome students into the practices of learning. Perhaps the gift, if indeed there is one from this virus, is a reminder that practices can heal. In the midst of a horrendous day, playing a musical instrument permits immersion into the practices of music. One loses the intensity of surrounding difficulties and potential pain in the doing of immersed labor. In this moment, as I reflect on Day, Arendt, and Richard Sennett's (2009) focus on the craftsman, I remember my own upbringing in a construction family, where the practices always mattered. *Perhaps one of our major callings as educators is to assist our students, not just with what they learn, but with an invitation to the very practices of learning.*

My second reflection affirms Martin Buber's (1948) warning: Do not overrun reality (p. 39). This is not the first time the human community has experienced a pandemic. In 1918 and 1919, more American lives were lost from the Spanish Flu than all those who succumbed to World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined (Pasquantonio, 2018). The overrunning of reality came from a stark mistake, with a large percentage being lost in the second wave of the pandemic (Nickol & Kindrachuk, 2019, p. 1). The glaring point for us in this historical moment is to recognize the possibility of an additional wave of the virus. Our working with one another is being radically adjusted. An education in the liberal arts, particularly in the field of communication, ought to encourage personal and professional nimbleness. Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation, Aristotle's (340; 1998) focus on *phronesis* or "practical wisdom" (VI. 8), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1949; 2005) stress on contextual ethics (p. 101), and the notion of *everyday adaptability should define who we are as a discipline committed to praxis, theory-informed action* (Arnett

& Arneson, 1999, pp. 17–19; Schrag, 1986). Gregory Bateson (1979) repeatedly discussed the importance of calibration and recalibration (p. 196). Calibration permits a paradigmatic engagement along a straight line. Recalibration requires us to change directions constantly, and sometimes quite quickly. During this pandemic, communication study affords us a basic truism: maybe, things change, and we must adapt. Recalibration is one of the geniuses of our field.

## Communication Study and Tenacious Hope

I conclude, as a communication educator, offering a reminder of who we are. We are a field of study attentive to interruption, responsive to practices, and ever alert to responsible change. *The coronavirus may temporarily, or perhaps for the long-term, recalibrate much of what we do, but it cannot, and will not, destroy the importance of learning, studying, practices, and care for one another in the midst of the unknown.* A student, during a Zoom meeting, stated, “I feel like I’m on the Titanic, and the world about me is going down. I’m spending my time reading and talking about ideas with others, and wondering: Is this a good way to spend time before the boat sinks?” The response from a number of people in the class was reassuring to this educator, and to many. “Why not? Why not use every last moment we have to learn?” The students in the class educated all of us, reminding us about the necessity for tenacious hope when clarity of direction fails and conventional wisdom does not assist. I concluded the Zoom meeting with a feeling that I am fortunate to be in such a discipline with such students, committed, determined learners who are capable of meeting absurdity and disrupted lives with tenacious hope. This demanding moment announces the insights of Immanuel Kant (1781; 1998): Imagination begins with what is before us, with the real, contrasted with fantasy, which demands that existence bend to our will (pp. 223; 238–239). Imagination dwells within the home of tenacious hope and undergirds a communication education defined by its nimbleness in the midst of uncertainty.

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#### Note

1. Dorothy Day was a writer, editor, and social activist who lived from 1897–1980. She founded *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1933, which led to the birth of the Catholic Worker Movement.