Unpacking Privilege in Pandemic Pedagogy: Social Media Debates on Power Dynamics of Online Education

Roy Schwartzman

Keywords: online education, instructional communication, pandemic pedagogy, social media, critical incident analysis, student engagement

Abstract: As one of the world's major social media hubs dedicated to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Facebook mega-group *Pandemic Pedagogy* provides a panoramic perspective of the key concerns educators and students face amid a public health crisis that forces redefinition of what constitutes effective education. After several months of instruction under pandemic conditions, two central themes emerged as the most extensively discussed and the most intensively contested: (1) rigor versus accommodation in calibrating standards for students, and (2) ways to improve engagement during classes conducted through videoconferencing, especially via Zoom. Both themes reveal deeply embedded systems of privilege and marginalization in the structures and methods of online education. The pandemic starkly exposes disparities in access, equity, and inclusivity. Addressing these challenges will require explicit measures to acknowledge these power imbalances by rethinking what counts as effective teaching and learning rather than relying on institutions to revert to business as usual after this pandemic abates.

Introduction: From Interruption to Intervention

March 11, 2020: FULL STOP. That was the day face-to-face classroom instruction screeched to a halt at my university, suspending all classes for 1 week. During this time, all courses would transform into a fully online delivery mode as a way to protect students and teachers from the newly declared

---

Roy Schwartzman, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina

CONTACT: roypoet@gmail.com

COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty were instructed to "put all your courses online." This imperative treats online instruction as if it were a spatial transfer, simply moving packaged goods from one shelf to another. Although the rapid, large-scale shift to online instruction began as an emergency stopgap, communication educators and students will continue to face the post-pandemic ramifications of more extensive and intensive incorporation of online instruction for years to come. Regardless of their experience in online teaching, instructors quickly realized that online represented more than merely the location of instructional content. The pandemic-induced disruptions forced faculty to reflect seriously on what counts as effective pedagogy and the role of communication in instruction.

Back to March 11th. That evening, I considered the magnitude of the task at hand. Two decades of designing and teaching fully online communication courses, including the performance-based fundamentals course, taught me that "putting courses online" even within the constraints of emergency remote teaching involves more than cosmetic alterations. The online environment presents a different media ecology, which explains why (once upon a time) instructors earned additional pay to redesign an existing face-to-face course into an online one.

To clarify, when I developed online versions of the communication fundamentals course a number of years ago, I was paid the equivalent of teaching an additional section. Other institutions typically provided something similar (e.g., one course release). The last time that happened for me was several years ago. Media ecology establishes, however, that educational technologies never operate as neutral content delivery mechanisms (Barnes & Strate, 1996). One does not simply "put an existing course online" because the online medium transforms the nature of the course and the teaching/learning experience (Dowd, 2016). Far from a mere interruption, educational pedagogy throughout and beyond the pandemic invites—no, demands—transformation of what communication instruction is and how it operates.

Faced with an emergency that required quick adaptation to remote delivery formats, faculty and staff across campus had to break through silos and work together to create and implement best—or at least viable—practices in remote and online learning environments. To foster communication across these divides, I created the Facebook group *Pandemic Pedagogy* (https://www.facebook.com/groups/pandemicpedagogy1). It would provide a forum for stakeholders across all levels and types of education to optimize teaching and learning throughout (and beyond) the pandemic. The group grew rapidly, with membership eventually stabilizing at more than 32,500 hailing from 99 countries and comprised of teachers, course designers, students, and others directly involved with educational practice. *Pandemic Pedagogy* provides a panoramic perspective of key issues the education community faces amid a public health crisis that forces redefinition of what constitutes effective instruction.

From Intervention to Interpretation

The following reflections stem from preliminary examination of emergent themes from the more than 1.4 million content items generated thus far in the *Pandemic Pedagogy* Facebook group. The reflections that follow employ critical incident analysis in teaching (CIAT) as developed by Tripp (1993). Critical incident analysis links stories of personal educational experiences with the deeper, structurally embedded forces that generate and perpetuate these episodes. CIAT proceeds through four kinds of judgments. Practical judgment involves narration of the event and the major challenges, questions, or decision points it poses. Diagnostic judgment includes the causes and consequences of the incident. Reflective judgment offers personal evaluations of the event and how it affects others as well as self. Critical judgment moves into meta-analysis by addressing who or what generates this type of incident. Through critical judgment, the

personal incident can broaden into an archetypal experience that informs the professional practice of others.

Although CIAT begins as a self-reflective analytical procedure, it is particularly appropriate for application to social media communication contexts. The narration of an incident on social media constitutes an observable threshold for an incident to qualify as critical. The decision to share an incident on a platform with thousands of other educators worldwide demonstrates that the episode has more than personal importance and deserves public scrutiny. Subsequent interactions among group members enact diagnostic and reflective judgments, with the accumulating comments stimulating instructional improvement (Bruster & Peterson, 2013). Thus, this essay concentrates on connecting the practical with the critical by investigating the underlying power dynamics operant in the particular incidents. Tripp (1993) stresses the importance of driving analysis to this level because "we also have to locate responsibility on the system that has constructed the practices this teacher employed and which has also been primarily responsible for the construction of her view of these practices" (p. 122).

Posts and comments appearing most frequently are shown in the "top posts" area of Facebook's group administrator tools. Posts are ranked by the engagement they generate, operationalized as the number of comments and reactions. In addition to the amount of engagement to indicate breadth of impact, intensity of engagement was judged by tracking the topics that instigated conflicts so intense that members called for administrator intervention. The intersection of breadth and intensity yielded two themes that garnered the most attention: how to apply academic standards under pandemic conditions, and student (dis)engagement during class videoconferences (especially via Zoom).

Avoiding Rigor Mortis: Calibrating Standards

Every instructor hopes to embrace high standards for students. Throughout the pandemic, however, insistence on the same kinds of standards implemented the same way could prove grossly inappropriate. Adherence to rigidity may ossify the standards, failing to account for how the standards themselves may impose inequitable burdens. Even a policy as straightforward as an assignment due date ordinarily presumes a baseline availability of the resources and environment—such as the expensive computer labs that sat empty throughout most of the pandemic—to complete the work promptly and to specifications. Digital divides in online access and skill sets consistently track to race and culture (Reilly et al., 2017), and particularly to socioeconomic status (Morgan, 2020). In many online environments, students may be especially reticent to disclose cultural factors—such as low income reflected in the physical environment visible onscreen—that present barriers to learning.

The longer the pandemic-induced mode of education continues without addressing such inequities, the more these disparities will persist and potentially deepen achievement gaps. Many posts in *Pandemic Pedagogy* express concerns that students will fall behind not because they shirk coursework (as those students likely would perform poorly anyway), but because they lack the necessary means for engaging in their courses properly. Posts and comments inquire: To what extent are instructors evaluating the student's work, or are they evaluating how well a student can access the time, tools, and environment to produce high-quality work (Schwartzman, 2020b)?

Two of the intertwined themes that figure most prominently in *Pandemic Pedagogy* discussions revolve around communicative constructions of students: characterizing student motivations and calibrating assessment of student work. The portrayals of students range from casting them as manipulators who

exploit the pandemic to describing them as adrift or traumatized from pandemic-related stressors. The manipulative image arises from descriptions of students who ask for exemptions from deadlines or from assignment requirements, attributing missing or shoddy work to nebulous pandemic factors. Group members respond by noting that students who lack the resources or opportunities for doing work properly may not disclose these deficits for fear of humiliation. Furthermore, insisting on full documentation of excuses during the pandemic could infringe on medical privacy or FERPA regulations if the rationale relates to contracting COVID-19.

Profiles of students as traumatized most poignantly emerge from (duly anonymized) notes of thanks from students who disclose the hardships they face. The rapid spread of the virus touched many students directly, as friends and family members suffered or died without any personal visitation allowed (due to threat of infection). Members generally prefer allowing for Type II errors, allowing some cases of manipulation to go undetected and unpunished. Anecdotal reports of student performance across various disciplines remain mixed, but turn decidedly more negative with final grade calculations at the end of each term. Most frequently, educators lament abnormally poor work from students, but they also acknowledge that the stress from the pandemic could have taken its toll. Other instructors celebrate high student achievement, suggesting that some students immersed themselves more thoroughly in coursework when removed from campus-based distractions and social life. The ability to escape distractions, however, may in itself signify privilege. The allure of completing coursework "in the comfort of home" presumes a home environment conducive to learning, one that accepts and validates the student (Linares & Muñoz, 2011), providing basic emotional foundations as well as the physical conditions that foster learning.

For many students, the physical campus environment they share serves as a grand equalizer, assuring them access to equipment, space, motivational peers, and student support services devoted to their success. Physical campuses offer dedicated spaces for study with minimal distractions, social spaces for positive peer interactions, and ample opportunities for mental and physical stimulation as well as emotional support (Tinto, 2012). This connectivity with people and resources has tangible effects. Tinto (2012) adds that "absence of social involvement and the social isolation and loneliness that follow often lead to withdrawal," and that "students living in residence halls on campus are found to have higher retention rates than those who live off campus" (p. 65). Campus-based services make tools such as computer labs, equipment checkout, and assistive technologies (especially for disability accommodations) available to all students. In their influential study of student retention and success, Kuh et al. (2005) repeatedly note how the campus can provide a powerful sense of place that embodies learning—not simply genial geography, but a sense that everyone at the institution belongs. Online environments can prove inviting as well, but they do not provide as immersive an educational experience. Eventually, perhaps online course environments will become as fully immersive and engaging as online games along the lines of Fortnite or World of Warcraft.

The fundamental debates about assessing student performance center on calibrating the balance between enforcing academic standards (demanding rigor) and adapting to pandemic-related extenuations (extending grace). Members defend positions across the continuum from "everyone gets an A" to "ratchet up the rigor now that students aren't partying with their peers." Advocates of rigor note that students still must master the same competencies to succeed in the professional world, regardless of the pandemic. Many proponents of rigor fear that learning will stagnate and students will fall behind in achievement (below grade level in K–12, not meeting accreditation and licensure standards or delaying graduation in higher education).

Camera Obscurer: Surveillance and Presence

A second prevalent theme bears specifically on the video component of online instruction, focusing on how best to engage students via videoconferencing tools such as Zoom and similar platforms. Recurrent, detailed discussions center on the challenges of teaching to empty "black boxes" of students whose cameras are turned off. "I hate teaching to black boxes" has become a regular refrain. Members frequently express extreme frustration at the disconnect they experience in the absence of any visual feedback. Some discussants connect the muted videos to student disengagement (a manifestation of apathy or antagonism). Others suggest more nefarious motives, such as the blank screens serving as cover for skipping class. Even worse, a cottage industry has arisen for bots (e.g., the infamous Beulr app) that clone a Zoom user's identity so that the person appears to be present in meetings they do not actually attend.

As with so many other aspects of online education, usage of technology enacts and reflects systems of power and privilege (Schwartzman, 2020a). This point applies especially to camera policies that do not account for gender, class, race, or cultural factors (Finders & Muñoz, 2021). There may be legitimate reasons for requiring cameras to remain on, but such a requirement carries unintended consequences. The "camera on" mandate takes for granted access to reliable bandwidth and other technologies that enable consistent video streaming. Furthermore, insistence on sustained direct eye contact is not a universal cultural norm. The camera also can reveal conditions a student may prefer not to share: surroundings that suggest poverty, cultural artifacts that risk negative stigmatization, or concern about other people who may be visible on camera (e.g., revealing cohabitation arrangements). The ability to blur or replace the unfiltered background comes only with the privilege of equipment that can run these enhanced features properly.

Perhaps attention could focus less on camera policies and more on multiple ways to engage with students in differently mediated environments. If cameras are not required, instructors can create an atmosphere that invites students to voluntarily unmute their video. The extensive communication research on creating immediacy, "the feeling of psychological closeness" between student and instructor, could prove beneficial here (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 28). The closer the perceived bond between students and teachers, the more each student may feel comfortable activating the camera that could expose vulnerabilities or differences. Greater immediacy has both cognitive and emotional benefits by increasing student motivation to learn and participate (Kelly, 2010). Hundreds of studies demonstrate the link between the positive relationships established through student-teacher immediacy and improved learning (Frymier, 2013). The preponderance of research on immediacy in communication instruction discusses building closeness in direct face-to-face interactions (Gardner et al., 2017). Although more rarely addressed in communication scholarship, a robust body of research in instructional technology and distance education investigates how to cultivate immediacy online, a concept more frequently discussed in these research communities as presence. Thomas and Thorpe (2019) suggest that online instructors prioritize using "presence and authenticity" to create an environment that "enhances the students' comfort, confidence, and willingness to participate," and thereby "provide a 'safe container' for students to participate and interact without being judged, ridiculed, or marginalized" (p. 67). Students and teachers can cultivate presence by behaving in ways that project themselves as fully involved, participatory, and acknowledging each other as valued individuals.

In fully online environments, presence most intensively arises in the interactive components of the course that place the student and teacher in direct contact (Thomas & Thorpe, 2019). Two decades

ago, Arbaugh (2001) noted that verbal and nonverbal behaviors that foster immediacy in traditional classrooms have a similar effect in online modalities. The benefits of immediacy may be more easily realizable in synchronous courses where the teacher and students interact in real time. Although more challenging, similar measures to communicate immediacy can be implemented in asynchronous online courses as well. Some of these techniques include (Conaway et al., 2005):

▶ Expressing appreciation of student efforts, not simply outcomes;
▶ Sharing experiences similar to those of students;
▶ Referring to the class as a cohesive collective by using inclusive language (we, us, our) and addressing students by name;
▶ Quoting and referring to student work when discussing course material;
▶ Demonstrating openness to interactions beyond the immediate course content;
▶ Inviting and listening to student feedback;
▶ Validating the inherent worth of the student, irrespective of academic performance;
▶ Enabling students to use breakout rooms as a way to build closeness.

For example, students in my communication theory and methods course immediately made overtures toward immediacy by using humor in our initial class meeting. Every student unmuted their video to reveal an "inside joke": a background photo of me superimposed on a page from the textbook I wrote, suitably yellowed to mimic an important archival document. For good measure, the background included a seated Bernie Sanders duly attired with the facemask, parka, and knitted mittens he wore at President Biden's inauguration.

Conclusion and Inclusion

No amount of imaginative online course contortions can counteract embedded privileges and deprivations that structure students' ability to access and benefit from technological tools. It remains unclear whether a genuinely new educational landscape will emerge from addressing the power dynamics brought into bold relief by the pandemic. Although early theorists touted online education as the great equalizer that would universalize availability of knowledge (Schwartzman, 2014), the migration online during the pandemic proved otherwise. Maximizing the benefits of online learning requires designing and deploying technologies that do not deepen existing inequalities. As a long-time practitioner of both online education and poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2020), I have often turned to poetry in struggling with the profound reassessment of educational practice that the pandemic poses. Poetry germinates at inflection points that stubbornly resist definitive (re)solution. Poetry itself embodies the struggle to grapple with the possibilities of communicating at the limits of what can be expressed. One fragment of a poem perpetually in progress (as much of my work is, wavering between composition and decomposition) issues a caveat about settling into "the new normal" championed by institutions trying to return to pre-COVID practices. I wrote about the flirtations between pedagogues and demagogues, questioning the blustery proclamations of victory against the virus, then backsliding by returning to a time

> when online pedagogy
> bleeds into demagogy,
> rewarding those already awarded
> privileges.

The ongoing discourse on *Pandemic Pedagogy* may offer a glimpse into how and whether the post-pandemic educational landscape evolves. Future research, especially employing big data analysis techniques, could discern more subtle and longitudinal patterns of discursive content. Those studies, as well as detailed content analyses, would complement the more theoretical reflections on (post-) pandemic educational practices.

References

Arbaugh, J. B. (2001). How instructor immediacy behaviors affect student satisfaction and learning in web-based courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *64*(4), 42–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/108056990106400405

Barnes, S., & Strate, L. (1996). The educational implications of the computer: A media ecology critique. *New Jersey Journal of Communication, 4*(2), 180–208.

Bruster, B. G., & Peterson, B. R. (2013). Using critical incidents in teaching to promote reflective practice. *Reflective Practice*, *14*(2), 170–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2012.732945

Conaway, R. N., Easton, S. S., & Schmidt, W. V. (2005). Strategies for enhancing student interaction and immediacy in online courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *68*(1), 23–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569904273300

Dowd, J. (2016). *Educational ecologies: Toward a symbolic-material understanding of discourse, technology, and education*. Lexington.

Faulkner, S. L. (2020). *Poetic inquiry: Craft, method and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Finders, M., & Muñoz, J. (2021, March 3). Cameras on: Surveillance in the time of COVID-19. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/03/03/why-its-wrong-require-students-keep-their-cameras-online-classes-opinion?fbclid=IwAR0HdZDfNPO4Pkazpk1tBFQfST2iHeHh6Zk4Lhsy5BEOchVjyHajR5dRBBE

Frymier, A. B. (2013). Teacher immediacy. In J. Hattie & E. M. Anderman (Eds.), *International guide to student achievement* (pp. 425–427). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Gardner, E. E., Anderson, L. B., & Wolvin, A. D. (2017). Understanding instructor immediacy, credibility, and facework strategies through a qualitative analysis of written instructor feedback. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *18*(1), 27–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2016.1247113

Kelly, S. (2010). Movie magic: A gateway to higher classroom immediacy. *Communication Teacher, 24*(3), 127–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2010.489194

Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Kinzie, J., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. American Association for Higher Education.

Linares, L. I. R., & Muñoz, S. M. (2011). Revisiting validation theory: Theoretical foundations, applications, and extensions. *Enrollment Management Journal*, *5*(2), 12–33.

Morgan, H. (2020). Best practices for implementing remote learning during a pandemic. *Clearing House*, *93*(3), 134–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2020.1751480

Reilly, J., Gallagher-Lepak, S., & Killion, C. (2017). 3Gy4 e-learning in higher education: The digital divide and culture. *Journal of Current Issues in Media and Telecommunications*, *9*(1), 1–13.

Schwartzman, R. (2014). Digital culture as emancipator, oppressor, and distractor. *North American Social Science Review, 1*(1), 22–44.

Schwartzman, R. (2020a). Performing pandemic pedagogy. *Communication Education, 69*(4), 502–517. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2020.1804602

Schwartzman, R. (2020b). The (post-)pandemic academic: Re-forming communication studies. *Carolinas Communication Annual, 36*, 1–8.

Thomas, G., & Thorpe, S. (2019). Enhancing the facilitation of online groups in higher education: A review of the literature on face-to-face and online group-facilitation. *Interactive Learning Environments*, *27*(1), 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2018.1451897

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical incidents in teaching*. Routledge.