



# Transforming Experiential Learning in the Honors Interpersonal Communication Course: Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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**Keywords:** experiential learning, interpersonal communication, online learning, honors education, pandemic

**Abstract:** Drawing upon my own experience as an educator, I describe and reflect upon my experiential learning-pedagogical process of transforming my Fall 2020 Zoom-based honors interpersonal communication course in which my students traversed through a series of experiential learning activities called Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. Data revealed that students achieved desired learning outcomes and strengthened much-needed interpersonal connections despite the circumstances and stressors induced by the pandemic. Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys can be replicated to maximize the features of quality online courses identified by Kaufmann and Vallade (2022), such as helping students develop personal connections in a positive learning climate and ensuring that “students are getting the information and interaction they need to be successful” (p. 153).

## Introduction

Interpersonal communication is at the heart of personal, social, civic, and professional interactions and relationships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, interpersonal communication became more challenging in daily life and in college courses. Health and safety measures such as masks, social distancing, quarantine, and isolation made it difficult to engage in the everyday face-to-face communication that people previously took for granted. Loneliness increased considerably among college students (Labrague

et al., 2021) and in the general population (Killgore et al., 2020) during the pandemic. In one diary study during the early weeks of the pandemic, participants reported decreases in interpersonal connection, psychological well-being, and physiological health (Ford, 2020). As attested by Arnett (2020), the pandemic disrupted the everyday human experience and led people to reflect upon their practices of living, learning, and loving.

As the volume of COVID-19 cases surged in the Spring of 2020, over 4,200 U.S. institutions of higher education experienced unprecedented closures and disruptions to teaching and learning, with many schools transitioning to online or remote instruction (Rhea, 2020). In the Fall of 2020, the pandemic led 65% of nearly 3,000 U.S. universities and colleges to shift their courses to online or remote instruction (C. Miller, 2021). Instead of in-person instruction, the majority of Fall 2020 classes met online using synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid modes of instruction. Many institutions continue to offer courses via online modalities (Fassett & Atay, 2022); however, little research has documented effective instructional communication in synchronous and hybrid online courses (A. N. Miller et al., 2021). Two exceptions are A. N. Miller et al., who discussed hybrid courses, and Piotrowski (2021) who provided a brief report about a course using Zoom, a synchronous videoconferencing technology. Put simply, from a communication perspective, we know little about the effectiveness of these modalities, especially related to experiential learning. I build on previous work by documenting in detail how the synchronous modality afforded a uniquely and carefully cultivated culture for experiential learning in my honors interpersonal communication course.

The pandemic foregrounded the importance of interpersonal communication and thereby presented ripe opportunities for guiding my students in a synchronous course through a series of experiential learning cycles. In this autoethnographic (Arnett, 2020) and qualitative analysis, I reflect upon and present my own experiential learning process in successfully transforming my Fall 2020 online honors interpersonal communication course to feature a set of experiential learning activities. When presented to students, the experiential learning cycle typically begins with *framing* the process and then engaging in *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization*, and *active experimentation* (Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2016). That said, the experiential learning process is continuous, and when pursued mindfully, may begin at any phase. Therefore, I begin by describing my own *active experimentation* with a traditional experiential and service-learning project prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Fall 2020, my 200-level honors interpersonal course shifted from in-person instruction to class meetings held via Zoom. Ultimately, I reimagined the course as a unique opportunity to prioritize and transform my students' academic study and lived experiences of interpersonal communication.

Subsequently, I present a set of experiential learning activities which I *framed* to my students as *Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys*. I then describe the *concrete experience* of guiding students through these journeys. Over the course of the 16-week semester, students progressed through Kolb's experiential learning cycle as they mindfully adapted course materials to enrich their interpersonal communication and relationships in "COVID-19 friendly" ways. I conclude with qualitative-analytic *reflective observations* of the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey experiential learning activities and *abstract conceptualizations* from my Fall 2020 teaching experience that can be used to strengthen teaching and learning experiences beyond the pandemic.

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## Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys

### Active Experimentation: Planning and Pilot Testing Experiential Learning Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Fall 2019, I was selected by my previous university's Office of Institutional Effectiveness as a 2020 fellow in a Learning in Action experiential learning program for faculty. Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 functioned as "planning" semesters for Fall 2020 implementation of fully-developed experiential learning components in a fellow's course—in my case, the honors interpersonal communication course.

Initially I envisioned a service-learning project with a local nonprofit community partner that matched international students with local families, couples, and individual citizens. In the early weeks of Spring 2020, I began pilot-testing the project with my honors interpersonal communication students and our community partner. Fortunately, my class had mostly completed the in-person, direct experience components prior to disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-March 2020, like most other institutions of higher education, my previous university pivoted from in-person instruction to exclusively online and remote instruction. My Spring 2020 class was able to salvage our service-learning project and work through the remaining steps in their experiential learning process.

As spring turned to summer in 2020, the pandemic increased in scope and severity. Due to public health, governmental, and university restrictions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became clear that a service-learning project requiring face-to-face activities with a community partner was no longer a feasible option. I was faced with at least two choices for my Fall 2020 honors interpersonal communication course. One option was to scrap the experiential learning components of the course altogether. Given the challenges introduced by the pandemic, reverting to a more traditional pedagogical approach would have been an acceptable option. Although forgoing experiential learning components in my course would have been the *easier* option, it was not the *best* option.

The pandemic powerfully foregrounded the interpersonal imperative for human connection (Bowen, 2021). As the pandemic swept through the United States and the world, the *need for interpersonal communication* emerged as a resounding theme in social and traditional media and in the lived experiences of my students, colleagues, family, friends, and neighbors. After studying experiential learning in the fellowship program and seeing the fruits of our Spring 2020 pilot-tested service-learning project, I felt compelled to innovate "COVID-friendly" experiential learning opportunities in my Fall 2020 online honors interpersonal communication course. My goal was to facilitate experiential learning of interpersonal communication during a time when students needed it most. Thus, I reimagined and developed a safe, meaningful, relationally-rich, and technology-friendly instructional plan and set of experiential learning opportunities, which I called Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys.

### Framing: Presenting the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey Process to Students Via Synchronous Class Meetings During the Pandemic

The first day of class is vital in setting the tone and expectations for the semester (Weimer, 2018), especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and in a class that meets exclusively online. During our first Zoom class meeting, I welcomed students by name and acknowledged the unique circumstances and

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means by which we had gathered. From the first class meeting and onward, I strove to facilitate a sense of community, openness, respect, involvement, and confidentiality. These are essential qualities that facilitate multifaceted learning and growth in the interpersonal communication course (Carter & Wood, 2020).

In keeping with the custom for small honors seminars, 14 students were enrolled in the course. Students reflected a range of majors from across the university. All students were members of the Honors College which promotes critical and creative thinking, ethical and empathetic citizenry, and collaborative and inclusive leadership in classroom and extracurricular activities.

In line with Atkinson and McMahan's (2019) advice to provide clear guidelines regarding self-disclosure early in the semester, I previewed basic expectations of Zoom participation. I also solicited additional expectations and requests from students during the first class meeting (orally and in chat) and via a survey, which students completed prior to the second class meeting. I asked questions such as, "Based on your experience with online learning, what Zoom practices have been more or less effective? What behaviors should we establish in our class to promote a positive learning experience for you and your peers?" I distilled and integrated my students' input in a "Zoom Covenant." This document was posted prominently in our Learning Management System (LMS) and referenced periodically throughout the semester.

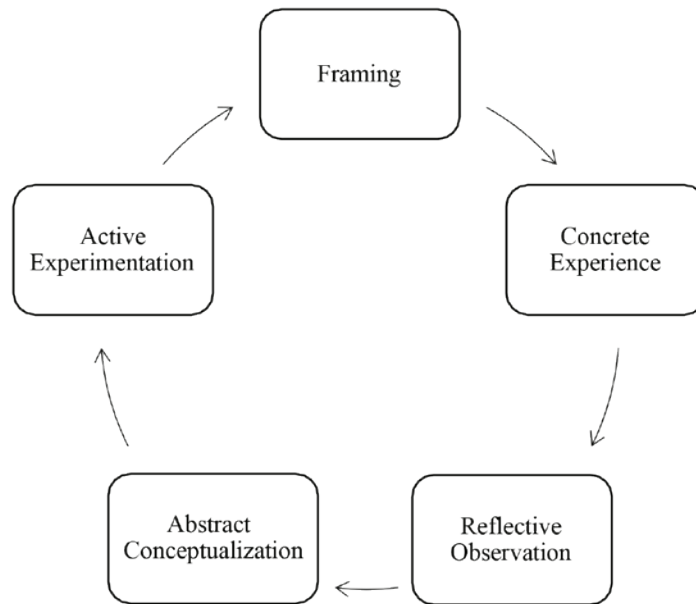
During the second full week of class, I introduced Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle in general and our iteration, the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey, in finer detail. Anecdotally, students who had experienced and benefitted from previous experiential learning opportunities seemed more open and eager to embark on Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in our course. Following Roberts's (2016) recommendation, I framed our unique experiential learning process, goals, and potential outcomes and challenges prior to students' direct application and experience with course concepts. See Figure 1 on the following page for an illustration of the experiential learning process.

To guide students through the experiential learning process, I modified and incorporated the DEEPER scaffolding framework (Antonenko et al., 2014). Whereas other problem-solving models focus almost exclusively on the *outcomes* of a project or problem, the DEEPER framework foregrounds critical thinking, creativity, and communication throughout the experiential learning *process*. In my own course, the DEEPER framework seemed ideal for students tackling problems, challenges, or tensions in their interpersonal communication and relationships.

Although advantageous for addressing students' struggles with interpersonal communication and relationships, the deficit orientation of the existing DEEPER framework did not allow for enhancement of newly-formed and established interpersonal communication and relationships that were predominantly positive. I "tweaked" the DEEPER framework by integrating the basic principles of the appreciative inquiry approach. According to Cooperrider and Fry (2020), appreciative inquiry focuses on "strengths and positive potentials" (p. 267) and promotes resilience during troubling times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although typically applied to organizational systems, appreciative inquiry has been applied successfully by college students in online courses (Johnson, 2014) and service-learning courses (Lahman, 2012).

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**FIGURE 1**  
**Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle Infused With Roberts's 2016 Pre-Exposure Framing Stage**



Framing the experiential learning process as an *Interpersonal Enrichment Journey* (as opposed to an *Interpersonal Problem-Solving Journey*) broadened possibilities for enhancing multiple types and stages of interpersonal communication and relationships. See Table 1 for a summary of the modified six-step DEEPER model that students worked through in their experiential learning Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys.

TABLE 1 The DEEPER Model Customized for Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys
<b>Summary of Action Steps</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Define</i> at least one interpersonal communication challenge or need in a relationship and set at least one goal for interpersonal enrichment.</li> <li>2. <i>Explore</i> possibilities for interpersonal enrichment.</li> <li>3. <i>Examine</i> and refine options for interpersonal enrichment.</li> <li>4. <i>Put into action</i> a set of interpersonal enrichment strategies.</li> <li>5. <i>Evaluate</i> your interpersonal enrichment process and outcomes.</li> <li>6. <i>Reflect</i> upon your learning</li> </ol>

As I presented the DEEPER model to my students, I explained how Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle was embedded in their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. The first three DEEPER action steps would require students to systematically engage in class meetings, study course material, and analyze how they would personalize that course material to their own interpersonal communication and relationships. The fourth action step—putting into action a set of interpersonal enrichment

strategies—would require real-world verbal and nonverbal communication with a relationship partner and reflect the *concrete experience* stage in Kolb’s cycle. The fifth and sixth action steps—evaluating the interpersonal enrichment process and reflecting on learning—involved iterative, nonlinear reflexivity as students developed *reflective observations* and *abstract conceptualizations*. *Active experimentation* would ensue as my students progressed through Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle in their second and third Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in the course. I told my students that over time, they would develop a richer and well-rounded repertoire of interpersonal communication knowledge and skills.

In the course syllabus and assignment instructions, I prioritized health and safety requirements and guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state and local governments, and my previous university. I encouraged my students to develop creative and meaningful interpersonal enrichment strategies that supported the course objectives and student learning outcomes (see Appendix).

### Concrete Experience: Working Through Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the course of the semester, I guided students through a sequence of three personalized Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. These journeys corresponded with the three units (each encompassing four chapters) of our course structure and textbook (Adler et al., 2018). See Table 2 for the units and chapters of the course. Students traversed through the following six steps of the modified DEEPER model in each of their three journeys.

<b>Unit Number and Theme</b>	<b>Chapter Number and Topic</b>
1. Foundations of Interpersonal Communication	1. Interpersonal Process 2. Culture and Interpersonal Communication 3. Interpersonal Communication and the Self 4. Perceiving Others
2. Creating and Responding to Messages	5. Language 6. Nonverbal Communication 7. Listening: Receiving and Responding 8. Emotions
3. Dimensions of Interpersonal Relationships	9. Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships 10. Communication in Close Relationships: Family, Friends, and Romantic Partners 11. Managing Conflict 12. Communication Climate
<i>Note.</i> This course used the Adler et al. (2018) <i>Interplay: The process of interpersonal communication</i> (14th ed.) textbook. We studied all 12 chapters over the course of the three units as presented in the textbook.	



***DEEPER Action Step 1: Defining at Least One Interpersonal Communication Challenge or Need in a Relationship and Setting at Least One Goal for Interpersonal Enrichment***

In the first step of their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys, students defined at least one interpersonal communication challenge or need in a personal or social relationship. Additionally, students set at least one goal to address their specified challenge(s) or need(s) and thereby enrich their interpersonal communication and relationship.

As a means of identifying at least one personally relevant interpersonal challenge or need, students completed three types of self-assessment: personal introspection, use of empirically-vetted questionnaires, and review of Habits of Mind. Personal introspection required students to reflect upon the applicability of course readings and materials in the unit. As we progressed through the semester, I encouraged students to consider relevant themes from the previous unit(s) as well. Once they were familiar with the interpersonal communication concepts in the unit, they judiciously identified and assessed their most important and relevant strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and needs. Students also completed empirically tested and validated questionnaires published by scholars of communication and related disciplines. These questionnaires were provided in the *Interplay* 14th edition textbook (Adler et al., 2018) and embedded in our course learning management system for easy completion. As a third form of self-assessment, students reviewed the 16 Habits of Mind (HOMs) associated with critical, creative, and productive patterns of thought and behavior (The Institute for Habits of Mind, 2022). Students identified their strongest and weakest HOMs that they wanted to intentionally apply and develop in their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. The HOMs most-commonly targeted by my students were listening with understanding and empathy; thinking flexibly; thinking and communicating with clarity and precision; taking responsible risks; finding humor; and thinking interdependently.

Students reported the HOMs framework as an invaluable means of opening their eyes to alternative ways of thinking about and subsequently defining their interpersonal communication challenge(s) or need(s) and corresponding goal(s).

After completing their self-assessments, students documented their work in step 1 in a weekly journal entry. In addition to identifying at least one interpersonal challenge or need and related goal, students also addressed noteworthy complexities to consider in subsequent steps of their Interpersonal Enrichment Journey. They identified and analyzed how relevant situational, relational, and cultural factors as well as ethical and logistical complexities might impact their process and outcomes. These analyses prepared students to traverse mindfully through the remaining steps of Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys.

***DEEPER Action Step 2: Exploring Possibilities for Interpersonal Enrichment***

In the second step of Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys, students brainstormed a list of enrichment strategies that could possibly address their previously specified interpersonal challenge(s) or need(s) and facilitate their goal(s) for interpersonal communication in one of their relationships. I encouraged them to generate at least 10 ideas for addressing their interpersonal challenge or need and facilitating their goal for interpersonal communication in their relationship. I also encouraged students to refer to their textbook (including the guidelines for interpersonal communication at the end of each chapter), class meeting notes, and other course materials for inspiration. I invited students to think holistically and incorporate themes from previous units and chapters.

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As another form of brainstorming, I also encouraged students to try mind mapping. Mind mapping is a creative process of depicting relationships of themes from a central image. Mind mapping can involve pictures, words, or a combination thereof. Mind mapping is especially useful for students who identify as creatives, artists, or visionaries (Lane, 2009).

### ***DEEPER Action Step 3: Examining and Refining Options for Interpersonal Enrichment***

In the third step of the Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys, students reviewed the ideas they brainstormed in the previous step. They then examined and refined their list of possible enrichment strategies to those that seemed best suited to their previously defined interpersonal need(s) or challenge(s) and corresponding goal(s) they had set for their interpersonal communication in their relationship. Again, I encouraged students to reflect upon their learning from the textbook, class meetings, and other course materials. Students incorporated course concepts, theories, processes, principles, and guidelines into their lists of chosen enrichment strategies. Finally, I directed them to review the HOMs and consider how they might build upon their strong HOMs and “stretch” their thinking by building on the HOMs they wanted to develop (The Institute for Habits of Mind, 2022).

As students refined their options, they considered the cultural, relational, and situational contexts of their interpersonal communication and relationship. They also analyzed the many ethical and logistical complexities of their options. One method for considering contexts and complexities involves futures wheels (Daffara, 2020). Essentially, students begin their first futures wheel by identifying a possible enrichment strategy and writing it in the center of a piece of paper. The next step is to list possible direct results or consequences of the strategy around the center idea. From there, students list possible indirect results or consequences based on the direct results/consequences. Ideally, students repeat the process for each possible enrichment strategy to narrow the list of possibilities. By working systematically through the third step of the DEEPER model, students mindfully selected a set of interpersonal enrichment strategies that they might not otherwise have considered.

### ***DEEPER Action Step 4: Putting Into Action a Set of Interpersonal Enrichment Strategies***

The fourth step of the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey calls for students to put into action, or implement, a set of interpersonal enrichment strategies. Students adapted and applied their chosen set of interpersonal enrichment strategies in their own interpersonal encounters and relationships. Given that humans are creatures of habit, I again invited students to reflect on their HOMs in this fourth step of their journey. As they engaged in concrete, direct experience, I encouraged them to practice mindfulness and take care not to “default” toward pre-existing tendencies. In this step, it was especially important to be responsive to situational, relational, and cultural factors in the moment and a potentially large array of ethical and logistical complexities.

I sometimes encouraged students to consider technologies that could increase emotional closeness despite geographic distance. Several students used videoconferencing technologies such as FaceTime and Zoom and some even sent cards and letters to loved ones via “snail mail.” Others made a point to spend more time in face-to-face conversation with roommates or significant others in close geographic proximity.

Because interpersonal communication and relationships involve two people, one individual does not have complete control over the process or outcomes of a dyadic conversation or other social interaction.

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Given that honors students tend toward perfectionism (Becker & Parsons, 2020), I gently reminded students, “your interpersonal enrichment journey is just that—a *journey*. Sometimes there are roadblocks and detours. An interpersonal enrichment journey is always ‘under construction’ and that’s okay!” I emphasized that experiential learning requires real-life application of course content in authentic conversations and relationships, which invariably involves some uncertainty and risk but also potential rewards of intellectual and relational growth (Association for Experiential Education, 2021).

### ***DEEPER Action Step 5: Evaluating Your Interpersonal Enrichment Process and Outcomes***

The fifth step of Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys involved evaluation of interpersonal enrichment process and outcomes. Extending the journey metaphor, I encouraged students to “take a look in their rear-view mirror” to see how far they had come. In this step, students evaluated and reviewed the implementation and impact of their interpersonal enrichment strategies on their interpersonal communication and relationship. They reviewed their work in previous steps and analyzed the effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethics of the set of interpersonal enrichment strategies they had developed, refined, and applied. Students described in detail the situational, relational, and cultural factors (anticipated and unanticipated) that impacted the feasibility, implementation, and impact of their strategies. They also assessed their strengths, challenges, and areas of growth as they exercised HOMs in their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys.

### ***DEEPER Action Step 6: Reflecting Upon Your Learning***

Finally, students thought about how they will apply what they had learned in their future interpersonal communication and relationships. In the sixth step, they explained in detail how their interpersonal enrichment journey contributed toward their learning of specific interpersonal communication concepts, theories, processes, principles, and guidelines in the course. They also elaborated how their experience would influence their future interpersonal communication in the relationship upon which they had focused, other relationships, and other contexts. As students considered the impacts of their learning on their future interpersonal communication, they described which interpersonal enrichment strategies they would continue, start, and stop. A final element of reflection focused on connections between students’ Interpersonal Enrichment Journey and other academic or life experiences. They considered how their Interpersonal Enrichment Journey broadened their point of view. The sixth reflection component of the DEEPER model was critical to helping students process their cognitive and emotional learning and think critically about their experiences (Hampsten, 2021).

Both formative and summative assessments are necessary for documenting and supporting students’ learning progress and outcomes (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004). Students reported their Interpersonal Enrichment Journey progress through a combination of weekly reflective journal entries and one small group dialogue per journey. The small group dialogues, each consisting of three students in a student-led, instructor-monitored process, successfully enabled students to communicate social support to peers who differed from themselves (Hampsten, 2021). In both types of assessment, students shared and received feedback about their progress in the experiential learning cycle.

**Weekly Reflective Journal Entries.** Students kept a private journal in our online learning management system. Each week for each of the three Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys, students described their progress through the DEEPER model for experiential learning of course material. Journal entries were both personal and formal. Writing from the first person, students described, interpreted, and analyzed

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their learning of course material and application in their own interpersonal communication and choice of relationship. At the same time, they maintained a formal academic tone and reflected to a greater depth than is typical in everyday life. I instructed students to carefully structure, edit, and proofread their journal entries. I also assured them confidentiality and never shared journal disclosures to other students. Students seemed to trust my discretion and sometimes shared their vulnerabilities or difficult circumstances that contextualized and complicated their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. On the whole, students' journal entries were substantive, integrative, and reflective. In a small number of cases, students' journal entries allowed me to detect and deter potential derailment by offering timely, descriptive, and supportive feedback.

**Small Group Dialogues.** I met with small groups of three to four students via Zoom for 75 minutes once per unit. In each group's first dialogue, we began with brief introductions to "warm up." I then reminded everyone of our Zoom covenant and shared a handout describing some group norms conducive for safe, comfortable, and confidential dialogue and invited students to specify norms that they wished to enact in their own dialogue. Students typically referenced norms from the handout and suggested their own ideas as well.

Students then shared 5-minute summaries of their Interpersonal Enrichment Journey to date. These summaries were aligned with the foci of their journal entries. As students listened to their peers' summaries, they jotted notes with feedback to eventually offer to one another. After the round of 5-minute summaries, students offered each other formative oral feedback in the forms of social support and confirmation (e.g., encouragement, empathy, and points of connection), informational support (e.g., additional course concepts, theories, processes, principles, and guidelines to adapt and apply), and occasionally instrumental support (e.g., offers of practical assistance). Students had opportunities to respond to their peers' suggestions, which were typically characterized by identification, affirmation, and gratitude. Toward the end of the 75-minute session, I invited students to reflect on their small group dialogue and to look ahead in their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. I asked, "What is the most important or valuable 'take away' (idea or benefit) from today's dialogue? How will you apply that 'take away' as you move forward in this course? In your interpersonal communication and relationships?" These questions helped students to distill important ideas and processes for further reflection and experimentation. Consequently, small group dialogues supported students' respective journeys, promoted accountability, fostered a sense of community with peers, and contributed toward course objectives and student learning outcomes. I prioritized peer-to-peer learning in small group dialogues but offered some formative feedback during the small group dialogues and subsequently a rubric-based grade and feedback to individual students.

Some students were initially skeptical and reluctant to engage in small group dialogues that involved personal self-disclosure. Especially as they began working on the first of their three Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys, I reminded students that they should not feel pressured to disclose anything about which they were uncomfortable. Additionally, I told them that although they had the option of focusing on relational deficits (i.e., problems or challenges), they could also focus on strengths, such as developing a blossoming friendship.

By the end of the semester, students perceived small group dialogues as a valuable component of their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. For example, one student stated, "Having open-ended discussions with my peers allowed me to ask questions in an open and accepting environment and gauge how others felt about the topic, helping me in addressing my challenge [in my Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys]."

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## Reflective Observations: Evaluating and Assessing the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey Experiential Learning Activity and Drawing Conclusions That Extend Theory and Research

Overall, the honors interpersonal communication course, and Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in particular, transformed students' academic study and lived experiences of interpersonal communication with broader impacts. My reflective observations of students' experiential learning are supported by analyses of de-identified end-of-semester assessments of our course experiential learning activities. My previous university's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) administered these assessments,<sup>1</sup> which were completed by all 14 students enrolled in the course. I obtained exempt IRB approval (ID: 22-01-5262) from my previous university retroactively after the semester had been completed and therefore students did not complete informed consent forms. I received the OIE aggregated data, from which names and other sensitive information was redacted, following the conclusion of the semester. I arbitrarily lettered the students' sets of comments alphabetically and later reordered them to appear in alphabetical order in this manuscript. I used the qualitative data to answer Ashby-King's (2021) call to understand the communicative and relational nature of learning through interpretive qualitative research.

### **Textual Analytic Procedures and Findings of Student Experiential Learning**

I thematically analyzed the OIE written responses (totaling approximately 10,000 words) via inductive and iterative analytic procedures. To begin, I repeatedly read students' OIE reflection written responses and sorted comments into two emergent themes: *interpersonal communication competence* with three distinct categories (*effectiveness*, *appropriateness*, and *ethics*) and *enriched interpersonal relationships* with two distinct categories (*addressing relationship challenges* and *enhancing relationship strengths to meet interpersonal needs*). I then used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare categories within each theme. I selected OIE statements that exemplified each category, retaining any typographical errors.

**Interpersonal Communication Competence.** Students documented and demonstrated increased interpersonal communication competence from their progression through their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. Interpersonal communication competence was illustrated by the categories of *effectiveness*, *appropriateness*, and *ethics*. These categories reflect common definitions of interpersonal communication competence (e.g., Adler et al., 2018).

People communicate *effectively* when they communicatively accomplish a goal (Adler et al., 2018). Student A wrote, "I had always wanted to share more with my father, but never knew how to do it effectively." In the past, the situational factors of geographical distance and different schedules had complicated the student's goal of self-disclosing asynchronous communication technologies. The student developed and implemented a set of enrichment strategies to self-disclose more openly and deeply to his or her father via "richer" synchronous communication technologies, which ultimately "strengthened [their] relationship tremendously." Several other students reported increased effectiveness of their interpersonal communication. Student B commented, "This entire class has helped me understand myself and others on a better level. It has also taught me a lot about communication and ways to make my own communication more clear and effective."

People communicate *appropriately* when they get along with others in light of societal, relational, and situational norms (Adler et al., 2018). Student C lamented the “restrictions of being in a global pandemic,” such as social distancing, wearing masks, constraints on face-to-face communication, and increased reliance on mediated forms of communication. Student C wrote, “This course taught me strategies for how I am communicating with others in my life, which has proven to be a huge help especially right now when communication [during the pandemic] is so difficult.” Student D wrote that his or her Interpersonal Enrichment Journey led to a realization that in the past,

I often felt that my thoughts and feelings weren't being acknowledged the way they should have been. I felt left behind and unimportant. Moving forward, I know the expectations I must uphold for myself when it comes to communication climates. I cannot settle for anything less than a confirming and supportive communication climate. I deserve to be acknowledged, endorsed, and recognized for my opinions and feelings.

These students' comments demonstrate their increased sensitivity to and enactment of appropriate interpersonal communication.

Fewer students analyzed the *ethics* of interpersonal communication in their journeys. Some students did demonstrate the ability to identify, evaluate, and demonstrate ethical behavior within and across a variety of interpersonal contexts (Engleberg et al., 2017). Student E addressed the ethical aspect of more honestly self-disclosing to his or her mom, writing,

The main incentive for me establishing a transparent relationship with my mom was that ethically, my mom deserved to be aware of my state of mind. I pondered the idea that a mom cannot play her influential relational role as a mother if she is unsure of her child's emotional state . . . I am proud of the ownership I took over my issues that were negatively affecting this interpersonal relationship of mine. By acknowledging and working on my faults, I illustrated how much I value my mother and all she does.

Other students also discussed ethics less directly by prioritizing honest and open communication and values such as love, care, respect, and consideration for their relationship partner (e.g., a grandparent, a romantic partner, a friend).

**Enriched Interpersonal Relationships.** In addition to increased interpersonal communication competence, students strengthened their connections with relationship partners—family, friends, romantic partners, classmates, and others—from working through their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. They also developed friendships amongst themselves that persisted outside of class meetings and after the semester had concluded, a byproduct of the connections they developed via Zoom (Kinsky et al., 2021). Enriched interpersonal relationships were distinguished by the categories of *addressing relationship challenges* and *enhancing relationship strengths to meet interpersonal needs*.

Students *addressed relationship challenges to meet interpersonal needs and goals* as they progressed throughout their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. For example, Student E wrote,

A challenge I faced was establishing a sense of vulnerability in the interpersonal relationship I have with my mom. This Interpersonal Enrichment Journey has immensely strengthened our

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relationship. Our bond was already built on a solid foundation of love and trust but was lacking in honesty. I believe our struggle with open communication was a result of my inability to articulate my feelings to others. Working through my Interpersonal Enrichment Journey has helped to reduce my hesitancy in being vulnerable with my mom and others.

As another example, Student F described geographical distance, gender and cultural differences, and an introverted personality as posing challenges in the student's own Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. Like the previous two examples, the majority of students' Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys focused on challenges, problems, conflicts, or other concerns within a relationship with a friend, family member, romantic partner, or other relationship partner.

However, some students also *enhanced relationship strengths to satisfy their interpersonal needs and goals* from experiential learning processes of their Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys. As they worked through their relationships in their journeys, they often reminded themselves and each other "of that which has enduring significance . . . [what] can and should direct a life" (Arnett, 2020, p. 7). Student G chose to strengthen a treasured relationship with a grandfather. The student wrote,

We needed a way to keep in contact and still be active in one another's lives even though we live far apart and I am very busy with school. The interpersonal enrichment strategy I chose to address was a weekly scheduled phone call with my grandfather. This allowed us to share with each other and strengthen our mutual understanding for one another. It also showed my grandfather that I care about him and want him involved in my life, just as I want to be involved in his. We were able to spend time each week dedicated to just talking and sharing with one another and we were able to develop a greater understanding and closer relationship.

In contrast, Student H provided an example of enhancing a positive nascent relationship:

One of the strategies I came up with to have at least one meal with my mentor every week to increase the amount of time that I spent with her and to increase our shared experiences . . . The results of this strategy were really positive. My relationship with my mentor has developed a lot more and we're a lot closer.

As Arnett (2020) said, "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" (p. 9). Whether applying interpersonal communication strategies to enrich relationships with loved ones they had known their whole lives or those with whom they were just getting to know, Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys sensitized students to the importance of caring for their fellow human beings.

Overall, analyses of the OIE data reveal that students increased their interpersonal communication competence and enriched interpersonal relationships in our Zoom-based honors interpersonal communication course. They strengthened their abilities to communicate effectively, appropriately, and ethically, and they overcame relationship challenges as well as enhanced existing relationship strengths. After reflecting upon my students' experiential learning in the course, I turned my attention to the quality of my own teaching.

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### **Analytic Procedures and Findings of Teaching Effectiveness**

As part of the reflective observation process in the experiential learning cycle, I analyzed my own teaching effectiveness via student opinions of instruction (SOI) questionnaires. Whereas the OIE questionnaire focused almost exclusively on students' experiential learning activities and generated only a few comments about my teaching, the SOI questionnaire specifically solicited students' opinions on my teaching and the course in general. All students completed the SOI questionnaire and aggregated data were provided to me after the semester had concluded. The SOI data contains statements that are not linked to the OIE data and are typically briefer in length; therefore, representative statements are presented anonymously.

I repeatedly read students' comments and sorted them into the emergent theme of *student-centered teaching*. I then used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare, contrast, and refine the two categories of *investing in student learning* and *humanizing the online teaching-learning experience*. Finally, I selected statements that exemplified each category, retaining any typographical errors.

**Student-Centered Teaching Effectiveness.** The SOI questionnaire generated numerical data from closed-ended questions. Students' numerical ratings of the course and my instruction were remarkably favorable. The numerical scores exceeded university, college, and department mean scores on every question and were among my highest in over 20 years of teaching.

Moving along to qualitative data analysis, students repeatedly commented about my *investments in their learning* in SOI evaluations. One student commented, "Her deep investment in her students is what made this class so enjoyable for me." Another student wrote,

She teaches the class so well and makes sure that everyone in the class is actually learning the material well. Dr. Becker also tries to make sure that she is effectively teaching the course and makes sure that we know what we can do better within the course.

A third student wrote, "She was always prepared and used class time well." A fourth student stated, "Loved how dedicated Dr. Becker was to this class and its content."

The second theme reflected my efforts to *humanize our online teaching-learning experience*. I openly acknowledged the challenges of our online synchronous instructional format, thanked students for offering grace during times of technical difficulty, and affirmed each student's unique contributions. In SOI evaluations, one student wrote, "She was the most accessible, caring, and friendly professor I've had during my time at our university!" Another student wrote, "Even through Zoom, I felt that Dr. B genuinely cared about us students and the journeys we were going through." A final student wrote, "Dr. Becker displays a true enthusiasm and understanding of the material she is teaching to her students. I can say that with 100% assurance because I felt her dedication even through the mediated channel of Zoom."

The themes of *investing in student learning* and *humanizing the online teaching-learning experience* extend the scholarship on memorable messages and corresponding impacts identified by Kaufmann et al. (2021). They surveyed college students about the types and impact of memorable messages from

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instructors during the initial weeks of the pandemic. The five types of memorable messages are emotional support, motivation, solidarity, compliments/praise, and tangible/informational support. The three most commonly reported impacts on students were boosts to motivation and performance, the instructor–student relationship, and morale. Kaufmann et al.’s findings provide another lens for viewing how my teaching approach and strategies encouraged motivation and connection among my students.

Additionally, the second theme of *humanizing our online teaching–learning experience* discredits the myth that online courses are inherently impersonal and unmotivating. As Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) attest:

When online courses are designed in a clear, consistent, and organized way where students are encouraged to respectfully collaborate and interact with one another and the instructor is seen as engaged, supportive, and understanding, students are more likely to perceive a positive online learning climate and they perceive a connection. (p. 152)

Ashby-King (2021) emphasizes the value of “creative instructional approaches” to promote learning and communicate care (p. 206). I sometimes had to innovate, adjust, readjust, and communicate to my students that although something in the present moment wasn’t quite ideal, I appreciated that we were working together collaboratively. Although our Zoom-based teaching and learning experience was not always perfect, our esprit de corps was powerful and motivated us to persist despite the challenges we faced.

Taken together, as I reflected upon my teaching and my students’ learning in Fall 2020, my introspection and analysis of the two sets of aggregated student data suggest that the course objectives and student learning outcomes for my honors interpersonal communication course (see Appendix) were fulfilled. Moreover, evidence suggests that the course and Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in particular transformed students’ academic study and lived experiences of interpersonal communication with broader impacts.

### **Abstract Conceptualizations: Learning From the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey Teaching–Learning Experience and Implications That Inform Instructional Communication Practices**

Although I applied autoethnographic inquiry throughout the experiential learning process, at no point was this method as essential as when drawing the abstract conceptualizations or “take-aways” from my students’ learning experiences and my own teaching experience. Arnett (2020) argues that ethnography is ideal for exploring disruptions from the pandemic. Arnett explains, “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” (p. 6). As I have engaged in abstract conceptualization and deep inner examination, I have drawn several conclusions that can be applied to future courses.

To begin, the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey activity promoted experiential learning that extended to multiple facets of interpersonal communication in a close-knit community of engaged, active learners in an online environment. Similar to Symonds LeBlanc’s (2020) experience of students’ project-based learning in a family communication course, my students developed close connections, particularly

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within their small group dialogue groups. However, Symonds LeBlanc's course was convened as a conventional, in-person campus course. The closeness that my students developed within an online synchronous course may be a testament to the course design, our carefully curated and maintained student and instructor course engagement practices, and a positive online learning climate (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

Students came to deeply understand and experience the interpersonal theory and practice of how people communicate shared understanding in close relationships and were transformed by the course as suggested by Mortenson (2007). Drawing from student feedback and my own experience, I believe that the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey was a worthwhile venture into "COVID-19 friendly" experiential learning. While the pandemic has subsided, educators should reflect upon what worked well during the pandemic and how they can integrate features and assignments from their pandemic courses into their current and future courses. Like the initial 2020 pivot to new instructional formats, ongoing adaptation and experimentation will require resilience, creativity, and commitment (Fassett & Atay, 2022).

For example, in Fall 2021, I taught the honors interpersonal communication course in a traditional in-person format. While preparing for the course, I briefly considered a return to a traditional service-learning project. However, a variant of the coronavirus and other uncertainties about the pandemic led me to retain the series of Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in the in-person course. I retained many features of the reflective journal entries and small group dialogues in my Fall 2021 course with some "tweaks." For example, rather than requiring weekly submission of reflective journal entries, students submitted journal entries twice per unit. The reduced number of submissions was more manageable but still supported students' progress in the experiential learning cycle.

In both the online synchronous and in-person classes, my students' Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys have focused on their own pre-existing or naturally-developing interpersonal communication and relationships. In the future, I plan to integrate Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in community-based experiential learning opportunities. For example, students will engage in Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys while reading to local schoolchildren or getting to know international students during multicultural coffee hours.

## **Contributions Beyond the Pandemic: Integrating Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys in Interpersonal Communication and Other Courses and Directions for Future Research**

While on-campus enrollments in higher education have been in severe decline since the pandemic (June, 2022), enrollments in online courses continue to grow. Data from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics shows that from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, the percentage of students enrolling in at least one distance education course increased from 37% to 74% (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Even if enrollment in fully online courses does not sustain its extraordinary levels of growth, it is likely that many instructors will continue to rely more heavily on online instructional tools. As such, it is valuable to understand the benefit of Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys beyond the circumstances created by the pandemic.

My course utilized Zoom, a synchronous online learning technology ideal for real-time communication. As noted by A. N. Miller et al. (2021), "Although a good deal of empirical research exists about online

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learning generally and instructional communication effectiveness in asynchronous online learning specifically, little research exists to date on the effectiveness of these relatively new synchronous and blended learning models” (p. 203). This manuscript addresses the dearth of research, aside from A. N. Miller et al.’s discussion of hybrid courses and Piotrowski’s (2021) brief exploration of a course using Zoom-rooms, and offers one example of a successful Zoom-based project that can be adopted and modified by fellow instructors. However, more research is needed to document best practices in online instructional communication, such as a quantitative pre- and post-test study assessing the learning outcomes of this course (see Appendix).

The interpersonal communication course is one of the most frequently offered in the communication curriculum, in part due to the central role of social and personal relationships in everyday life (Atkinson & McMahan, 2019). Although the course I taught was an honors interpersonal communication course, other instructors can adapt Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys for non-honors courses. Additionally, the activities can be adapted for other courses that focus on interpersonal growth, such as internships, training and development, leadership communication, social justice and activism, intercultural communication, and more. Future research is needed on the effectiveness of similar activities in other courses in the communication discipline, other disciplines, and contexts outside of higher education.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic required my students and me to be innovative, intentional, and flexible in our reimagined online synchronous course and the series of three Interpersonal Enrichment Journey experiential learning activities in particular. By sharing my path of creating, implementing, and assessing the Interpersonal Enrichment Journey activity in my Zoom-based honors interpersonal communication course, I hope to support and inspire instructors who teach any combination of interpersonal, honors, online, or related courses. I welcome others to use and modify my instructional communication processes in their own courses. Likewise, I look forward to continued conversations about best practices in experiential learning and teaching.

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## Note

(1) The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) pre- and post-assessments were administered to my students at the very beginning and very end of the semester respectively. Normally OIE pre- and post-assessments were administered in all courses taught by Learning in Action Fellows; however, due to COVID, the OIE assessments were made optional. I elected to participate in data collection because I was interested in learning about my students' learning.

The OIE pre-assessment consisted of five questions. Students were instructed:

In this reflection, you will be describing a challenge you faced within your college educational experiences, how you addressed that challenge, and how your previous courses and/or experiences influenced your strategy to address the challenge. You will also be describing the experiential learning opportunity you will be participating in, and how your previous academic experience might help you or enhance the experience.

The OIE post-assessment also consisted of five questions which were similar to the pre-test questions. However, students were instructed, "In this reflection, you will be describing a challenge that you faced within the experiential learning opportunity you just completed, how you addressed that challenge and how the experiential learning opportunity itself connected with your academic/career goals."

The Student Opinions of Instruction (SOI) assessment is administered routinely at the end of every semester to students in all courses at my former institution. Although there tends to be variance among colleges within the institution, my college administered a 17-item version of the SOI with 12 closed-ended questions measuring the quality of instruction and five additional open-ended questions for students to write comments. Prompts for the open-ended items included:

- ▶ Comment on the demands made upon you in this course (e.g., level of difficulty of given subject matter, amount of material, reading, and other assignments).
  - ▶ How could this instructor improve?
  - ▶ Any additional comments about the course.
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## Appendix

### Course Objectives

As your professor, I will:

- ▶ Introduce you to foundational knowledge of social scientific, interpretive, and critical theory and research on interpersonal communication.
- ▶ Support your application and integration of a diverse range of lived experiences and perspectives to course material.
- ▶ Facilitate multidimensional learning about course material and your own interpersonal communication, relationships, and values through interpersonal enrichment journeys.

### Student Learning Outcomes

In this course, you will:

- ▶ Understand, apply, integrate, and critique the foundational concepts, theories, processes, principles, and guidelines of interpersonal communication.
  - ▶ Increase your interpersonal communication competence in face-to-face and mediated contexts.
  - ▶ Self-assess and identify areas for growth, apply course material to your own interpersonal communication and personal relationships, and engage in real-world problem-solving and focused reflection.
  - ▶ Increasingly value the importance, diversity, and complexities of interpersonal communication in your own and others' lives.
  - ▶ Become an effective self-directed learner by identifying, developing, and working on your personal learning goals, habits of mind, and plans for enriched interpersonal communication and relationships.
-