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Editor’s Note to Volume 7 of the
Journal of Communication Pedagogy

Sharing is Caring

Renee Kaufmann

First, I want to thank my editorial board, ad hoc reviewers, consulting editors, editorial assistant, and the Journal’s out-going editor Deanna Sellnow. This Volume would not be possible without them. Their time, support, feedback, and expertise have helped shape this current Volume. I am forever grateful for the people that I am surrounded by and can say that a role like this takes a strong and supportive community. I believe this embodies what I see in our association—people who care and work together to help build stronger communication practices and pedagogy. It is why I love CSCA so much.

When I was asked to serve as the editor of the Journal of Communication Pedagogy, I was honored. For those who do not know me, I started my journey as an educator in the middle school classroom. From that pivotal experience, I learned how important it is to share best practices and reflect on those teaching experiences with others. Once I was in graduate school, I learned the value of empirical research and how difficult, at times, it is to access. These experiences highlighted that educators need this research; they want to be effective in the classroom, but at times, lack the resources to do it. What good does this do? It is through this journal that we serve our members and our communities with exemplary instructional communication and communication pedagogy work. This Volume provides informed pedagogical implications, best practices, and reflections on how we can be effective communication educators in a range of learning spaces with a variety of learners.

In my first Volume as Editor, I present nine original research studies, a best practices essay, and a reflective essay. Each piece offers thoughtful points for us to ponder and tangible considerations for us to employ with our students and beyond.

Renee Kaufmann, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

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Specifically, in this Volume, authors present data and tools for us to engage our students who are experiencing classroom disengagement and disconnection post-COVID. Of those suggestions, rationale for incorporating a flipped classroom approach to strategically immerse students is provided (G. Yilmaz) along with a guide for the intentional use of enrichment journals to broaden students’ interpersonal course experience (A. H. Becker) and suggestions for the use of photovoice as a tool for self-expression (D. Priddis and H. L. Hundley). Additionally, authors in this Volume present ways for us to best communicate with and instruct our students as well as areas where communication training is needed. For example, the need for training students on professional short messaging and evidence for how our work with communication education is valuable in providing our students with their best selves for the workplace (S. Frei, A. M. Alford, and A. B. Smith). In the online space, several strategies are shared on how instructors can be perceived as confirming to their students (A. Jones-Bodie, L. B. Anderson, and J. Hall) and considerations for student camera usage and its implications (Z. D. Johnson and K. Knoster). Moreover, for those of us who work with student veterans, a tested instructional communication training is provided (T. Kauer and M. Houser). Suggestions are also provided for general web accessibility of communication information for those with disabilities and limited English proficiency (A. M. Mason, E. A. Spencer, M. C. Westhoff, K. M. Livingston, and J. Compton). And finally, authors offer implications for student retention based on the format of basic communication course delivery (D. E. Schneider and J. D. McCullough).

Lastly, in this Volume, we have a best practices essay that offers ways in which we may think about language and how to create and implement Communication Action Statements (V. McDermott and A. R. May) as well as a reflective essay that calls for the development of an ethic of empathy in our communication classes (D. H. Kahl Jr.).

In conclusion, I hope you find this Volume as thoughtful and informative as I have. I also hope you consider submitting your work in the future to the Journal of Communication Pedagogy because sharing these findings, experiences, and resources truly is an act of care.
Innovating the Communication Pedagogy: An Application of Flipped Classroom Technique in Communication Education

Gamze Yilmaz

Keywords: flipped classroom, pedagogical innovation, student-centric pedagogy

Abstract: As students try to make sense of their college experience and the value of attaining a degree post-pandemic, educators are grappling with finding new methods to re-engage students in the classroom using a range of modalities. This case study explored student reactions to flipped classroom learning experiences, and possible relationship between the flipped classroom technique and academic performance in communication education. As a student-centric pedagogical method, the flipped classroom can offer a promising remedy for student disengagement, and the findings of this study provide supporting evidence for this conclusion. Students characterized flipped classroom as a very favorable learning experience as it (1) motivated and engaged them in the course, (2) encouraged them to make creative connections across course topics, (3) provided a self-paced, flexible learning environment, and (4) facilitated an authentic experience with the course material for deeper learning. Additionally, the quantitative analysis suggested that flipped classroom may have connections to students' academic performance in a human communication and technology course. The findings are discussed within the framework of engagement theory, and pedagogical implications are advanced for future practices of flipped classroom within communication pedagogy, particularly as a tool to address increasing student disengagement after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2020) outlines critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration as the foundational skills that will set up students for success in their professional lives after college. Teacher-centric approaches to instruction fall short of addressing these skills and meeting the expectations of today’s college students. As a student-centric approach, flipped classroom
Innovating the Communication Pedagogy

Technique promotes creative and critical thinking skills by pushing students to actively engage the course material and identify its connections to past knowledge or real-life experiences (Al-Zahrani, 2015). Interestingly, flipped classroom is not widely implemented in communication education except for a few applications in business communication (Hall & DuFrene, 2016; Pérez et al., 2019; Sherrow et al., 2016).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, students’ expectations as well as their sensemaking process for attaining a college degree has shifted. For instance, a recent article published in The Chronicle of Higher Education highlighted the importance of connecting with students and helping them redefine the value of a college degree (McMurtrie, 2022). By putting students in the driver seat of their learning journey, flipped classroom technique not only offers an innovative toolkit to help communication students learn and practice 21st Century Skills, but also provides them an opportunity to see the real purpose and value of a college degree.

This study examines students’ perceptions of learning in a flipped classroom format and its possible connections to academic performance, particularly in communication education. Data collection for this case study took place in Fall 2019, one semester before the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly moved all instruction to remote modality. The flipped classroom format provided a novel learning modality for students during this time and the implications of this study can offer great potential for online learning strategies that have become the new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the learnings from this case study can shed light on proactive strategies instructors can use to address student disengagement that has recently emerged as a very problematic issue in higher education (McMurtrie, 2022). Accordingly, the first goal of this study is to explore how students perceive and react to flipped classroom technique—characterized by a student-centric, active learning pedagogy—in a communication course. The second goal is to examine possible connections between the flipped classroom technique and academic performance in communication courses. The following section will review past research findings on flipped classroom technique and introduce engagement theory as a conceptual framework (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998).

Literature Review

Flipped Classroom Technique

Flipped classroom redefines the teacher’s role in the learning process, by placing the student in an active role for a self-regulated experience that is facilitated by changing class structure and integration of technology. It is a pedagogical technique consisting of interactive group learning activities during in-person classroom time, and online individual instruction before in-person classes (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). More specifically, online videos, activities, or assessment tools are used to convey subject content before the class time while in-person class is allocated for higher-order peer- or team-based interactive learning activities that require active participation (Chen et al., 2017). As such, in-person class time is used for active learning rather than passive transmission of course content, providing a learning environment for practicing higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, applying, criticizing, synthesizing course concepts (Strayer, 2012).

In the flipped classroom, the student takes a central role in their self-paced learning by viewing, studying, and completing course materials before meeting with peers and the teacher during the class time. In general, flipped classrooms allow students to become more active participants in the knowledge
construction related to course subject (Butt, 2014; Davies et al., 2013), foster peer learning by increasing class interactions (Rodríguez et al., 2019), and bolster teacher-student connections by creating more opportunities for feedback regarding course materials (Mason et al., 2013). One study examining the impact of flipped classroom on the promotion of creative thinking skills found that despite its challenges, flipped classroom promoted students’ creativity (Al-Zahrani, 2015). Additionally, students had a positive perception of flipped classroom technique as they reported that it significantly helped with their creative thinking processes (Al-Zahrani, 2015). Similarly, another study showed that students were highly satisfied with the flipped classroom methodology, and they performed better using this method compared to a traditional classroom (Rodríguez et al., 2019). On the other hand, some studies reported lower student satisfaction with flipped classroom due to ill-structured class systems and unclear assignments (Strayer, 2012).

While some studies reported that students performed better in flipped classroom compared to a traditional classroom (Mason et al., 2013), a group of studies found no difference in the academic outcomes of participants in flipped classrooms (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2013). Though there are mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of flipped classroom technique on student learning and satisfaction, there is sufficient data to support the notion that when designed and implemented properly, flipped classroom may positively affect both student learning and engagement. One theoretical framework that can be used to frame positive effects of flipped classroom on learning is engagement theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). The following section will summarize engagement theory as it relates to flipped classroom technique and advance research questions.

**Theoretical Framework and Research Questions**

Rooted in the constructivist approaches to learning, engagement theory posits that for learning outcomes to be achieved, educators should create learning environments where students are “meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998, p. 20). Accordingly, learning should occur in a collaborative context, must be project-based and have a real-life outcome as these methods generate learning experiences that are “creative, meaningful, and authentic” (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998, p. 23). The key tenets of engagement theory align closely with the main components of flipped classroom technique as in the flipped classroom, students continuously create and recreate knowledge by means of creative and inspiring in-class activities, and ideally by working on a team project with real-world impact. In this sense, new knowledge, skills, or attitudes are achieved through integration of different learning modes than those offered by traditional, teacher-centric approaches (Kolb, 1984). For instance, students learn and practice how to reflect on and observe their experiences from different perspectives. Subsequently, they integrate their observations into logically plausible theories, and solve a real-world problem by applying reflective and observational experiences that are gained via high-level cognitive activities.

Despite the scholarly attention flipped classroom captured in a variety of fields (e.g., engineering, science, education, art, business), there are limited flipped classroom assessments in the field of communication with a few exceptions in business communication courses (Hall & DuFrene, 2016; Pérez et al., 2019; Sherrow et al., 2016). The literature suggests that when designed and implemented effectively, flipped classroom technique can promote student learning by increasing student motivation and engagement (Pérez et al., 2019). Abeysekera and Dawson (2014) argued that “the flipped classroom approach is under-evaluated, under-theorized, and under-researched in general” (p. 3). This study will attempt to
address the gap in scholarship by examining students’ reactions to flipped learning experiences, and possible reflections of these on their academic performance in communication education. The following questions summarize these research objectives:

**RQ1:** How do students perceive and react to learning experiences in a flipped communication classroom?

**RQ2:** What connections can we establish between a flipped communication classroom and academic performance?

**Methods**

**Study Design**

This study used an exploratory case study methodology to examine student perceptions of flipped classroom technique and whether there are any possible connections between this technique and academic performance. The flipped course used for the case analysis was an undergraduate communication course offered at a Northeastern public university in Fall 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic moved classroom instruction to remote modality in Spring 2020. Thus, during this time, flipped classroom format provided a novel approach for students to learn and practice course concepts by allowing them to have agency and take an active role in their learning journey.

**Participants**

The human communication and technology course (i.e., theoretical approaches to mediated communication, online privacy, problematic use of social media, online communities, etc.) used for this case study was an upper-level, elective communication course offered in Fall 2019. There were 23 communication majors and seven communication minors in the class. The academic majors of students ranged from communication and criminology to biology and management. The age range of the students were 19 to 24; 53% were female and 46% were male.

**Procedures**

The data collection occurred both during the course and afterward. The primary data source for the analysis was the student self-reflection essays submitted by 28 undergraduate students after the course completion. Additionally, class interactions, project and course grades, field notes, and observations from in-class interactions were used to complement the primary data sources. The self-reflection papers included responses to questions about students’ attitudes toward the flipped classroom format, key learning takeaways from specific in-class activities, and the value they perceived in the flipped classroom technique (See Appendix for a list of reflection questions used for the analysis). All written data sources resulted in 225 pages of material. Quantitative assessments of student grades were based on the comparison of student grades in the current flipped course to the previously taught classes with a more traditional lecture format by the same instructor.

**Case Description**

Using a flipped learning format, the human communication and technology course aimed to provide students with a hands-on experience in communication technology use as well as solutions for improving
real-life issues in our society. This course was developed and offered in Fall 2019 using a flipped classroom format before the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, though online instruction was offered in this institution, the norm was taking classes in person using a traditional classroom technique.

One pedagogical tool used to provide a hands-on experience with the course materials in the flipped classroom was rooted in the design thinking methodology (Brown, 2008). Student teams completed a human-centered innovation project to create an original mobile app design proposal by applying the course content as a conceptual foundation and design thinking as a creative problem-solving technique (G. Yilmaz, 2021). Using prerecorded online lectures and videos, students got familiar with course topics and relevant materials before in-person class time. Upon video-based instruction, students completed low-stakes quizzes and activities prior to in-person discussions. Once in the classroom, students completed high-level cognitive activities to engage the course material instructed online (See Table 1 for sample in-class activities).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Sample High-Level Cognitive Activities Used in the Flipped Classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Instructions</td>
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| Focused Listing | ▶ Come up to the board and list two-word examples for dystopian vs. utopian narratives in technological deterministic discourse about the effects of digital media on our lives.  
▶ Open the board for discussion.  
▶ Delete/move examples around. |
| Word Journal Headlines | ▶ Break up into groups of 5.  
▶ Discuss the essence of each reading focusing on the main argument, theoretical stance, and conclusions.  
▶ Create an original, interesting, funny news “headline” to capture the essence of each reading.  
▶ Give the class a 1-minute pitch about why your “headline” makes sense in light of the readings and your group discussion. |
| Class Debate | ▶ **Debate Group 1:** Defend a stance based on the Cues Heuristic Approach. Support your claims using evidence from this line of research as it was explained in Hancock & Guillory (2015).  
▶ **Debate Group 2:** Defend a stance based on the original arguments/research Hancock & Guillory (2015) used to debunk the assumptions Cues Heuristic Approach made. |
| Critical Reflection | ▶ **Prompt:** Imagine that you applied for a communication advisor position in a new tech start-up working to develop an online community app, focusing on creating healthy daily habits (e.g., nutrition, exercise, sleep, socializing, etc.).  
▶ **Question:** What should the tech start-up do to create a safe, reliable, and effective online community?  
▶ Write a research-based critical analysis discussing what factors the start-up should consider for creating a successful and effective online community app.  
▶ Think about the connections between readings on digital deception, online credibility, online misinformation, and online communities.  
▶ Use one theory as a theoretical framework.  
▶ Support your arguments with evidence from at least 3 class readings. |
Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of student self-reflection papers was conducted to examine the first research question about student perceptions and reactions to the flipped classroom technique. The themes were identified based on the representation of similar meanings and explicit repetition of words or phrases used to represent a sentiment (Owen, 1984) in students’ responses to reflection questions unique to the modality of the course. In the first stage of coding, key ideas from the data were summarized using descriptive labels. In the second round, new descriptive labels were generated to illustrate connections across initial codes and recoded data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, class observations, student project outputs, and in-class field notes were used to complement and make sense of the emerging themes.

To provide another layer of interpretation for our findings in the thematic analysis, we quantitatively compared student grades from the course using flipped classroom technique in Fall 2019 to two classes that were taught in Fall 2016 and Fall 2015 using a more traditional lecture format. It is important to note that though the exact same assessments were administered using the exact same course material taught by the same instructor across all three courses, all objective assessments were conducted in a timed, online format including quizzes and exams in the flipped classroom. The questions used in these assessments were application questions, meaning students were required to identify or apply a course concept based on an example or a scenario provided. The questions were not knowledge-based, so students would not be able to simply look up their notes, find a definition, and answer a question. Also, the questions were randomized and timed, leaving very little time and planning to refer to class notes. Considering these boundary conditions and characteristics of the question types in the objective assessments, we attempted to control the conditions across three groups to some extent. Accordingly, one-way ANOVA was used to test average grade differences across three different class groups taught by the same instructor.

The first part of the following section summarizes the results of the thematic analysis. The second section will outline the quantitative data results, followed by the discussion of the findings.

Findings

Thematic Analysis

Overall, students thought the flipped classroom helped them learn the course material in an effective way. They found the learning process successful as the diversity of learning tools used in the flipped classroom helped them stay engaged throughout the course, allowed them to self-pace their learning outside the classroom, provided relevant learning activities to be used in their final projects, inspired them to think outside the box, and pushed them to make connections across course topics and real-life contexts. The thematic analysis showed that students had very positive reactions to the flipped classroom format as they reported this technique to (1) motivate and engage them, (2) to force them to make meaningful connections across course topics, (3) to provide a self-paced, flexible learning environment, and (4) to offer a hands-on experience with the course material for deeper learning.

More specifically, students reported feeling motivated to engage with the course material thanks to the nature of flipped classroom learning activities. For instance, several students mentioned how timed critical reflections pushed them to make connections across different course topics. Additionally, students reported benefiting from the convenience of self-paced learning modules. Finally, students
characterized in-class activities as effective tools for authentic and deep learning. The following section will elaborate on each theme with specific examples from student reflections.

**Student Perceptions and Reactions to Flipped Communication Classroom**

**Motivation to engage with the course material.** Learning tools and assessments unique to flipped classroom method helped students stay engaged. Most students mentioned that the way flipped classroom was implemented motivated them to complete the course materials and engage in higher level thinking. For instance, online quizzes and online activities were based on the information provided in the online lectures as well as the course readings. If students did not view the online lecture and complete the assigned readings, they would not succeed in the quiz or the activity. One student stated that they “liked this concept in general because it forced [them] to engage in the content more.” Similarly, in-class activities were built on the notion that students completed the online portion of the class, hence motivating them to come to class prepared to engage in high-order thinking and participate in team-based discussions. One student wrote, “this flipped class kept me engaged helping me gain interest in how technology affects us and the variety of things it can be used for as well.” Reflecting on online activities, another student wrote, “the activities would ask small, detailed questions along with general questions about the overall material. Doing these helped me gain more knowledge and kept me more engaged throughout the class.”

As students elaborated on the most helpful learning tools in the flipped class days, online quizzes and online lectures seemed to be the most effective tools for knowledge acquisition and assessment. Providing a concrete example for helpful learning tools, one student stated the following:

> The online quizzes I believe were a huge help for understanding the material. I think that with a quiz, you’re most required to know the material well. The quizzes showed me what I had left to learn, and they also gave me an understanding for what to expect for the online exams.

Student responses also showed that online quizzes motivated students to do the assigned class readings and pay attention while watching the videos. Students appeared to be intrinsically motivated to complete pre-class learning activities as they found these assessments relevant and useful for knowledge acquisition and necessary for in-class participation. One student summarized this sentiment stating, “the online quizzes were difficult so in order to do well I had to read and really focus on the details of the material discussed in the videos.” Another student commented, “online quizzes and activities has confirmed me throughout the semester to go in depth with my responses in a timely manner.”

**Making creative connections through learning tools.** There were several learning activities implemented during class time (See Table 1). For instance, critical reflection activities were designed to have students think creatively and critically in a timed session. Many students mentioned how these short write-up sessions were both challenging and rewarding at the same time. One student perfectly captured the purpose and intended effect of these active learning tools stating, “The critical reflections were the most effective on understanding the ideas presented in the readings and fully get the meaning out of using examples that could be related to our personal lives.” Echoing the preceding sentiments, another student wrote:

> For one of the critical reflections that we completed in class, we were supposed to explain how we would speak to middle school students about cyberbullying. This example was really
As clearly discussed in the student responses, critical reflections pushed students to make “forced” but “analogous” connections across different technological contexts. Students were forced to integrate ideas from different areas of research and make a plausible argument about how these ideas would be integrated to create a solution. Prompts given for critical reflections forced students to think creatively and led them to shift from memorizing the material to using it for knowledge construction. As one student mentioned, critical reflections achieved their goal of “helping [them] think outside the box.”

**Convenience of self-paced, flexible instruction.** Students had very favorable attitudes toward the self-paced instruction and learning of the course material using online modules. This format allowed them to structure their learning experience according to their own schedules. One student emphasized this point by stating, “I liked how I was able to do the readings on my own pace and then listen to the lectures on my own time.” Students also benefitted from recorded lectures as they enabled them to go back in a lecture to clarify any misunderstanding about a concept. One student stated:

> The flipped class is a cool mode for me because I never had that kind of class before, then the professor records the video; it is a helpful method; if I don't understand some theory, I can play and play the video until I know that theory.

Relatedly, another student added, “the flipped classes I enjoyed very much because it allowed me to have freedom and time to understand the material well enough.” This student particularly emphasized, “how the flipped class activities came with a mini online lecture. The lectures were great because we didn't have to go to class to listen to the lecture. I enjoyed this flexibility.”

**Deeper learning through authentic activities.** One important aspect of the flipped classroom activities was that they provided an authentic experience with the course topics. Rather than engaging in traditional class discussions during in-person sessions, we implemented interactive and experiential learning activities in the classroom. One student characterized the in-class learning activities, “to be the time where everything [they] had just learned would click in [their] head. It was like all the connections were made as [they] were participating in the class activities.” For instance, in our discussion about virtual reality (VR), we had 10 virtual reality headsets brought into class by the university’s instructional design and IT team. This experience stuck with many students and several of them mentioned the positive impact of having a hands-on experience on their learning. For instance, one student commented as follows:

> Learning about VR from this class opened my mind to how technology can help us develop and help put people in “other's shoes” to experience a variety of different cultures and backgrounds. This flipped class kept me engaged helping me gain interest in how technology affects us and the variety of things it can be used for as well.

Overall, student reflections on the nature and content of flipped classroom technique suggested very favorable attitudes toward this classroom format.
Quantitative Data Analysis Results

Flipped Communication Classroom and Academic Performance

To examine the possible connections between flipped classroom technique and student performance, we compared student grades from the present class to those in previously offered classes by the same instructor and with the exact same objective assessments such as exams and quizzes. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the student grades of three courses, the flipped class with the project-based learning component generating the highest average grade ($M = 85.63$, $SD = 7.94$) compared to students in classes taught with a non-flipped format in Fall 2016 ($M = 75.68$, $SD = 12.25$) and in Fall 2015 ($M = 77.15$, $SD = 21.9$), $F(2, 80) = 3.89$, $p = .024$.

Given that the project-based learning component could play a role in the overall grades, we also calculated the student grades based on objective individual exams and quizzes across three courses as the content of these objective assessments were the same. The analysis of these scores also showed a statistically significant difference across three courses. Students in the flipped class performed better ($M = 80.58$, $SD = 9.14$) compared to students in classes taught with a non-flipped format in Fall 2016 ($M = 70.89$, $SD = 11.87$) and in Fall 2015 ($M = 72.98$, $SD = 20.9$), $F(2, 80) = 3.46$, $p = .036$. Though these findings by no means imply a causal relationship between flipped classroom and academic performance, they suggest that learning experiences in flipped classroom may have favorably influenced academic performance.

Discussion

Student Learning Experience in the Flipped Class

The findings of the current study are aligned with the research on the effects of flipped classroom technique on student learning. Past studies found that the flexibility provided by the flipped class format allows student to self-regulate their learning (Steen-Utheim & Foldnes, 2018). If students are given the proper tools and a well-organized structure to learn the course materials, they feel motivated to complete learning activities alone, and come to class prepared to discuss their takeaways with the classmates. This class format allowed them to structure their school time around their work time, but also kept them on track by scaffolding the learning process with small assessments and more in-depth in-class activities.

Overall, students thought the flipped classroom helped them learn the course material in an effective way. They found the learning process effective as the diversity of learning tools used in the flipped classroom helped them stay engaged throughout the course, allowed them to self-pace their learning outside the classroom, provided relevant learning activities to be used in their final projects, inspired them to think outside the box, and pushed them to make connections between course topics and real-life contexts. These findings confirm the main propositions of engagement theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998) as students reported very favorable attitudes toward flipped classroom technique. Collaborative in-class activities that were characterized as “meaningful,” “creative,” or “applied” by students seemed to engage and motivate them to learn (Pérez et al., 2019).

Motivating students to engage in active learning by means of low-stake assessments is a central theme in flipped classroom modality (Hall & DuFrene, 2016). As the COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning approaches a new normal, communication instructors can use low-stake assessments as
Incentives to increase student participation and fight student disengagement in their courses. One study examining boredom in a communication course reported that the amount of teacher-talk was one of the primary reasons for boredom for students (Deveci, 2016). Yet, if students do not come to class prepared to discuss the course material or apply it in active learning activities, instructors may have to resort to teacher-led discussions. Delegating low-stakes assessments before in-class meetings, whether online or in-person, can incentivize students to actively participate in communication classes, reduce the amount of teacher-led talk, and hopefully alleviate student boredom and disengagement.

Past research showed that students generally fail flipped classes when they do not complete online lectures or learning activities prior to face-to-face classes. One of the reasons for this is listed as low motivation for online learning and not being able to manage self-paced learning (R. Yilmaz, 2016; R. Yilmaz & Keser, 2017). Interestingly, the findings of this study showed the opposite. Students enjoyed the self-paced learning provided by the flipped classroom technique and characterized the modality as convenient and valuable. While e-learning readiness in the form of technology self-efficacy and motivation may play a role in student experiences with flipped classroom (R. Yilmaz, 2017), poor instructional design of the flipped classroom and using ineffective learning activities also play a role in student experiences (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2014; Tune et al., 2013). It is important to note that documented difficulties associated with the implementation of flipped classroom (i.e., insufficient course tools, unclear course objectives, inadequate feedback) were considered during the instructional design phase of the course used for this case study. In-class activities used in the flipped class were designed and administered to evoke a playful culture of learning in the classroom and to make learning fun for students. As stated in a recent study on instructional communication, making each class session “memorable, interesting, and engaging not only improves attendance rates, but it also sets the tone for student openness” (Diers-Lawson, 2021, p. 117). Incorporating high-level cognitive activities that are informative, engaging, and fun not only help student engagement, but also provide a rewarding teaching experience for instructors in the communication classroom. For flipped classroom technique to promote creative thinking, appropriate class design and suitable assignments should be designed and implemented (Martin & Schwartz, 2014).

Having used high-quality materials as well as effective teaching and learning activities possibly played a favorable role in students’ motivation, and overall experience with the self-paced learning environment offered in the flipped classroom. These finding sheds further light on the importance of taking a systematic approach to the instructional design of flipped classroom to promote student motivation, learning, and creativity (Al-Zahrani, 2015).

Lor (2017) argues that “one of the biggest challenges for education is how to prepare the students for a world that doesn’t yet exist” (p. 1), and communication students are no exception to this challenge. More importantly, it is very likely that communication students will find themselves in jobs where they will need to craft messages, make sense of meanings, fight misinformation, and find ways to navigate ambiguity for their stakeholders. These skills are particularly relevant in communication courses that focus on applied communication contexts such as crisis communication, health communication, or strategic communication. Thus, if communication students experience and practice high-level cognitive learning activities that push them to think critically in the communication classroom, they can be better equipped to function effectively in the realm of ambiguity and unknown beyond their college experience.
Academic Performance in the Flipped Class

Past research documents mixed results for the effect of flipped classroom technique on student performance. While some studies reported its positive effects on student performance (Mason et al., 2013), others did not find any difference between traditional lectures and flipped classrooms (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2013). When compared to previously taught classes without a flipped format, the academic performance of students in the present course was higher. Though a large portion of the grade was based on the team project, students peer-evaluated each other and not all group members earned the same grade. For instance, while three members of a team earned an A, one group member could earn a C in the team project. The content of these assessment tools was generally consistent across all three courses. The only difference was that in the flipped class, all objective assessments were conducted in a timed, online format including quizzes, exams, and worksheets. Though students could look at their notes during the online completion of these assessments, the questions were mostly application-based and randomized, making it very difficult to use notes. Additionally, the standard deviation of the mean grade in the flipped class was much smaller than those of previous semesters. This evidence further documents that students in the course with the flipped classroom technique collectively performed better than students in classes taught with a more traditional, teacher-centric format. Though this finding does not imply a causal link between flipped classroom technique and academic performance, it suggests that flipped classroom may create a positive learning environment conducive to improved academic performance.

These findings are not surprising as carefully and systematically designing and implementing a flipped classroom technique is essential to student learning and satisfaction. Additionally, student motivation plays an important role in whether a flipped format can generate positive or negative effects on student learning.

When we interpret the quantitative results with the qualitative findings, the high student grades in the flipped class format can be further contextualized. Scholarship in flipped classroom reports that student engagement and motivation is essential for perceived effectiveness of a flipped classroom (Pérez et al., 2019). Research also shows that when students are intrinsically motivated and actively involved in their learning, they perform better compared to when they are extrinsically motivated and passive (Deci et al., 2011). As evident in the student reflections, the way flipped classroom was designed and implemented in the present case helped students stay motivated and engaged in the course. As such, it is possible that intrinsic motivation and student engagement may also contribute to the relationship between flipped classroom and overall performance.

Engagement theory posits that for effective learning to occur, students must be engaged in the coursework (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), and flipped classroom technique, more than any other time, can help instructors engage the students in the college classroom. For instance, one study conducted among undergraduate students of an organizational communication class reported that using flipped classroom during the pandemic “helped increase student engagement and was very different from anything else students experienced” (Ishkova et al., 2021). Another study reported that “taking initiative in learning and peer communication can inform interventions to help students at greatest psychosocial and academic risk” (Morris et al., 2021, p. 23), particularly as the remote and hybrid learning modalities have become the norm post-pandemic.
Pedagogical Implications

Another source of data for understanding students’ experiences with the flipped classroom format came from in-class observations throughout the semester. Mid-semester course feedback provided additional data points to reflect on the possible connections between the flipped classroom and student learning. The following section summarizes insights gained through thematic data analysis, teacher observations in the classroom, as well as student feedback on the class structure.

Regular Attendance as an Added Benefit

Attendance in the flipped class was more regular compared to classes taught using a traditional format. Though no official attendance was taken, students still showed up to class more regularly than the previously taught courses. Perceived effectiveness of the flipped classroom as well as student satisfaction with it (Pérez et al., 2019) may have played a role on improving attendance. Past research documented that when students were given the opportunity to practice what they watched or read, they saw the value in attending classes (Sherrow et al., 2016). As such, by attending the class to engage in class activities, students would exert more effort to meet the course requirements and accomplish the learning outcomes to great extent (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Additionally, as students knew that the in-person class time would be dedicated to engaging group activities rather than traditional lectures, they may have felt more motivated to attend the classes regularly, especially when they complete the pre-class work.

Time for Acclimating to Flipped Classroom

Research on innovative teaching techniques suggest that simply implementing a novel approach does not guarantee its success. At mid-semester, students voiced their need for reducing ambiguity regarding in-class activities before they come to class. They also mentioned that they were not feeling comfortable actively participating in some of the activities that made them very conspicuous in the class such as debate activities. Encouraging students “to feel comfortable with being uncomfortable” is essential to instilling creative and critical thinking skills in the flipped classroom. One way to reduce student anxiety about high-level learning activities is to inform them about an upcoming in-class activity before class and give them extra time to reflect on the activity. After all, one of the keys to the success of flipped classroom approach is to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what is happening in and outside the classroom (Sherrow et al., 2016). For instance, before in-class critical reflection write-up days, students would receive a list of discussion questions to think over before the in-person class meeting. Once in the classroom, a class discussion on these questions using interactive techniques such as forced connections or mind mapping would take place. Following these activities, they would be provided with the writing prompt for the critical reflection session. Making these slight changes had a very positive impact on student comfort levels and attitudes toward the flipped class format, and possibly reflected positively on their performance. Communication instructors can benefit from developing and introducing flipped classroom format to students.

Low-Stake Assessments to Improve In-Class Participation and Learning

Student preparedness for in-class activities is essential to success of flipped classroom technique (Rahman et al., 2015). Current research shows that students’ reading compliance for course preparedness is very low, and decision to read depends on perception of information usefulness and relevance (Sharma et
Innovating the Communication Pedagogy

Accordingly, if teachers want students to engage in higher-order interactive and collaborative in-class activities after completing the course readings, they should implement low-risk assessments prior to class time to highlight the relevance and usefulness of readings. Research shows that failure to complete the out-of-class work negatively affects learning outcomes in flipped classes as well as instructor satisfaction. Such low-stakes pre-class assessments can boost student motivation to complete the required course materials, and come to class prepared (Hall & DuFrene, 2016). It is also important that these activities are closely related to student interests and concerns, as such relevance would highly contribute to student engagement (Pérez et al., 2019). For instance, these assessments can motivate students to complete the readings, view the lecture slides, and apply what was learned in an online activity before they come to class for a more in-depth discussion and application. Students who complete these online quizzes and online activities are more likely to participate in class discussions and have a deeper learning experience through collaborative learning activities.

**Timed Critical Essays for Deeper Learning and Creative Thinking**

One effective tool to help students connect and synthesize all out-of-class and in-class learnings is having them write timed critical reflection essays during the class period. These reflection essays can be structured as application of course concepts in different contexts and should include some degree of task complexity. Research shows that in order to improve engagement in the flipped classroom activities, students should be exposed to activities with a certain degree of complexity, as simplistic, routine activities reduce the perceived effectiveness of the flipped classroom technique (Pérez et al., 2019). For instance, for the online community chapter in this class, a critical reflection prompt instructed students to synthesize their learnings from readings on online deception and online communities to generate recommendations for a fictitious mobile app company. Students were asked to write up a persuasive pitch for the startup that is based on theory and empirical research findings. Such writing assignments high in complexity push students to think divergently, apply the course material in a real-life context, and think about the ways they could present what they learned for an unexpected audience.

**Flipped Remedy to Re-Engage Students**

As discussed in McMurtrie (2022), instructors should find innovative ways for connecting with students and help them make sense of their college degrees post-COVID-19. Flipped classroom technique may equip instructors with tangible tools to accomplish this goal. For instance, by creating learning experiences that build on the connections between students’ personal interests and the course material, instructors can incite more excitement, and thereby, generate more engagement from students. As flipped classroom puts students in charge of their learning, instructors can start moving away from one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching and start giving students freedom to adopt personalized learning experiences.

Real-life problem-solving projects comprise the backbone of any flipped classroom as they force students to translate theoretical concepts and academic research into real-life applications. When students are tasked with working on complex problems that have a real-life outcome, they demonstrate more willingness to engage in deeper learning of the course material (G. Yilmaz, 2021). As proposed in the engagement theory, collaboratively working on meaningful learning tasks strongly contribute to intrinsic motivation to learn (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). As such, interactive learning practices intertwined with real-life problems in a flipped classroom can intrinsically motivate students to learn
the course material while providing them with the much needed meaning they are looking for in their college degrees.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The limitations in this study are twofold. First, to examine the connections between flipped classroom technique and student performance, we compared grades on objective course assessments (i.e., exams, quizzes) between the course taught with the flipped classroom technique and two courses taught with a traditional format. The content of these assessments was the same and all three courses were taught by the same instructor, but the modality difference in administering the assessments (online vs. in-person) may have played a role in student grades. Though the application-based questions in the objective assessments make it almost impossible to look up answers in an online test, future studies should examine student performance in a flipped classroom by controlling for this factor.

Second, this study took an exploratory approach to examine student perceptions and reactions to flipped classroom learning experiences. The thematic analysis suggested that students generally enjoyed the flipped classroom modality and characterized it as a valuable learning method. To dissect the unique effects of variables embedded in the flipped classroom (e.g., group project, classroom culture, sense of belonging in the class, etc.), future studies should adopt a confirmatory approach to thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Alternatively, future studies can explore the research questions advanced in this study using an experimental design to establish causal links across flipped classroom technique, student learning experience, and academic performance.

**Conclusion**

As evidenced by the findings of this study, flipped classroom can provide communication students with more meaningful and relevant learning experiences compared to traditional, teacher-centric approaches. Flipped classroom technique can help communication students develop and practice their critical and analytical thinking skills, and, thereby, better prepare them for the ever-changing complexities of the world waiting for them beyond the college campus. If more communication instructors start to offer flipped courses that are systematically designed and playfully executed, students can experience the significance of their in-class learnings for the world outside the classroom. Flipped technique is worth a try for innovating the communication pedagogy. After all, what is a better remedy for disengagement than immersing our students in a meaningful, relevant, and fun learning journey?

**References**


Appendix

Self-Reflection on “Flipped” COMM 300

1. What was your initial attitude toward “flipped class” format before you took this course?
2. Did your attitude change or transform as you completed the flipped course? Please explain briefly.
3. Having completed this course:
   a) What do you think you liked the most about the flipped learning format?
   b) What do you think you liked the least about the flipped learning format?
   c) What do you think helped you the most to learn the course material in this flipped format?
      (i) Which online materials did help you the most? Give specific examples and provide a short rationale for why you liked these the most.
      (ii) Which in-class activities were your favorite? Give specific examples and provide a short rationale for why you liked these the most.
      (iii) Which in-class activities were your least favorite? Give specific examples and provide a short rationale for why.
4. What tips would you give a fellow student for success in a flipped course?
5. What tips would you give a professor who is planning to teach a flipped course?
Transforming Experiential Learning in the Honors Interpersonal Communication Course: Interpersonal Enrichment Journeys During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Jennifer A. H. Becker

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.
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
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).
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Action Steps</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Define at least one interpersonal communication challenge or need in a relationship and set at least one goal for interpersonal enrichment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Explore possibilities for interpersonal enrichment.</td>
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<td>3. Examine and refine options for interpersonal enrichment.</td>
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<td>4. Put into action a set of interpersonal enrichment strategies.</td>
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<td>5. Evaluate your interpersonal enrichment process and outcomes.</td>
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<td>6. Reflect upon your learning</td>
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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
Transforming Experiential Learning in the Honors Interpersonal Communication Course

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Course Units and Chapters</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit Number and Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Foundations of Interpersonal Communication</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Creating and Responding to Messages</td>
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Note. This course used the Adler et al. (2018) Interplay: The process of interpersonal communication (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.
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.
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
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].”
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,\(^1\) 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
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.
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
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
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
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.

References

Association for Experiential Education. (2021, March 1). What is experiential education? https://www.aee.org/what-is-ee


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.
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.
Elucidating College Students’ Stressors: Photovoice as a Pedagogical Tool and Qualitative Methodology

DeAnne Priddis and Heather L. Hundley

Keywords: photovoice, college students, stressors, time management, mental health

Abstract: Traditional research examining student stress relies on surveys using pre-determined categories. This study diverts from that approach by adopting a Conflict in Communication class assignment over seven classes (N = 115) using photovoice to determine if results fluctuate by using a different methodology. Additionally, we sought to understand if the sources of stress vary by gender and semester. The data revealed seven categories as the main stressors of student conflict: (1) time management, (2) mental health, (3) finding oneself, (4) future uncertainty, (5) other, (6) financial, and (7) past mistakes. Regardless of participants’ sex/gender or semester in which the data were collected, time management and mental health remained constant. Furthermore, finding oneself and future uncertainty were stressors identified more often in the fall rather than the spring semester. These results varied from traditional survey research.

NOTE
While we acknowledge there is a difference between sex and gender, they are convoluted in U.S. culture. Generally speaking, children are deeply socialized to conform to a gender that is associated with their biological sex. The anonymous files disallowed us to identify specific participant demographics. Therefore, we provided the overall course demographics. To maintain authenticity, agency, and voice, all participants’ titles and captions remain as the students submitted them; therefore, grammar and spelling errors may be present.

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Introduction

Lasarus and Folkman (1984) state that stress is inevitable, however the reaction one has to stress is unique. Stress can occur from fear of failure or outside stimuli. Böke et al. (2019) confirm that when outside stimuli outweigh one’s perceived ability to cope, the individual will experience stress. As a unique population, college students experience a significant amount of stress from both fear of failure and outside stimuli and are identified as a vulnerable group (Acharya et al., 2018; Bulo & Sanchez, 2014; CCMH, 2020; Deatherage et al., 2014; Nisa & Nizami, 2014). While they transition into young adulthood, many move away from what is known and comfortable (parents, siblings, friends, hometown) to unknown circumstances (college, professors, roommates). Unlike high school, the stakes are higher in college as they gain more financial independence and personal freedoms. Parents and teachers are less likely to check up on them or remind them to meet deadlines and complete their homework. They often secure employment, loans, and scholarships to pay for their education. Thus, students must learn to manage their resources, including their time and money, which may compete with the individual's responsibilities and social life, creating conflict and stress.

Although stress levels are high for students in early college careers with unknown circumstances, Böke et al. (2019) determined stress levels are higher in the latter part of the college career. Students in later college years are faced with new stressors such as finding an internship or starting their professional career that may stress coping mechanisms. The students are required to maintain coping with the academic and social stressors, while adding on new stressors.

Many college and university campuses have counseling centers to aid students with varying traditional college stressors and conflict. Novotney (2014) identified that the number of students attending a counseling center for mental health concerns increased annually which coincided with the severity of the cases. For example, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) report notes that counseling centers increased utilization by students 30%–40% between Fall 2009 and Spring 2015, while college enrollment only increased 5%. The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors’ (AUCCCD) 2019 annual survey of 562 counseling center directors evaluated the unique number of students served by a campus counseling center for all universities and colleges (excluding community colleges). The survey reveals the mean number 1,083.8 services provided including triage/screening, crisis, group psychiatric help, and individual therapy (LeViness et al., 2019).

While we cannot identify whether students experience more stress now compared to students in the past, we do know that it is a more explicit topic of concern. In bringing it to the forefront, universities have improved by acknowledging student stress and other mental health issues, addressing the topic in faculty training and student orientation, and providing more resources such as campus counseling centers. Currently, it is evident that college students do indeed experience conflict and stress which negatively impacts their mental health. Fortunately, more students today are seeking campus services to help navigate their situations.

Research reveals that sources of college students’ stressors include loneliness, concern about financial and health-related issues, missing loved ones, academic pressure, and managing interpersonal conflict (Acharya et al., 2018; Bulo & Sanchez, 2014; Deatherage et al., 2014). While student participants completed surveys for researchers to determine their stressors, the AUCCCD surveyed counseling center directors to understand reasons students sought treatment. The AUCCCD survey from July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019, reports the most frequent reason for students seeking services were ranked in order of concern...
as suffering from anxiety, depression, stress, family issues, specific relationship problems, academic performance difficulties, sleep disturbances, social isolation/loneliness, trauma, adjusting to the new environment, suicidal thoughts, and lastly eating/body image concerns (LeViness et al., 2019).

Nisa and Nizami (2014) categorized these sources of stress into four dimensions: interpersonal stress, intrapersonal stress, environmental stress, and academic stress. They identified interpersonal stress as involving relationships, intrapersonal stress pertaining to self, and environmental stress in college life relating to technology issues, noise, living environment, access to faculty, and access to transportation. The fourth dimension, academic stress, Nisa and Nizami explain is unique to students because it occurs when a student transitions to college, switches colleges or semesters, or adjusts to the workload for individual or group work. Past survey research reports that college students predominantly suffer from interpersonal stress followed by intrapersonal, academic, and environmental stress.

Providing Voice to Students

As evident in the literature, college students’ stressors are typically determined by surveying students (Acharya et al., 2018; Bulo & Sanchez, 2014; Deatherage et al., 2014) or counseling center directors (LeViness et al., 2019), whereas photovoice involves the participants and uses their photography as data. Photography offers participants the opportunity and freedom to “document the realities of their circumstances” (PhotoVoice, n.d., para. 7) while communicating their own story to the audience (PhotoVoice, n.d.). Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) approach that offers participants the opportunity to reflect and share one’s life experience and perceptions with the researchers as co-researchers (Nelson, 2019; Wang, 1999; Young, 2017). Drawn from Giroux’s (2011) critical pedagogy, Freire’s (2005) empowerment education, hooks’s (1994) feminist theory, and documentary photography (Ewald, 1985; Hubbard, 1994), photovoice is a well-established classroom tool and popular methodology among social science researchers.

Categorized as arts-based research, photovoice participants can “create images and words to express their realities and feelings” (Latz, 2017, p. 32). The image-text combination creates the ability for participants to communicate their message more vividly on their own terms. The researcher’s role is then considered as “making space for a voice rather than give one” (Latz, 2017, p. 43). Each participant is provided an opportunity to tell their story through pictures. Furthermore, photovoice methodology can raise questions and initiate conversations to create stronger meanings than traditional research methods (Latz, 2017).

Initially used in health activism and promotion (Castleden et al., 2008; Downey et al., 2009; Palibroda et al., 2009; Wang, 1999; Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997), it has been employed in examining domestic violence and homelessness, and for indigenous studies (see Allen, 2012), stigma of mental health (Wada et al., 2019), disability studies (Povee et al., 2014), assisted living (Lewison, 2015), and public health, international development, parenting, and refugees (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Despite its implementation in education (Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009), it has not been as prevalent in higher education (Metcalfe, 2015; Wass et al., 2020).

Yet, more recently Hunter et al. (2020) used photovoice to understand students’ perceptions of a summer college preparation program. Anderson et al. (2019) and Wass et al. (2020) employed photovoice to determine how Maori and Pacific students in New Zealand described “good teaching” and “effective
learning,” respectively. Latz and colleagues (2016) implemented photovoice to identify graduate students and community college student success. More closely related to our research, Tsang and Lian’s (2020) use of photovoice examined undergraduates’ academic stress in Hong Kong. Although their focus was primarily on the role of academic stress created by examination demands, school administration, and parents, the intent of the study was to reduce the pressure caused by heavy loads and exams.

Similarly, our study examines academic stress that students experience in higher education. Rather than pre-determining categories as reasons for student stress, as evident in survey research, we allowed the categories to emerge from student participants to understand if the results are the same, regardless of methodology. Additionally, we collected data over several years allowing us to determine if sources of college student stress vary by sex/gender or between fall and spring semesters.

Despite their goals or applications, scholars claim photovoice is participatory, empowering, and inclusive. Participants are encouraged to share their story or experience collectively vis-à-vis photographs, captions, and brief descriptions (Nelson, 2019). Thus, for this study, the first author assigned college students to identify their stressors visually and verbally with the intended audience of professors and administrators. The audience is important to identify as they may craft their message differently if directed toward friends, parents, or employers. As such, to understand perceptions of stressors germane to college students, we asked the following research question:

**RQ1:** What do college students communicate as their biggest stressor to professors and administrators?

Sex/gender may play a role in college stressors since people are socialized differently. Thus, gender expectations and stereotypes may affect the types of stress students experience. Böke et al. (2019) state that females perceive having higher levels of stress than males, and females are more apt to react emotionally to the stress (i.e., coping response) based on perception of the stress and their socialization. Acharya et al. (2018) found female students reported higher levels of stress in social activities, change in eating habits, being placed in unfamiliar situations, and change in living environments as compared to male students. Additionally, research identifies women as more likely than men to seek and receive information on mental and emotional health concerns (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Acharya et al. (2018) determined that male students had higher levels of stress than females in interpersonal and academic levels. Research also indicates that men are more likely to use drugs and alcohol to help cope with stress (Böke et al., 2019). In addition, men are less aware of resources available on campus to help them cope with stressors (Gibbons et al., 2019), such as the campus counseling center. Based on this information we asked:

**RQ2:** Does the perceived stressor differ between varied sexed/gendered1 college students?

Stressors may also change for individuals based on the time of the year. For example, fall semester students may be experiencing stress related to transitioning to (or back to) college and a new environment, or adjusting to the new independence of living away from family (Hurst et al., 2013). On the other hand, spring semester students may encounter stressors related to changes in employment, graduation, or

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1. While we acknowledge there is a difference between sex and gender, they are convoluted in U.S. culture. Generally speaking, children are deeply socialized to conform to a gender that is associated with their biological sex.
returning to family (Bulo & Sanchez, 2014). Overall, the types of stress encountered by college students may differ depending on the semester, therefore we asked:

**RQ3**: Does the perceived stressor differ in the fall and spring semesters?

Students experience stressors such as academic stressors, interpersonal stressors, and environmental stressors that have impacted their physical and psychological health (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Yang et al., 2021). Furthermore, psychological health can impact the mental health and well-being of emerging adults (Charles et al., 2021).

### Photovoice as a Qualitative Method

To address these questions, we extended the pedagogical tool of photovoice to its methodological application. Wass et al. (2020) posit that qualitative higher education researchers predominantly use interviews and focus groups as methods. However, the visual component in photovoice adds to the quality and depth of data. “Visual metaphors can generate different ideas from those derived from verbal or written interviews” (Wass et al., 2020, p. 844). Latz et al. (2016) concur that photovoice is a powerful research approach. Likewise, O’Mally and Munsell (2020) agree that photovoice, as a method, helps researchers gain a better understanding of the lived experiences from people. Based on this, our study provides the combined voice for participants asking them to submit an original photograph or image, caption, and a brief narrative to articulate their biggest stressor they experience as college students with faculty and university leadership as the intended audience.

### Data Collection and Participants

While explaining the assignment, the instructor provided some general examples of visual metaphors and suggested they use a digital camera or smartphone to obtain an original image that represents their perception of their biggest student conflict (see Figure 1 on the following page for assignment prompt). One student drew a picture rather than supplying a photo, which was acceptable since an image was provided and the assignment criteria were met. Coinciding with Hocker and Wilmot’s (2014) *Interpersonal Conflict* textbook (see Chapter 2) used in this class, the assignment was due at the end of the first week and students delivered a brief presentation the second week of class to explain how their perceived stressor or conflict is communicated by the visual metaphor in an upper division Conflict in Communication class.

Originally, the assignment was scheduled to occur the first week of the semester and then repeated during the 10th week to determine if differences existed in level of disclosure and type of stressor throughout the academic semester. The project was initially employed Fall 2017. During the assignment debriefing early in the semester, students revealed that they lacked an understanding of what others were experiencing. This acknowledgment led students to immediately identify with others, share stories and strategies to resolve or alleviate the stressors, and display empathy toward each other. Ultimately the assignment during week 10 was removed because the anticipated level of disclosure or type of stressor variation was minute; therefore, the latter assignment was repetitive and unnecessary. Keeping the assignment in week one was fruitful in terms of building trust, rapport, and support among students. Further, upperclassmates reflected upon past experiences and did not rely on the stressor as an excuse to not come to class, meet their deadlines, or get their work completed. This was an unintended but welcomed consequence.
FIGURE 1
Assignment Handout

COMM3650 Writing 1: Photovoice

Purpose: To use photovoice as a tool to present metaphors of conflict.

Instructions: Because the student role provides several challenges, this project allows you to share your biggest conflict as a student with faculty and university leadership.

The Photo: Your photo will represent a metaphor of your biggest area of conflict encountered as a college student. Be creative! Don’t just show a picture of a book. This picture should be a metaphor or unique item representing your conflict. This picture should be your original photo that you take with a digital camera or smartphone. If your photo includes any people in it, they must be unrecognizable.

Caption: Create a small caption to go with your original photo. This caption should be a sentence fragment of less than eight words, as in a textbook, to explain how the picture relates to your conflict.

Write-up: Explain your biggest conflict as a student. Tell the story of why this picture was selected and explain the picture. Tie the two together and include how it represents your biggest conflict as a college student.

Informed Consent: Please include at the end of your write-up if your informed consent was given. This can simply be done by stating “yes, I give my informed consent to use my work for the project” or “no, I do not give my informed consent to use my work for this project.” This is part of a larger photovoice project that will be used for presentation and/or publication purposes.

This assignment is due at the end of Week 1. Your photo and caption will be presented with a brief presentation to the class during class Week 2. Please note that all four items (picture, caption, write-up, and consent) should be submitted in one Word document.

Writing 1 = 30 points

After obtaining IRB university approval (protocol number 18-1017), participation was acquired through an upper-level undergraduate course assignment. Students were asked to give written consent permitting researchers to use their assignment as data. The collection of data occurred from Fall 2017 through Fall 2020, for a total of 7 semesters, 8 class sections, and 174 total students listed on the rosters. The largest student major was communication (n = 101, 58.1%). Other majors spanned across the university, with the second highest representation from journalism. Combined, the classes included 26 sophomores (14.9%), 71 juniors (40.8%), 76 seniors (43.7%), and 1 other.

Of the 174 total students, 115 (67.2%) participated in the study, 70 identified as female (60.9%) and 45 identified as male (39.1%). Most of the participants were enrolled in the Fall semester (n = 74, 64.4%) and 41 were in the Spring (35.7%). Students who did not provide written consent or did not submit an original image were excluded from the study. Further reasons for nonparticipation include the student failing to submit the assignment or joining the class after the assignment was due. Approximately two

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2. The anonymous files disallowed us to identify specific participant demographics. Therefore, we provided the overall course demographics.
Elucidating College Students’ Stressors: Photovoice as a Pedagogical Tool and Qualitative Methodology

students’ work per class were excluded in the final data for this research regardless of the rationale. Students’ grades were not penalized if they chose not to sign the consent form. They were penalized for other reasons pertaining to the assignment criteria and grading rubric.

A spreadsheet located on a Google Drive included participant pseudonyms, semester, and year of participants’ submissions. To protect student identity and maintain anonymity, students who identified themselves to the class as male students were assigned the name of John 1, 2, 3 and so forth; female self-identified students were assigned as Jane 1, 2, 3, and so forth. Students did not identify as non-binary or transgendered. Distinguishing student sex/gender was necessary to address RQ2. The semester and year were identified to address RQ3.

Coding

After reviewing the submissions and hearing the presentations, the first author (also the course instructor) identified seven emergent themes from the data, along with “other” for a total of eight total themes. The two authors independently coded 12 projects (10%) and found differences among three of them. They discussed the differences, clarified the themes, and achieved consensus. The codebook was modified to seven themes by merging mental health and loneliness as one theme when the coders found difficulty differentiating them. The remaining projects were divided between the two authors who coded them independently. Some projects referenced more than one theme. For example, John 37 discussed his struggles with time management, mental health, and finding oneself. Therefore, to select the most dominant theme, the coders discussed each project that referenced multiple themes and jointly decided which to code as the most dominant.

Results

This study was designed to serve several purposes. As college professors concerned with students’ well-being, we sought to identify their perceived stressors to determine if they varied among sex/gender or by time of year. We were curious how students would visually depict their perceived stressors metaphorically. Additionally, we sought to understand if photovoice reveals different results compared to the traditionally employed survey method. We conclude by critically questioning whether photovoice—as a pedagogical tool and qualitative method—is truly empowering for participants.

Types of Stressors

Research question 1 posed the question, “What are the biggest areas of conflict (i.e., stressors) encountered by college students?” The findings reveal that college students’ main sources of conflict are time management \((n = 49)\), mental health \((n = 23)\), finding self \((n = 15)\), future uncertainty \((n = 14)\), other \((n = 7)\), financial \((n = 5)\), and past mistakes \((n = 2)\). See Table 1 on the following page for a summary of theme frequencies and percentages.

**Time management.** Time management was the most prevalent category (42.6%). The theme included students juggling work, school, and social life. Several students disclosed they worked full-time and were also full-time students. Although there were several degrees of work-school balance discussed, there were also struggles with social life, organizations, and studies. A student used the visual metaphor of a pot of boiling water for his struggle with time management. His photograph is of a pot on a stovetop.
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with a slotted spatula being held by someone’s hand to show the depth of the water and the bubbles from the boiling water in the pan. His narrative explained:

In college, semesters always seem to start off like a breeze. The days go by nice and slowly. In my head I believe can stay at a nice even pace and keep up. Instead I always feel like I must go faster and harder every new week. Assignments get harder and harder. Studying is a must as every exam and assignment covers more and more material. Time is now flying by at a million miles per hour. This constant buildup of assignments and studying is like water boiling over the sides of a pot. If you don’t “stir the pot”, do your work, it will overflow, just like keeping up with everything college entails. (John 18)

Just like a pot of water on the stove may boil over if left unattended, he identified the growing challenge keeping up with an increasingly difficult pace as a student. Attending to his schoolwork can lead to less time for other things such as work and social time.

Similarly, another student expressed how she overcame the difficulty of managing her schoolwork. She shared a picture of a large window with sheer curtains covering blinds behind them. The neighboring house is visible through the blinds, with the caption “Far Far and Away” she wrote,

My biggest conflict as a student is having so much work to do and having to stay at home to do it. I get distracted easily, so being in my room I have other distractions such as my tv, music, video games, and etc. I am the type of student who gets things done early, and likes to organize the way I do things. With this virtual learning, it is hard for me to keep up with everything. I am taking a lot of political science classes which requires a lot of reading and weekly papers. To juggle with those classes and others will be difficult.

I took the picture of my window and blinds because it shows my life right now. I am taking some difficult courses this semester so it contains a lot of work. This requires me to be at home

3. To maintain authenticity, agency, and voice, all participants’ titles and captions remain as the students submitted them; therefore, grammar and spelling errors may be present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Student Stressors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Self</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Uncertainty</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Mistakes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a lot of the time. The window shows how I can easily open up the blinds and see the sun, see people, which is a little bit of fresh air, but I cannot actually go out there. Although, I hope this is temporary, it is what I have to do as a student to succeed. (Jane 15)

She expressed her determination to manage her time wisely by disclosing techniques employed such as self-discipline and essentially self-confinement to get her work done. She recognized the need to stay focused and prioritize schoolwork above distractions for the rest of the semester. Though the benefits may seem “far far and away” or she may have felt “far far and away” from what she would prefer doing, the results were just out the window or the distractions are within sight.

Mental health. The second most common category was mental health (20%). The students disclosed that they were experiencing loneliness by missing friends, family, and pets. The students also shared their feelings of anxiety, stress, depression, fear, burnout, emotions, mourning, and being overwhelmed.

Participants recognized the negative effects being a student had on their mental health. One student attempted to overcome feeling overwhelmed by using the visual metaphor of the cockpit of an airplane (see Figure 2). In the photo, the upholstery on the pilot’s and co-pilot’s seats were torn and tattered, showing wear. The interior, including the floor, appears dingy and dirty. Numerous knobs, switches, and

FIGURE 2
Being Overwhelmed With Options but Focusing on the Bigger Picture
dials on the dashboard and above the seats are evident, leading one to easily surmise how overwhelming the responsibility of flying may be. There are myriad choices and decisions required for operation and control. Just above the center of the frame, four windowpanes reveal a tree line and gray skies indicating options for what is ahead, though neither are particularly optimistic. This student used the caption “Being overwhelmed with options but focusing on the bigger picture” and this description:

> My biggest conflict as a college student is simply how overwhelming everything can seem. Many small tasks (due dates, projects, papers, presentations, etc.) can add up into one massive stress-inducing problem. I often have to force myself to not focus on all of the small details but rather the bigger picture as a whole. As with the picture above, there are so many small buttons and options and while they do have a major impact on things, I must remind myself that sometimes I just need to look through the window in order to understand where I need to go. (Jane 46)

Another student continuously cited the mantra “Stay Positive” attempting to overcome the impact that being a full-time student had on her mental health (see Figure 3). The picture features a gray and brown dull-colored wall with a concrete floor. It may be an abandoned space or underpass. In contrast, someone

**FIGURE 3**

*Stay Positive*
spray painted the wall with “GOOD” (in pink), “Vibes” (in yellow with purple outlines), “Only” (in yellow). The words were stacked vertically, and a pink flower and blue stem were on the right side. The word “GOOD” had a line of black spray paint across it. She explained:

The photo I chose represents how I have a hard time staying positive. The stress of college and always being tired can affect how you perceive things. As an ORCO [Organizational Communication] major you’re always having to communicate with others and seem like a happy person even if you are not. These interactions with others can sometimes get annoying or overwhelming. Sometimes you have to get up in front of a class and give a presentation whether you feel like it or not, but you have to pretend to be happy. In this major, there is a lot of group work which can be great unless you get stuck in a group that is not willing to participate. Last semester, I ended up being the only person doing work in two of my classes near the end of the semester. This put a lot of stress on me and I was in a bad mood a lot of the time. This semester, I already have a group that I can tell is going to be hard to work with because they want to wait until the last minute to do things. I have to try my best to be patient with them as well as be encouraging because if I was rude it would not make them want to get their work done any faster. This semester I am taking 18 hours so I know that there are going to be points where I feel overwhelmed, but if I stay positive it will be a better experience for not only me, but the people around me.

This year I am trying to get rid of the negative factors in my life in order to make me feel happier. I am trying to surround myself with positive people and get rid of the negativity in my life. Staying positive is easier said than done, but I believe it is necessary. I also believe that happier people live a better life and that is something that I would like to be a part of. (Jane 45)

Although both Jane 45’s and Jane 46’s narratives and photographs told their unique stories, their submissions were coded in the mental health theme. Both students were finding ways to work through their mental health concerns by consciously focusing on the things that make them happy, attempting to avoid situations and people that caused them stress.

**Finding self.** The third category of stress concerned the students’ interest in finding self (13%). Many participants worried if they were on the right track, if they were doing enough, or doing the right thing. Self-doubt can cause stress for the students. Jane 52 submitted a photograph of the end of a Fender Telecaster acoustic guitar with the headstock and focused on the strings and tuning pegs. The guitar’s neck is not visible, but instead the photograph is altered with purple dots in the darkness. She included the caption “How one with passion sees their craft” to help describe her greatest conflict at the time of the assignment.

My biggest conflict as a student has been finding myself. Finding who I want to be, who I want to surround myself with, and how I want to spend my future. I think underneath this all lies a desire to find my passion—something that drives me more than anything. For some people, this is music. For me, I had hopes that someday it could be photography. This photo features me doing something I love, and capturing an image of what the person I loved is passionate about: music. I have a desire to learn more on the camera, and have an underdeveloped passion for it as well. So, to me, this photo says passion. His passion in music, and my passion behind the shutter. Passion has been a struggle of mine, and I hope to discover what makes me tick before my time as a student has ended. (Jane 52)
She appeared to have doubts if her passion for photography will be enough to make her great in this profession. Another student shared his desire to find himself with a photograph of a clear plastic 16-ounce cup half-full of water. Behind the cup is a stack of school-related items including a red three-ring binder and a paperback textbook on top of it. The caption for this photograph was “Where am I?”

My biggest conflict as a student is determining where I am. Of course I know where I am in terms of my location, but where am I when it comes to my education. Am I on track to graduate? Do I have enough credits? Will these classes benefit my career? Although I try my best to stay on top of all of my work, I still often question myself and ask am I doing enough or do I need to more. I chose this picture because I feel like it’s perfect for my thoughts towards where I am. The cup symbolizes what I mean when ask the question, “Where am I?” One can’t determine if the cup is half-empty or if it is half-full. One can’t determine if someone hasn’t finished drinking it or if they haven’t finished pouring the water. This picture represents my biggest conflict as college student perfectly because one can’t determine where am I stand with my life by simply looking at me. It would take one to see my entire process to know where I am truly located. (John 04)

He seemed to be searching for a roadmap to help him navigate his progress toward graduation, and perhaps the impact that others have on his progress by controlling the level of water in the cup.

Future Uncertainty. The fourth category was future uncertainty (12.2%). The participants worried if they would find an internship or a job after graduation. The photograph one female student submitted was a treetop, at the bottom of the picture darkness was surrounding it. Further up the picture were storm clouds that dominate the photograph’s right side. The clouds were gray and suggest impending rain. However, on the left side of the photograph the disappearing sun was hiding behind the clouds. She captioned the photograph “The Unknown.”

One of my biggest conflicts I face as a student is fearing the unknown. Now, what I mean by this is not knowing exactly how my future is going to play out, or what challenges I am going to face going forward. I find myself thinking about what I am going to do with my life a lot, especially now that I am a junior. The thought of failure really scares me. I took a picture of the sky at night because just like our futures can be unclear and not certain, the clouds can sometimes fog the view of the sky and make everything not as clear. Along with that, there is so much out in the world that we do not know of. So much of the world is still unknown to us. I think many young adults my age face this conflict without even realizing it. (Jane 73)

The dark night and cloudy sky featured in the image metaphorically depicted her fear of the future as it is unknown. She also noted the level of uncertainty for many young adults; thus, she was not alone, suggesting she found this notion comforting.

Also concerned with future uncertainty but more optimistically, another student wrote the caption “A Flower Waiting to Bloom” with the visual metaphor of a flower in the rain representing the uncertainty of his education compared to what he will do after graduation. The photograph he took inside features a window framing a flowering bush. The window is slightly foggy, and raindrops are on the glass. The green bush has long, leafy branches and a few large pink flowers, somewhat like hydrangeas. The flower in the center of the photograph appears to be weighed down by the rain. He connects this image with his stress as a student:
My biggest conflict as a student is feeling as if all the work that I’m doing is weighing me down and all for nothing. Sometimes the courses and assignments feel like they are not doing anything to further my development. I feel like the work isn’t doing anything for me but I know in the end when I finish my degree it’ll all be worth it. The work that I feel like is dragging me down is actually molding me to be successful in my career field.

The flower is being pushed down by water when it rains. The rain comes down hard and fast and sometimes knocks the petals off of the flower making it look fragile and weak. In reality the rain in the moment makes the flower look less desirable but the rain is necessary for the flower to bloom similar to me being a college student. The things that may feel like they’re hurting me or useless at the time are often just necessary in my journey of success. (John 19)

The flower metaphor allowed the student to express the toll that going to school may have on him at this moment. He recognized the importance of his education for building resiliency and strength.

**Other.** The fifth most common category (6%) was other. This category included a wide variety of stressors including the desire to travel, home responsibilities, inability to have desired time for fitness, lack of transportation and parking, and challenging relationships with professors. These participants appeared to be more focused on an immediate stressor compared to the other participants. While these stressors varied, they often dealt with sacrificing something to fulfill the student role. For example, a participant photographed a silhouette of a man looking toward the sky with a red backpack on his back in the bottom third of the photograph. The background features the top of a tree line, but the sky makes up most of the image. The student captioned it “Beyond His Backpack” and stated,

I chose the picture because it expresses my love for travel and adventure. I’m wearing the backpack because it’s what’s holding me back. I want to travel while I’m young but it’s impossible without the proper knowledge and funding. Though the backpack aids me in obtain what I need, it keeps me still. Patience is a struggle. (John 16)

While this student yearned to be elsewhere, another student desired that all people remain present throughout the learning experience. She created the caption “Lack of Passion” to accompany her photograph picturing a computer monitor with a document on the screen. The heading on the paper said “Nothing” with three arrowed bullet points following. The first lines stated, “Blah Blah Blah” and the two remaining lines stated, “Blah Blah.” She expressed that she had already completed the reading for the week, and that she relied on her professors to also contribute to the learning experience.

As a student at MTSU who has had several kinds of professors, I can comfortably say that a professor without passion promotes students without passion. If they haven’t got the passion, they are less likely to be engaging. A lot of people I know would go to classes a lot more often if they had professors that had passion about the subject they were teaching. An issue that I have faced with dispassionate professors is that I personally love to learn, but a bad professors makes even me dread going to class. Students are less likely to get a good grade in the class, and that in turn reflects poorly on the professor too.

Since the first assignment, I understand that conflict is between two parties that perceive something to be scarce or unattainable. So, in this instance, the student is frustrated with
school because it prevents them from learning things that they care about or something that they can personally use in the “real world.” The professor could see updating their knowledge on the topic as unnecessary or too time consuming. They could see it as the students just being lazy when in actuality, but must compromise to benefit all stakeholders. (Jane 65)

The student was expressing her impression of past educational experiences as she was attempting to connect her learning to current and future goals.

**Financial Concerns.** The sixth category involved financial concerns (4.3%). The participants stated that conflict is caused by working for financial reasons, paying bills, and overall money is an area of conflict for them. For example, Jane 78 shared a picture of a nylon wallet with a driver’s license, library card, fast-food restaurant card, and loyalty card for Sephora. The wallet had several empty card slots, and was absent money or credit cards. The caption was void, but the summary stated, “The life of a college student can be hard. The biggest problem I’ve noticed is that many people are not financially stable as they would like to be. Money is the root of a lot of issues for college students” (Jane 78). This participant made a blanket statement expressing that it is not uncommon for students to have financial concerns. Another participant conveyed more details on expenses and income while attending school with her photograph of a laptop, highlighters, a mason jar of markers, and a stack of three textbooks, a journal, and spiral notebook with a bag of coffee beans and a coffee mug on top of the stack. The photograph included the caption, “Vital school supplies for the average successful student.”

My largest area of conflict with college involves the fees above the tuition price. The price of textbooks, school supplies and miscellaneous fees cause me distress. We as college students pay a hefty sum of money for tuition. I am fully aware that some people are lucky enough to have wealthy parents, scholarships or plenty of financial aid to cover the fees of being a successful student. But I, like many other financially burdened students, am not that lucky. There are over $2000 worth of school supplies in this photo alone. Considering money is an extremely scarce resource for me, it is difficult to shell out approximately $800 dollars a semester solely for textbooks. Add to this the gas money for the forty-five minute daily commute to get to campus, the costs add up. I have to get a lot of babysitting jobs to stay in school. (Jane 88)

**Past Mistakes.** The seventh and final category focused on past mistakes (1.7%). The participants in this theme disclosed their regret at starting at a different school, initially selecting the wrong major, or other choices they made. One student metaphorically articulated this with a photograph of a wire garbage can containing several books and tools including large shears and a wood handled long bristled brush. The trash can on the carpeted floor is placed in front of white louvered closet doors. The caption is “Waste of Time,” and he related it to his stress as follows:

My picture features a metal waste basket that holds some of my Interior Design components. Before I discovered my love for communication I spent two years in the major Interior Design. Those two years were very difficult, because I did not fully understand everything in the major and completely a waste of my time. The professors were not very helpful. One even told me I should consider changing my major, which I thought was very offensive at the time. I was so devastated that I tried even harder to commit to Interior Design and understand the major. It was pointless, because my grades were not reflecting what I wanted them to be. Instead of A’s and B’s, I was making C’s and B’s on majority of the assignments. This picture represents a big
conflict I had in my life which was being lost. I spend so much time in a major I hated that I was not sure what I would want to do if I changed it. Shortly after I left Interior Design, I held meetings with the career center to help me determine my new major. I am happy to experience every part of that journey; because if it had not been for my failure in interior design I would not have discovered my success and enjoyment in the Organizational Communications major. (John 27)

Although he found a major that he truly enjoyed, he regretted the two years that he spent in a major that was not as fulfilling. Clearly, his stress was derived from a past decision that hindered his progress toward graduation.

**Stressor Differences Between Varied Sexed/Gendered Students**

Research question 2 asked if the stressors differed between sexed/gendered students. As noted, the participants consisted of 70 self-identified females (61%) and 45 self-identified males (39%). Female college students reported the following stressors: time management (42.9%), mental health (22.9%), finding self (15.7%), future uncertainty (10%), other (4.3%), financial (2.9%), and past mistakes (1.4%). Whereas the male college students reported their stressors slightly differently as time management (42.2%), future uncertainty and mental health (15.6% each), other and finding self (8.9%), financial (6.7%), and past mistakes (2.2%). Both groups rated time management as their biggest perceived conflict, followed by mental health. Females more frequently cited finding self than future uncertainty, whereas males noted future uncertainty more often than finding self. Both groups identified other, financial, and past mistakes as their least perceived stressor as college students. See Table 1 for theme frequencies by sex/gender.

While a direct connection between our findings and the literature is unclear, female participants’ stress about finding self aligns with Acharya et al.’s (2018) claim that this population reports higher levels of stress when it comes to their social activities. That is, identity (finding self) is determined socially; thus, to figure out who you are, you must engage in social activities to compare yourself with others and understand their perception of who you are and who you are not (Derrida, 1982). Furthermore, the finding that male students are less likely to seek help for mental health (Gibbons et al., 2019) is alarming given that is the second largest stressor for this demographic in our study.

**Conflict Between Time of Year**

Research question 3 queried whether students’ perceived stressors varied between Spring and Fall semesters. As identified earlier, the study took place over seven semesters; 41 students (35.7%) were enrolled in the Spring semesters and 74 students (64.3%) were enrolled in the Fall semesters. The frequency of stress categories for the Spring semester students were time management (48.8%), mental health (17.1%), financial, future uncertainty, finding self, and other all ranked the same (7.3%), and past mistakes (4.9%). The Fall semester students reported more variation with time management (39.2%), mental health (21.6%), finding self (16.2%), future uncertainty (14.9%), other (5.4%), financial (2.7%), and past mistakes (0%). The students were more concerned about finding self and future uncertainty in the Fall semesters than in the Spring semesters. See Table 1 for theme frequencies by semester. Literature fails to seek whether student stress varies between semesters, though we do know that stress levels are higher among students completing their college education (Böke et al., 2019).
Discussion

This research utilized photovoice as a pedagogical tool and qualitative methodology to identify college students' stressors and determine if these stressors varied by sex/gender and semester. This enables us to compare results from traditional survey research to this approach and question the claim that photovoice is empowering for participants. Although faculty and administrators may assume students' sources of stress, this study engages in participatory action by empowering students to define and describe their stress through visual metaphors and verbal explanations. In doing so, student stressors are discovered, and other, traditionally stereotyped stressors are questioned.

The literature reveals several stressors experienced by students by employing surveys including loneliness, concern about financial and health-related issues, missing loved ones, academic pressure, and managing interpersonal conflict (Acharya et al., 2018; Bulo & Sanchez, 2014; Deatherage et al., 2014). Our study founded on photovoice confirms previous research identifying student stress is partially derived by financial issues and academic pressure. Based on Nisa and Nizami's (2014) categories, surveys report that students primarily experience interpersonal stress the most followed by intrapersonal, academic, and environmental stress. Our results reveal that students primarily experience academic stress followed by intrapersonal stress as a close second regardless of their sex/gender or semester. Specifically, we identified time management and mental health as the two highest perceived stressors for college students.

Time management, as the most common stressor reported by participants, supports Musabiq and Karimah's (2020) research and the theme they labeled as “lack of resources.” The second most frequent category of stress students experience pertains to mental health. As noted in the introduction, students’ mental health issues are a growing concern for college and university campuses. Although many colleges have a counseling center, they are often understaffed and experience high turnover. The turnover rate for centers in 2019 was 43.5% compared to 36.5% in 2018 (LeViness et al., 2019). As a result, students requiring services have increased on average by 12.2% from 2018 to 2019, causing an average wait time of 6.1 business days for their first appointment, and 8.7 business days for their first appointment after a triage appointment (LeViness et al., 2019). Counseling centers are developing more collaborations such as the AUCCCD and other collaborative organizations to help tailor effective programs reaching students (CCMH, 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019; LeViness et al., 2019).

It is important to note that several themes are intertwined because the cause of one can affect another. For example, students struggle with work-life balance, time management, and procrastination. There are several students who work to pay bills which can be associated as financial stress but may also be identified as time management stress. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships and academic responsibilities can also create time management stress. Nevertheless, photovoice allows participants to define the sources of their stress rather than imposing them a priori.

As an in-class activity, one benefit to this exercise is the expression of empathy toward each other. Students disclosed their surprise that time management and financial stress exists among traditional and nontraditional college students. For example, an Army veteran student with a family expressed that he was not aware so many students had full-time jobs while attending school. This exercise revealed commonalities and led to a discussion of students’ new understanding of what each person experiences.
This empathy can also benefit professors and administrators to understand that students have other concerns outside of the classroom that may be a higher priority on any given day. Personally, this exercise has changed our class attendance policy. The first author changed her attendance policy from accepting only absences due to illness to allowing students two absences each semester without explanation or penalty. She discovered that students may be experiencing reasons for missing class outside of illness, such as childcare needs or financial issues forcing them to work during class. Furthermore, counseling centers can use this exercise as a strategy to determine the types of students' needs for services on campus. These needs may vary based on the campus demographics (e.g., commuters, nontraditional students, socioeconomic implications, first-generation).

Due to the conflation of stressors college students experience, we are challenged to prioritize one methodology over another. Instead, we caution faculty, administrators, and researchers to make stereotyped assumptions about students' source of stress. For example, we are familiar with the cliché of the “poor college student” eating ramen noodles and struggling to make ends meet. Working students have become more of the norm since reduced state support shifts the cost of tuition on to students. Interestingly financial stress was less often identified by participants in our study, but time management was the highest source of stress. This suggests that many students have jobs meeting financial demands, but this exacerbates their ability to balance school, work, family, and other demands on their time.

While financial stress extends beyond college life, so does mental illness. College counseling centers are focusing on increasing mental health awareness and treatment. For example, the 2020 Center for Collegiate Mental Health annual report states that during the 2019–2020 academic year approximately 60% of students who visited over 600 university and college counseling centers had prior mental health treatments. This number was under 48% in the 2012–2013 academic year (CCMH, 2020). The prior mental health treatments also have an impact on the growing number of student campus visits to the counseling centers. Counseling center directors report on average having 12.2% more clients served in 2019 than in 2018 (LeViness et al., 2019). Although our research has ranked mental health second highest, time management is much higher. Counseling centers can also offer more programs to help students with time management of classes, work, friends and family, and other responsibilities.

Finally, we find that photovoice is a useful and engaging pedagogical tool as well as an appropriate methodology in which to acquire data. Yet, we are cautious of scholars' empowering and liberatory claims. As scholars, we embrace the ability to seek answers using an alternative approach. This allows us to support or question past research. We also welcome the opportunity for participants to have a voice and articulate their primary source of conflict as a college student. By doing so, they are empowered to express themselves and they are generating data for analysis.

Conversely, student participants were not active in all stages of this research. They were not included to create themes, nor were they given the opportunity to assess our results. As such, students are not complicit and for this reason the exercise is not liberatory (see Higgins, 2016). In some sense, they were disempowered by assigning them this work and confining their expression to an original visual metaphor. As Wass et al. (2020) demonstrate, some ideas are challenging to express visually. For this assignment, students must possess some visual literacy and it may be challenging for some students to creatively express themselves through visual metaphor. As a result, the photovoice assignment is “emotively laden” (Wass et al., 2020, p. 837).
Limitations

As with any research, this study is not exempt of limitations. To begin, participants were students in a 3000-level communication class. Hence, the students who were asked to identify their primary stressor visually and verbally were primarily juniors and seniors. We acknowledge student stressors may be different for freshmen and a larger representation of sophomores compared to junior- or senior-level students. Our older and more experienced participants may be more adjusted to coping mechanisms for the stressors compared to newer students. Yet, as stated in the introduction, Böke et al. (2019) argue that student stress levels are higher later in a student’s college career.

Another limitation is that the students were asked to identify their dominant stressor in their photovoice project. Then each assignment was coded as one dominant theme. Many students experience more than one type of stressor (Musabiq & Karimah, 2020) which was exhibited in some of the photovoice assignments where coders had to determine which seemed to be the most dominant. Thus, multiple, secondary, and minor themes were not calculated, and the cause/effect of the themes were not speculated.

Coding was completed after the seven semesters from Fall 2017 to Fall 2020. Each student assignment was saved as an anonymous file shortly after the semester. The file name was saved as the students’ self-identified sex/gender and the semester and year in which the class was held. No other demographic information was requested nor shared by each student. Thus, the demographic information provided earlier in this manuscript was derived from class rosters, not by the actual participants. While this does not affect our data and results, it does suggest that future research may seek more nuanced information about particular types of students (e.g., age, major, minor, classification level, etc.).

Nonetheless, we find the 115 photovoice assignments, over eight sections and seven semesters provided robust data for analysis. Given the fact that students maintained the freedom to express their primary stress with a visual metaphor and accompanying caption and narrative empowered them, as opposed to presenting pre-determined options for them to rank or check off inherent in survey research. This offers valuable insight. The themes were not selected from past research, as the themes were not consistent throughout literature.

Future Research

While we caution not to overemphasize the power of photovoice, we encourage other faculty and researchers to continue exploring its pedagogical and methodological utility. Although the intent of the project was to identify college students’ stressors, compare results with traditional survey research, and consider scholars’ claims about photovoice, this project suggests the necessity of future research.

Specifically, as a participatory action research approach (Nelson, 2019; Wang, 1999; Young, 2017), photovoice provides a strong foundation to begin conversations and share commonalities within the classroom. This may be empowering to students to learn empathy that will help build connections and start conversations with other students who experience or have conquered similar stressors. For those who experience different stressors, they can learn about their classmates’ resilience and ability to overcome tremendous obstacles, which is both reaffirming and empowering. Hunter et al. (2020) adopted photovoice in a gallery-walk assignment and concluded the experience helped students feel heard and better understood by other students. Thus, future research can include the presentation portion of this assignment to capture whether students felt better connected, understood, and supported by their peers.
References


Students’ Perceptions of Professional Short-Messaging Education in Undergraduate Courses

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Keywords: short messaging, text message, chat, business communication, higher education

Abstract: The popularity of short-messaging formats, like text and chat, is on the rise in the workplace with many employees preferring this style over long-form options like email. While many businesses expect employees to communicate using short messages, students may be ill-equipped to effectively use these methods due to a lack of formal training. This study sets out to understand students’ experience, confidence, and education related to professional short messaging. Results indicate a correlation between confidence and experience levels in writing text and chat messages. Further, the participants who indicated they had training in writing short messages indicated they learned it in a business communication class. Thus, this study highlights a need for education on short messaging in the business communication classroom to increase student experience, and thus, their confidence in writing these messages.

Introduction

As employees communicate at work, there is an increased adoption of short-form messaging with over 79% of professionals using short messages (Kemp, 2020). These are often contained within team collaboration software (such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, Asana, etc.), which allow team members to post announcements and connect their digital tools in one space. These workspaces help “manage productivity and improve team efficiency” (Johnson, 2018, p. 148). To keep everything organized and all team members on the same page, these workflow spaces rely on frequent, short messages between
team members. This shift in communication styles is designed to meet the up-to-the-moment needs of today's professionals. The use of collaboration software, where short and frequent messages are preferred over those that are long and wordy, creates faster progress and more satisfying results for professionals (Mehandru, 2019). Tools like these can even foster connectivity among colleagues in the workplace and thus increase employee well-being when used effectively (Montrief et al., 2020; Papapicco, 2019). Conversely, the short-format tools that allow for rapid connectivity in organizations can also create perceptions of overload and decrease productivity if used ineffectively or without training (Stephens, 2009).

While many businesses expect employees to utilize virtual teamwork platforms, the skill of short-message communication is not often learned in undergraduate courses. Business communication courses traditionally include business writing, but this curriculum commonly focuses on formal letters, memos, and reports. This study seeks to understand current educational experiences and how students perceive their ability to formulate short messages professionally.

**Literature Review**

**Team Communication and Collaboration Software**

Communication has a great impact on the success of a virtual team. Clear communication expectations and norms are especially important in well-functioning virtual teams (Ford et al., 2017). The tools that a team chooses to utilize for communication and collaboration might vary as sometimes they are dictated by availability within the organization, and other times they are the most affordable or accessible option. Regardless of the tools offered, teams must navigate the collaborative technologies that work best for their team communication.

There are many collaborative information technology (CIT) platforms available to connect teams in the workplace, such as Microsoft Teams, Google's G Suite, Slack, Asana, Adobe Connect, and Trello. Users interact with these platforms from both remote and collocated places, applying both synchronous and asynchronous timing to their interactions (Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021). The use of these tools has rapidly gained favor over the past several years, with many workplaces reliant on technology to collaborate and create work products. Sometimes called “Groupware” in the interdisciplinary research field of CSCW (Computer-Supported Cooperative Work), these social collaboration applications have been studied from a variety of perspectives.

First, these platforms are sites of information-sharing and allow functional workflows and task management. According to Marion and Fixson (2021), “From the perspective of a knowledge-based view (KBV) of the firm, these tools can foster the creation of knowledge via faster problem-solving through the rapid dissemination of ideas, comments, and revisions to design” (p. 193). While the platform is a vehicle, the individuals who use it are the true asset of an organization, but their use of the platform determines its effectiveness. Students preparing for the workforce must understand their role in knowledge creation and information-sharing and the professional way to share it with others.

Second, work management platforms have been studied from a technological perspective within the information technology field. In this research area, technologies are designed and evaluated in terms of how they help users achieve their organizational goals (i.e., Jost et al., 2021). The design and implementation of computer networks for data processing and communication are foundational to the
use of task management systems that help businesses get things done. Future business professionals must be adept at using the available digital tools in their workplace but should also consider the social implications of interacting with collaboration software.

The third and final area of study is the social perspective, or the ways in which work is constituted in the relationship between the organization and its group members (Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021). Whether called the “work system,” as in the workplace psychology literature, or the “sociotechnical system,” as in the CSCW field, the social processes that undergird technology are the basis for determining its usage (Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021). While technology enables communication, it is the context of the moment and culture of the workplace which determines its effectiveness at connecting individuals. Whether teams are fully virtual or using a virtual space to connect in addition to face-to-face communication, the software acts as a bridging communication tool to bring teams together. The importance of wielding these tools effectively and in a professional manner cannot be overstated.

**Short Messaging**

Within team collaboration software, communication functions play a prominent role in the features utilized by many corporations. There are many ways scholars classify and label these tools and messaging platforms, including enterprise social networking (Cardon, 2016), text messaging, collaborative software platforms, and instant messaging (Parra et al., 2022). For this study’s purpose, we define short messaging as the sending and receiving of messages typically up to a few sentences in length and used primarily in the workplace. On a typical day, organizational members using these tools will often see several messaging threads from various small groups open and in progress, accessible on multiple devices. For example, Microsoft Teams allows users to communicate within multiple groups, or “teams,” in a desktop application, within an internet browser, and on mobile device applications (Microsoft, 2023). A user could switch between these devices throughout the day and the messages would be current each time the user checked in, as long as they were connected to the internet. While there are many platforms that offer short messaging, we focus primarily on the communication via the messages rather than the overall platform.

With exploding popularity, workplace connectivity software is not only becoming an essential part of modern organizational culture, important for completing everyday tasks, but it is also seeping into the vernacular with phrases like “I'll Slack You” signifying a worker’s preferred mode of communication (Ivanova, 2019). One way that short messaging influences teams at work is through community-building and the fulfillment of needs (Uysal, 2016). When employees exchange and observe others providing support using short messaging, they have an increased sense of community at work. Short messaging continues to surge in popularity with 79% of professionals using messaging services for communication at work (Kemp, 2020). While this popularity is highest with the youngest employees (>87% of employees 16–24 years old report using messaging services at least once per week), it is also very popular with those in the 55–64 age bracket (>47% report using messaging services at least once per week) (Kemp, 2020). The popularity of short messaging is higher than all other forms of communication besides email. Moreover, professionals must be well-versed in short messaging to avoid potential risks associated with poorly executed use of these tools. Whether aiming to avoid legal issues (Greene, 2018), after-hours policies related to messaging (Cheng et al., 2021), or overload from nonstop connectivity (Stephens, 2009), organizations are increasingly seeing the need for professionalism and use of smart judgment in contexts related to short-form messaging.
Short Messaging Education

It is clear that professionals are using short messaging in the workplace to achieve their goals (Kemp, 2020). Some research suggests that employees’ professional short-messaging skills meet or exceed employers’ expectations (Jones, 2011). Nevertheless, many scholars argue that students should be provided with learning opportunities on the form and etiquette of short-message communication given its prevalence in the workplace (Darics, 2020; Jones, 2011; Towner et al., 2019). There is less guidance, though, on what should be included in such instruction and how to effectively teach these skills.

Over the past 2 decades, some pedagogical scholarship has focused on drawing students’ attention to various communication mediums’ affordances, advantages, and disadvantages. These activities often ask students to use one or more digital communication tools for a task and then reflect on how the tool or medium affected their communication behaviors and expectations (Barrett & Murphy, 2019; Turman, 2005; Wallace & Mundell, 2003). While these projects are valuable, they tend to emphasize students’ reflection on and awareness of the influence of the medium on their practices rather than specifically teaching professional short-messaging skills.

When considering what should be included in short-message instruction, some researchers who study professional digital communication in the workplace critique the common guidance that advises writers to follow formal writing rules and avoid slang, abbreviations, emojis, and other similar features in their digital messages (Darics, 2020; Skovholt et al., 2014). Instead, their work shows that professionals often embrace informal tools, like emojis and other nonverbal communication representations, to increase the perceived richness of text-based digital communication and reduce ambiguity (Darics, 2020; Skovholt et al., 2014). Along these lines, some educators provide pedagogical activities to help students consider the value and effective use of emojis and emoticons (for example, Brody & Caldwell, 2019), but not necessarily for professional short-messaging contexts. Consider, however, the differences in form and function that occur in emails and in short messaging formats, as illustrated in the following hypothetical example in which two team members are discussing an upcoming pitch presentation. The email version of this message uses communication that is asynchronous, slightly formal, and compiles multiple topics into one message:

Good morning Jordan,

This email is your reminder that we are due in the conference room at 3 p.m. for a meeting with the executives from Big Time. Please remember to bring enough printed agendas for everyone who will attend. Also, bring some extra pens just in case anyone needs one. We might not end up needing these, but I prefer to have something to give them when they arrive because it shows that we are prepared for the meeting. I have attached the agenda here for you to see the most updated version.

As you know, this is an important account for us and we are hoping to do well on today’s pitch. Thanks for all the hard work you’ve put in so far. When we get in there, let’s project confidence, our collaborative spirit, and show that we can handle any question they throw at us.

If you have any questions for me before the meeting, you can email me or stop by my office. I will be working on prep for this meeting all day.

Best,

Phan
In contrast, the short message version of this message uses communication that is synchronous between the sender and receiver, conversational in nature with brief pauses that do not follow traditional grammar rules, includes emojis for emotions, yet accomplishes the same functions as the email message:

Phan (08:42 a.m.): Meeting at 3 p.m. today!

Jordan (08:42 a.m.): Yeah! It’s gonna be great. Big Time will be impressed with this, I’m sure.

Phan (08:43 a.m.): Got the agendas ready?

Jordan (08:43 a.m.): Printed and sitting on my desk. 😊

Phan (08:43 a.m.): 🚀

Jordan (08:44 a.m.): Don’t worry boss, we’ve got this. We’re ready.

Phan (08:44 a.m.): Just gotta show up with confidence, answer all their questions, and they will be so impressed they can’t pass this up.

Phan (08:44 a.m.): Couldn’t ask for a better team. 🎉 🎉 🎉

The research that more directly addresses professional short-message education tends to acknowledge its importance but offers mostly broad recommendations. In most cases, this scholarship highlights the connection between CIT platforms, short-messaging skills, and professionalism. In their report on one university’s use of Microsoft Teams for online education, Hewson and Chung (2019) argue that the use of such tools is more effective when norms and communication guidelines are established and communicated to users during implementation. More narrowly, some scholars recommend that etiquette for mobile phone use (Towner et al., 2019) and text message etiquette (Black et al., 2021) should be incorporated into business courses to strengthen students’ overall professionalism as they enter workplaces, but the research generally does not elaborate on what specific guidance should be imparted to students.

The limited research on short-messaging education reinforces the idea that this topic should be covered as part of developing students’ overall professionalism and professional communication skills. Yet, more research investigating what should be taught about short-messaging communication skills and how to effectively teach them to students would help instructors better prepare students for the workplace.

**Research Goals**

To effectively communicate in digital media spaces, students must understand the features of distinct types of digital messages, including short messaging. Thus, since short-messaging skills are important in the workplace, this study aims to further understand the current need to learn these skills. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What experience do students have with short messaging for professional communication?
**RQ2:** How do student confidence levels compare to experience levels for creating effective short messages on virtual teamwork platforms?

**RQ3:** What educational training on short messaging have students participated in?

**Methodology**

For this study, permission was obtained through two institutions’ internal review boards to gather data on short messaging. Data was collected via an anonymous online survey hosted on Qualtrics which solicited both demographic and study data.

Research participants (n = 406) were recruited from business communication courses at two large universities in the Southwestern United States. Participants were offered extra credit in their course for participation in the study, gathered via a secondary survey with identifying information. Participation was not required and was not tied to a graded activity in the course. Participant ages ranged from 19–45 years old with an average age of 22 years old. Participants were 40% male (n = 167), 58% female (n = 238), and 2% declined to answer (n = 3). Study participants self-identified their race as White (69%, n = 287), Black or African American (8%, n = 31), American Indian or Alaska Native (>1%, n = 3), Asian (7%, n = 31), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (>1%, n = 1), two or more races (7%, n = 28), and 8% declined to answer (n = 32). Regarding their education and work life, most survey participants (96%, n = 397) are full-time students taking 12+ weekly course credits.

After completing the demographic data, participants were asked questions related to short-form messaging. Because this was an exploratory study on short messaging, new survey questions were created to address the research questions. These questions were divided into sections related to employment situations, educational settings, and professionalism.

First, participants were asked to report on short messaging related to their employment experiences (RQ1). This included questions like, “What, in your opinion, is the most common form of written messages used to communicate between colleagues in a professional workplace?” with multiple-choice options including email, online message boards, memos, chats, text messages, or other. To answer RQ2, participants were asked to report on their confidence level and experience levels in writing text and chat messages in the workplace using a 0–10 scale (0 = “Not at all Confident” and 10 = “Very Confident”). Participants were also asked to describe a time when they used short-form messaging in the workplace via an open-ended question.

Next, to address RQ3, participants answered questions about short-form messaging and educational experiences. This section included questions like, “Have you been trained in any undergraduate course to write short messages (such as texts and chats) effectively?” with a Yes or No option. Participants were asked to report in which classes they were taught to write short messages effectively via an open-ended text box.

**Results**

For RQ1, the survey asked students currently or previously working in their prospective career field (n = 100) about the most prevalent form of written messages used to communicate between colleagues.
Respondents indicated email (71%, n = 71), chats (12%, n = 12), and text messages (12%, n = 12) are the most common form of written messages used. When asked if they believe short messages (texts or chats) are often used in business settings, 82% (n = 82) said yes, 9% (n = 9) said no, and 8% (n = 8) were unsure. Students also rated their level of experience using a semantic differential scale to indicate level of experience writing text and chat messages for business communication purposes. Results indicated moderate levels of experience for text (M = 6.63, SD = 2.36) and chat (M = 6.20, SD = 2.43) messages on a scale of 1–10.

For RQ2, a Pearson correlation was calculated examining the relationship between confidence level and experience level in writing effective text messages. A strong positive correlation was found (r (403) = .685, p < .001), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. Greater confidence levels are associated with greater experience levels for writing text messages. Descriptive statistics indicate higher average confidence levels (M = 7.19, SD = 2.18) than experience levels (M = 6.32, SD = 2.63). A Pearson correlation was also calculated examining the relationship between confidence level and experience level in writing effective chat messages (using online platforms like Zoom or virtual communities like Microsoft Teams). A strong positive correlation was found (r (401) = .789, p <.001), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. Greater confidence levels are associated with greater experience levels for writing chat messages. Descriptive statistics indicate higher average confidence levels (M = 6.69, SD = 2.35) than experience levels (M = 6.03, SD = 2.67).

To answer RQ3, 24% (n = 95) of respondents indicated they had training in an undergraduate course on writing short messages. Of those that responded yes, the most frequent courses listed where they learned how to write short messages were Business Communication (n = 60), English (n = 11), Intro to Journalism (n = 9), and Communication (n = 7).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to better understand students’ perspectives on short messaging, a communication format they will be expected to perform effectively once employed. Results for RQ1 indicate that students are aware that short-messaging formats are used for business purposes but have only moderate experience with texting and chatting in professional circumstances. Respondents’ moderate level of experience may be related to the relatively young average age of respondents, 22 years old. Still, it is clear there is a need for communication competence in the workplace. In a recent survey of U.S. degree- and credential-seeking students and professional recruiters, Ellucian (2019) found that while students understand that communication skills are essential to professional success, recruiters find new graduates lacking in these competencies. Incorporating more classroom instruction about short-messaging etiquette may improve new graduates related skills as they begin their careers.

Despite limited experience communicating professionally with short messages, students in this study indicate confidence that they can successfully deploy these messages in the workplace, as shown in the results for RQ2. This finding indicates that students have a greater belief in their abilities than they have proof of these abilities. This result echoes the findings presented by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), which found that students overestimate their proficiency in communication when compared to a recruiter’s evaluation, causing a lower chance of employment because communication is one of the top three competencies desired by employers (Collins, 2022). According to Collins, this discrepancy may occur because students do not understand how college experiences relate to real-world
Students’ Perceptions of Professional Short-Messaging Education in Undergraduate Courses

employment scenarios. A potential solution to this problem of overconfidence bias is a greater application of experiential learning opportunities.

Although there is a need for educational experiences tailored to today’s modern workplace communication, the results for RQ3 show that most students (76%) in our study indicated that they had no formal education or training on the use of short messaging for professional purposes. Though digital communication and the need for tailored solutions have long been heralded as necessary and important (Cardon, 2016), education for business undergraduates struggles to keep pace with modern communication needs, which require modern pedagogical solutions. Embedding digital communication platforms into classroom education, according to Proszek (2019), can improve students’ abilities to communicate with digital audiences as compared to material audiences. Thus, Proszek (2019) suggests, “Instructors, therefore, must make a conscious effort to demonstrate how audiences access, convene, listen, and respond through digitally mediated networks and technologies” (p. 130).

Taken together, findings related to a lack of classroom education on short messaging, coupled with the experience and confidence data above, reveal that students are likely informally learning the process of communicating with short messages or naively believing that personal experience with a tool equates to professional success. What is certainly true is that digital communication is a key feature of the modern workplace. The latest data on Gen Z professionals, the youngest generation in today’s workforce, shows that they are redefining the use of technology and seeking employers willing to match their needs with resources (Fernandez et al., 2023). Not only is it our responsibility to train and educate much of the workforce, but also to keep pace with them as they innovate and redefine what it means to communicate effectively in the workplace.

Practical Applications

Short-message communication can be tricky for students and early-career professionals. Even though they may be familiar with the personal use of short messages, they are often less experienced with how to use the common yet informal short-message communication conventions (e.g., emojis, incomplete sentences, etc.) on professional platforms while maintaining professionalism. While new graduates give themselves high ratings on their professionalism skills, employers surveyed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers rated new graduates’ professionalism as the sixth of eight career readiness competencies (Gray & Collins, 2022). There are many factors in professionalism, but the kind of professional yet informal communication needed in short-message formats is one important aspect that students should learn about (Black et al., 2021; Jones, 2011). While the research on short messages in professional settings is ripe for further investigation, the following steps would be useful starting points for instructors who are adding this training to their courses.

One starting step is to inform students about the increasing use of CIT platforms and short-message communication in the workplace (Black et al., 2021; Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021; Cardon, 2016; Jones, 2011). When students see that they will be expected to use these skills in the workplace, they are more likely to engage in lessons that will strengthen their relevant skills. Further, instruction related to short-message communication should recognize that these messages occur in spaces that are part of an organization’s professional oversight, and as such, are governed by norms and expectations just as physical workspaces are (Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021; Hewson & Chung, 2019; Jost et al., 2021). Although short-message communication may have some informal features, an organization’s expectations for professionalism and business etiquette still apply in many ways to these messages.
Second, students should be able to determine when a short message would be an appropriate format for a message. Concerning the differences between sending an email and a short message, the challenge may be to consider not only the content of the message but also the context. In their ethical training materials, for example, 3M (2020) shows an instant-message exchange that occurs between colleagues who are discussing one colleague not being invited to an after-hours team dinner. The message is written in complete sentences like an email, but it has a conversational and confiding tone that is more likely to be used in a short messaging format when colleagues communicate back and forth rapidly. 3M’s use of a short message to teach ethical policy demonstrates that not only is this form of messaging common but there is much more to short messages than their form; function and context must also be considered. An instructor could develop prompts like the 3M sample to help students understand the nuances of format selection and when a short message would be appropriate.

Students should also be trained to use the less formal language that is common in short messages while maintaining reasonably professional communication. Prior research shows that professionals’ short messages in the workplace are more likely to include emoticons or emojis and nonstandard capitalization, punctuation, and spelling to better signal their tone (Darics, 2020; Skovholt et al., 2014). For example, a coworker might send a short message like “great meeting!!! thx for your help :-)” to show appreciation to a team member after a meeting. Instruction on using informal language in professional contexts could address, as starting points, the connotations of certain emojis/emoticons and tactics students could use to identify how acceptable nonstandard language is when using short messages within an organization that hires them.

While there is more to learn about the use of short messaging in the workplace, teaching short-message communication skills would help prepare our students to be more effective, professional communicators.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Like all studies, this one has limitations that are important to note in order to contextualize the findings. First, due to the exploratory nature of the study design, results should not be seen as diagnostic but rather as descriptive of an area ripe for further inquiry. Furthermore, the findings from this study are not generalizable to the larger population but represent a snapshot of the students’ experiences at one point in time. We acknowledge that sampling a pool of business communication students may have poised the population to respond to the study questions with greater intentionality than a more diverse data set may have achieved.

This study helps unlock several future avenues to study short-messaging education as this communication format seems to only be increasing in the workplace. For example, future research could include business professionals or business educators to compare confidence and experience levels reported by students to those who observe them externally. Future investigation should include employers’ perceptions of the nature, amount, and necessity of short messaging in the workplace. A second area of research could focus on intercultural aspects affecting short-messaging education. Since communication norms vary around the world, the frequency and purpose of short messaging might be different depending on your culture of origin. When a university with a large mix of students from various cultures teaches short messaging, each student might have a different background and perspective. Future research would be beneficial in providing direction to instructors of courses with vastly different experiences in short-messaging habits.
Conclusion

The days of email being the only form of digital written communication in the workplace are over and short messages are commonplace. We set out to explore the topic of students’ perspectives on professional short messaging and the education they receive in this area. As communication instructors, we must stay abreast of current industry needs and equip our students to communicate effectively in fast-paced, rapidly changing environments. This study demonstrated that students need more short-messaging communication training to keep pace with current organizational communication trends, and we must create educational interventions to meet this demand.

References


Perceived Teacher Confirmation and the Online Classroom: Capturing Student Descriptions of Experiences With Faculty Online

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Keywords: teacher confirmation, online, communication pedagogy, virtual classroom

Abstract: This study explored and examined students’ perceptions of teacher confirmation, those behaviors that teachers engage in that make students feel confirmed as valuable, significant individuals, as experienced in online courses. With over 450 students’ written descriptions of experiences in online classes across three different universities, this study provides an important initial examination of teaching practices in the online context. While prior research has situated study of students’ perceptions of teacher confirmation in the traditional in-person course experience, the current project extends understanding of teacher confirmation into the online setting. The study provides detailed descriptions, in students’ own words, of specific tactics instructors can use and avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation in their students.

Introduction

Over the past 4 decades, numerous studies have supported the notion that effective teaching consists of not only content-related variables but also consists of an equally important relational dimension (e.g., Gorham et al., 1989; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Witt et al., 2004) and has supported the view of the teacher-student relationship functioning as an interpersonal relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000). One important framework for viewing the teacher-student relationship and ultimately student learning is the notion of teacher confirmation—teachers’ behaviors that confirm
students as individuals (Ellis, 2000, 2004). While other concepts about the teacher-student relationship, for example student rapport and immediacy, focus on characteristics of the relationship and behaviors, teacher confirmation examines teachers’ characteristics and behaviors as the outgrowth of a conceptual foundation for the relationship—the belief in the importance of students as “valuable, significant individuals” (Ellis, 2000, p. 266). Indeed, previous research has argued that teacher confirmation is a broad communicative construct that subsumes other teacher behavior concepts including immediacy and one that impacts students’ learning, motivation, and apprehension in the classroom (Ellis, 2000, 2004). Additionally, research has indicated that perceived teacher confirmation is linked to student communication, participation, and greater learning (Goodboy & Myers, 2008) and is more directly linked to student motivation over other factors as well as students’ perceptions of teachers’ pro-social power (Turman & Schrodt, 2006).

While an important construct for positive impacts on student learning, to date the study of teacher confirmation has generally been examined within the in-person classroom, despite the clear establishment of online learning as a mainstay in the collegiate landscape. As recent discussions of online teaching argue, the online course experience for current college students is a substantial and enduring part of the college experience and should be informed by scholarship directly exploring pedagogy issues in the online context (Broeckelman-Post & Mazer, 2022). Despite numerous studies exploring perceived teacher confirmation in the college classroom demonstrating its positive impact on students as well as the clear establishment of online instruction in the university setting, to date, studies have not specifically explored the application of teacher confirmation in the online classroom. This project responds to calls for exploration of online teaching generally and is a step in examining online teacher confirmation specifically.

Literature Review

As an important and foundational aspect of the teaching and learning process, the original notion of teacher confirmation is complicated by the various forms of online instruction that have permeated higher education in recent years. Indeed, online instruction has impacted the ways that faculty and students communicate with each other and, as such, underscores the need to understand how confirmation is enacted in online contexts. In the following sections, we weave together extant literature in these foundational areas—teacher confirmation and virtual instruction.

Online Instruction

In 2013, over 6 million college students in the United States took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This number increased to over 25 million students during the Spring 2020 semester when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the teaching and learning process out of the physical classroom and into mediated spaces (Entangled Solutions, 2020). Indeed, the prevalence of online instruction has made online teaching and learning more visible (Lang, 2020). At its most basic level, online instruction is a form of distance learning that is characterized by a student’s “interaction with content and/or people via the internet for the purposes of learning” (Means et al., 2014, p. 6). While this type of instruction can take a variety of forms—including hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, online instruction in general has been linked to increased access to higher education (Goodman et al., 2019) and has existed for decades (see Chatham-Carpenter, 2017; Morreale et al., 2019). Additionally, although the transition to online learning occurred rapidly in 2020 and was seen as a potentially temporary change to common instructional practices (Hodges et al., 2020), it provided insights into the various ways instructional
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communication could take place in online contexts. For example, Brophy and colleagues (2021) identified elements of online courses designed to facilitate supportive instructional spaces and found that clarity, flexibility, and instructor communication were associated with students’ online learning experience. In addition, past scholarship has started to examine how nonverbal instructional communication is enacted in online contexts (e.g., email, graded feedback, and online course page design) (Dixson et al., 2017). Through this work, instructor behaviors, such as the use of emoticons and course decisions (e.g., color and imagery) were identified as indicators of immediacy and potential ways to improve online effectiveness. Yet, there are still calls for continuing investigations that better account for the various modes of instruction (e.g., online, hybrid, in-person) (see Dixson et al., 2017).

Additionally, recent work argues for exploring the dialectic between the integrity of online courses and faculty ability to provide instruction and frame their pedagogy in compassionate ways (Sellnow et al., 2022). The authors argue that faculty should transform instructional communication pedagogy by enacting “compassionate care pedagogy” while maintaining course integrity and argue that one suggestion for doing so which emerged during the pandemic is for faculty to “be intentional and strategic about reminding students of their inherent worth as individuals rising to the challenge of learning while balancing complex life experiences” (Sellnow et al., 2022, p. 159). This is, in essence, the guidance provided by the notion of teacher confirmation. The authors’ guiding question “is not whether to embrace compassionate care pedagogy, but how” (Sellnow et al., 2022, p. 160). The continued exploration of students’ perceptions of teacher confirmation responds directly to this question.

Confirmation

To begin, the concept of confirmation signifies those communicative behaviors that highlight a person’s significance in a given setting while also emphasizing their interconnectedness with others (Sieburg, 1976). In early work, confirmation behaviors were classified as recognizing, acknowledging, and endorsing the individual (see Cissna & Sieburg, 1981). Recognizing refers to immediacy behaviors that create a sense of psychological closeness between interlocutors and include nonverbal (e.g., eye contact) and verbal (e.g., turn-taking in conversation) behaviors. Acknowledging is the way in which conversational partners recognize and allow for other viewpoints to be expressed. Endorsing is the acceptance of another person’s perspectives. While originally conceptualized within interpersonal interactions, confirmation has also been applied to instructional contexts (see Frymier & Houser, 2000; Schrodt et al., 2006). In the classroom environment, confirmation refers to “the transactional process by which teachers communicate to students that they are endorsed, recognized, and acknowledged as valuable, significant individuals” (Ellis, 2000, p. 266) and has been tied to decreases in student communication apprehension and increases in students’ motivation, participation, reported learning, and satisfaction (Ellis, 2004; Goodboy & Myers, 2008).

In the classroom context, confirming behaviors take the form of (1) the instructor’s response to student comments/questions, (2) the instructor’s perceived interest in the students and their learning, (3) the instructor’s teaching style, and (4) the absence of disconfirming behaviors in the instructor’s communication (Ellis, 2000). Indeed, this work laid the foundation for the development of the Teacher Confirmation Scale (Ellis, 2000), which includes 27 items designed to measure students’ perceptions of instructor’s confirmation in the classroom through specific teacher behaviors. As a product of the teaching landscape at the time, the Teacher Confirmation Scale was developed based on in-person...
instructional settings. Thus, it does not account for the way communication—including confirming behaviors—might be impacted and changed when in online teaching and learning environments.

Indeed, the need to explore confirmation in online settings has become increasingly important. In her 2018 article reviewing strategies for rapport building, Frisby (2018) argued that for online courses (as well as large lectures) instructors need to implement communicative strategies that humanize themselves. Specific strategies included posting both instructor and student self-introduction videos, utilizing discussion boards that encourage connectedness, personalizing student feedback, and holding virtual office hours. This research closely aligns with confirmation’s focus on the relational component of faculty-student classroom interactions and supports the continued exploration of these ideas in the online context specifically. One prior study began this move toward viewing teacher confirmation in an online context. During the transition to emergency remote instruction that occurred during Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were asked to rate their instructor’s teacher confirmation and reported decreased learning outcome achievement as well as a decrease in teacher confirmation, seen as less instructor interest in their learning and less response to their questions (Armstrong et al., 2022). Although this work asked participants to rate their perceptions of teacher confirmation during both face-to-face and then virtual instruction for the same course, the vehicle used to gather this information was the original Teacher Confirmation Scale, developed for the in-person classroom. So, while the study asked students in online classes, albeit sections experiencing an emergency switch to online instruction, to rate perceptions of teacher confirmation, the study did not explore views of confirmation in the online context from the students’ perspective. In other words, the project provides an initial move toward putting confirmation into an online context but did not fully examine it for online distinctions. Indeed, the researchers themselves call for continued exploration of ways faculty “can confirm their students in online classes” (p. 66). As such, it underscores the need to examine the nuances of confirmation and those teacher behaviors, as identified by students, that indicate confirmation specifically within online instructional settings.

Thus, in this study, we provide an initial exploration providing detailed answers to this question and directly respond to the numerous prior calls for examination of online teaching practices more broadly. Specifically, this project directly uncovers students’ perceptions, described in their own words, of instructors’ communicative behaviors indicating confirmation in the online setting. With this background in mind, we pose the following research question: What do students perceive and identify as confirming and disconfirming faculty behaviors in the undergraduate online course experience?

Materials and Methods

Participants and Courses

Participants for this study were recruited from introductory communication courses at three universities during the fall semester of 2020. The initial screening questions at the start of the survey asked students if they (1) had been enrolled in at least one fully online course (a course that is delivered completely online with no in-person components at any point in the course) in the past year, (2) were currently enrolled in at least one fully online course at the time of the survey, or (3) only had an online course experience where the course started in person and then switched to fully online for part of the semester. Students who indicated they had been or were currently enrolled in at least one fully online course were allowed to complete the survey. Qualifying courses were not limited to communication courses but instead were
open to any university course across disciplines. Because of the disruption to teaching brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to online teaching for many during the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, the exclusion of course experiences that began in-person and switched to fully online allowed us to only gather responses from students in courses that had been intended for fully online classrooms from their start. In all, 470 student participants indicated they had been or were currently enrolled in a fully online course and thus completed the survey.

As the final component of the questionnaire, participants were asked a number of demographic and evaluative questions which resulted in the following responses: 58% female (n = 274), 40% male (n = 190), 1% non-binary (n = 3), and 1% prefer not to say (n = 3); 21% Asian (n = 99), 7% African American/Black (n = 34), 4% bi-racial (n = 20), 60% Caucasian/White (n = 276), 5% Latino (n = 24), 1 tri-racial, 1 Iranian-American, and 2% prefer not to answer (nn = 8); 42% first-year students (n = 199), 24% sophomores (n = 111), 19% juniors (n = 91), and 15% seniors (n = 69). Student participants were almost all between the ages of 17 and 22 (n = 461, 98%) with eight respondents between ages 23–29 and one respondent between ages 30–39. A number of participants (n = 62, 13%) indicated they were first-generation college students and 25 (5%) noted their status as international students. Students also listed 167 different majors including those in larger categories of academic study including business (e.g., business analytics and operations management, general business, business management and finance, management), computer science (e.g., computer science and math, computer science and biology), communication (e.g., communication studies, communication and public relations, communication and French, corporate communication, communication and human services), engineering (e.g., aeronautical engineering technology, civil engineering, electrical engineering), sciences (e.g., neurobiology, microbiology, nursing, kinesiology, med lab science, physiology), liberal arts (e.g., linguistics, public policy, criminal justice, law and society), and others.

Additionally, participants were asked specific questions about the fully online courses in which they had been enrolled and for which they would be referencing when completing the remainder of the survey. These questions covered the academic home, size of course enrollment, reason for taking the course, course length, and the primary form of communication and technology used in the course. First, these courses represented over 20 different schools and academic areas across the universities—from accounting to dentistry to education and many other areas. Second, respondents also indicated that the online courses they experienced ranged in size from 11–30 students (n = 259), 31–50 students (n = 214), 51–100 students (n = 201), and more than 100 students (n = 242). Third, respondents were asked their reason for taking their online courses and were able to indicate all reasons that applied to their experiences. The most common reason selected was requirement for major/minor (n = 398) followed closely by general education requirement (n = 377). Some students (n = 135) indicated they enrolled in their online course as an elective. Fourth, respondents indicated that their online course experiences were overwhelmingly a full, regular semester course length (n = 469), with minimal other course length experiences—8 weeks (n = 40), summer session (n = 24), condensed semester such as winter or 4-week summer (n = 10), and other 4-week courses (n = 4). Respondents listed the primary method of communication and technology used in their online course experiences and asked to select all that applied. These responses included: Zoom (n = 300), Blackboard/Canvas/LMS (n = 246), email (n = 123), Brightspace (n = 107), and other (n = 23), for example Piazza, VHL Central, Tophat, Mylab IT. Although many respondents described use of technology that indicated both synchronous and asynchronous formats for their online courses (i.e., Zoom, recorded lectures), we did not directly ask all participants to identify the a/synchronous nature of the courses. Instead, this project focused on
uncovering students’ experiences related to confirmation overall, across all versions of fully online courses. In all, the referenced online courses were housed across university departments, varied in size, were primarily selected as a required course of some form, were experienced during a standard-length semester, and used common online platforms such as Zoom and Blackboard/Canvas/LMS as a means for engaging the course with students.

**Methodological Process**

The study asked student participants to complete a brief, online survey where they explained teacher behaviors they experienced related to teacher confirmation. Students who answered “yes” for either of the initial screening questions indicating they had either completed or were currently enrolled in a fully online course were allowed to complete the survey. They were then asked three, open-ended questions about their online course experiences (see Appendix for direct questions). Participants were asked to think of and describe specific experiences or incidents where they felt confirmed by their college teacher (Question 1, \( n = 469 \) responses), to describe specific teacher behaviors that communicated they were valuable, significant individuals (Question 2, \( n = 460 \) responses), and to describe behaviors that communicated they were not valuable, significant individuals (Question 3, \( n = 456 \) responses). Across these responses, 1,947 individual references to specific teacher behaviors were identified.

**Analytical Process**

After the survey responses were gathered, the research team compiled and analyzed the responses to all items on the survey, both the closed-ended and open-ended questions. Specifically, for participants’ written responses, we engaged in a process of thematic analysis to analyze the open-ended responses, guided by both Owen (1984) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) 6-phase approaches to Thematic Analysis (TA). These guidelines provide a methodical way to engage with and analyze qualitative data and allow overall themes to emerge from the collected data. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method for the final stage of the project because of its ability to uncover the overall sentiments, in this case, in the students’ responses about their own experiences. According to Owen (1984), an idea is counted as a theme when three criteria are met: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when the same thought or meaning occurs throughout the text though different words may be used in each reference. Repetition occurs when there is “explicit repeated use of the same wording” (p. 275) with forcefulness referring to the emphasis placed on certain ideas. Through continued reading and re-reading of the analyzed texts in search of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of ideas, we identified the major emergent themes. It should also be noted that in preparing for this project, two of the researchers who were not previously familiar with earlier work on confirmation purposefully did not familiarize themselves with the literature before engaging in the analysis. This general methodological choice was made as a supportive step to allow for a more inductive review of participant responses in the study.

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1. Survey explanation of confirmation: “When people think about the college course experience, research has identified a number of specific teacher behaviors that communicate to individual students that they are *valuable, significant individuals* where teachers exhibit qualities such as *interest, acceptance, respect, like and trust*. When teachers act in this way, students often feel ‘endorsed,’ ‘recognized,’ and ‘acknowledged’ as a unique, valuable human being. These types of behaviors, which can include anything the teacher does during the course experience, are referred to as teacher confirmation.”

2. Students were provided the following explanation: “A fully online course is one that is delivered completely online with no in-person components at any point in the course. For example, a course that meets for a few weeks in person and then switches to online delivery does not count as a fully online course.”
To begin, each evaluator individually reviewed the same first 50 responses. When these initial reviews were completed, 563 individual codes emerged. Some of these initial individual codes included “asks me questions,” “being considerate of our schedules,” “answering questions,” and “answering questions in detail.” After discussion and combining similar individual codes from the three evaluators, we condensed initial subcodes into broad categories for initial full analysis. In all, the following sections provided analysis of these overarching themes and the foundational categories and types of resources that emerged from the data.

Results

Analysis of student responses to the two open-ended questions revealed six major categories of behaviors: use of email, personal engagement with students, class engagement, course structure, feedback, and instructor personality. Within responses to both the confirming and disconfirming questions, detailed behaviors in each of the broad categories emerged. The following sections provide more details about these findings.

Use of Email

Respondents included abundant commentary that referred to their instructor’s use of email as a communication tool. The most frequently mentioned behavior was the time it took for the instructor to respond to an email. Quick and timely responses to emails were valued by students and seen as a sign of confirmation and was highly valued by students. On the other hand, slow or even no responses to emails were viewed as disconfirming. At the most basic level, students saw email response or lack thereof as a significant indicator of how the instructor viewed them as a person and student, “When teachers don’t respond to emails or other forms of communication, that tells me that they do not see me as a valuable, significant individual.”

In addition to the time it took to respond to emails, students also noted that qualities of the email such as tone, length, and content contributed to feelings of confirmation or disconfirmation. For example, one student replied that it was confirming when the instructor “responded to emails with more than just one word.” Another student wrote, “He also replied to emails in a warm manner, where I felt like he cared about each student and their needs.” In addition, students also noted that it was confirming when instructors responded to questions asked in emails and it was disconfirming when their questions were ignored or not responded to. Many students wrote similar comments about the issue of emails not being answered, “When a professor does not respond to any of my emails.”

Personal Engagement With Students

This category of responses included comments about the ways in which the instructor interacted with students on a personal, one-to-one basis as well as how the instructor engaged with students in ways not directly relating to course materials. Specific behaviors that students identified included using and knowing the student’s name, actively reaching out to students, asking about life outside of the course, listening to students, and being willing to meet and answer questions outside of class time. One of the most commonly identified behaviors was the use of the student’s name either in conversation during synchronous class sessions or via email and feedback. For example,
In my sociology course, I feel recognized by my professor. He has us start our course with meditation, and uses our names throughout the class to recognize us as human. In my communications class, my professor usually starts with her individually asking all of us to speak, which recognizes us as people. These experiences made the courses more engaging, and like they recognized us as humans.

Conversely, students identified an instructor not knowing or using names as highly disconfirming, “because it feels like the teacher could care less to get to know me.”

Another type of behavior that students felt was highly confirming was the use of communication that indicated to students that the instructor cared about them and their classmates as people. One student wrote,

*Every zoom I have for a class, all my teachers begin by asking how everyone is doing and wants a genuine answer. They make sure that we know that they care about our health and wellbeing during this unprecedented time.*

Another important behavior respondents identified was being available to meet with students outside of class in office hours or other meetings, for example students listed “*teachers who engage with individuals beyond the classroom in the form of one-on-one zoom meetings and emailing*” as being confirming.

**Class Engagement**

These responses included descriptions of behaviors instructors used or did not use when engaging with the class as a whole. Due to the online nature of these courses, some of the responses identified behaviors that would take place during a synchronous session such as a virtual meeting while other responses described behaviors that instructors would use in asynchronous courses. Much like behaviors categorized as personal engagement, students appreciated when instructors engaged with the class as a whole regarding their well-being and lives outside of the classroom. One student described,

*Although my professor has hundreds of students, he constantly reaches out to us saying we can email him or come to office hours if we need to talk about anything. As well, the day before election day, he had a zoom call to talk to students and guide relaxation activities to try and help students de-stress. This may not have been towards me specifically, but this made me feel valued as a student.*

The tone of instructor communication, whether written or verbal, was described by students as an aspect of behavior that encourages feelings of confirmation or disconfirmation for students. One student explained that they feel confirmed when instructors “*speak in a friendly tone of voice. They are not condescending when you ask a question.*” Another student described the benefits of having the instructors take time to speak with the class,

*My two teachers and four TAs were all very accepting, understanding, and patient with having to do zoomU. After every class, the teachers would say ‘If you want to hang back after our lesson ends to tell us about your week or what you’re doing this upcoming week, feel free to stay and chat’ and a LOT of students would stay and all take turns listening to each other and talking. This almost surpassed the feeling of being in class because even after lectures in person, that doesn't*
really happen. They made us feel included and it definitely helped build a relationship closer to everyone in the class!!

When students did not experience any substantive interaction between the instructor and students, it was difficult for students to feel confirmed and connected to their class and instructor. One student described the difficulties they had in online courses,

Thinking about my experiences in fully online classes in college I unfortunately cannot recall a specific incident where I felt confirmed by my professor as a vulnerable, significant individual. Being fully remote caused for no personal face-to-face introductions or connections to be made. I watch lectures of my professors and submit my assignments through Brightspace, never speaking to my professor, so it sometimes really feels like you are learning completely on your own.

Course Structure

Responses in this category were focused on the ways the courses were structured in terms of both the learning platform and the activities and components of the course. Many of the responses in this category addressed structural elements that are unique to online courses. For example, participants wrote about the use of cameras by both the instructor and students during synchronous sessions. Students appreciated instructors who had their camera on during live sessions and encouraged or required class members to keep their cameras on as well. One student replied, “She requested everyone to have their cameras on and explained how important that meant for her to make this an interactive class.” Camera behavior that a majority of students saw as disconfirming was the instructor keeping their camera off and allowing students to not have cameras on during live sessions. The complexity of this finding was demonstrated in the descriptions by a smaller number of students who conversely preferred not having to be on cameras themselves and appreciated not having a requirement.

Another area of course structure that students frequently mentioned was the use of videos. There were situations where instructors’ use of videos and the content of the videos was seen as negative. Students listed using only pre-recorded video lectures and no other forms of interaction with the instructor as disconfirming. One student wrote “Uploading pre-recorded videos and pre-written emails that completely disconnect you as a professor from your students.” This same respondent went on to equate posting only videos as being equivalent to, “Not TEACHING YOUR CLASSES.” Other students noted that when instructors did not interact with the class in other ways and only used what appeared to them to be pre-produced videos it felt as if the instructor was not doing anything to actively engage with students and “teach” the class.

Another feature of course structure not related to videos that was frequently mentioned was the organization of the course in terms of schedule and the layout of the course itself within the learning management system. One respondent bluntly stated, “They made the schedule in the beginning of the semester and stuck to it.” In contrast, students reported that having an inaccurate or frequently changing course schedule and difficult-to-locate course materials felt as if the instructor was not attending to their needs. One student explained, “I've had instructors change the syllabus without telling students, leaving us confused and overwhelmed.”
**Personality**

Responses in this category identified personality traits of instructors—such as being kind, understanding, empathetic, respectful, and flexible—that participants connected to feelings of confirmation. In addition to identifying specific traits, the responses often provided examples of behaviors that demonstrated those traits. One response mentioned several personality traits that made the student feel confirmed as they described their instructor,

> When a student voices a concern about an assignment/deadline, he relays that concern with the class and is very flexible. If a majority of the students are having issues, he is welcome to the idea of making adjustments for the benefit of the students. He is fair and really listens to the students and implements changes when needed.

Another student described the value of patience in an instructor. Here, they wrote,

> When my teacher called my name and waited for me to carefully piece out a question—though I was doing so very slowly and not forming a super coherent thought, I felt like I was valued and significant to her. When teachers listen with patience and understanding in general, I feel as though they care about me.

Students also wrote about the importance they placed on instructors being flexible in terms of due dates, accepting late work, and even in changing elements of the class. When an instructor listened to students’ concerns or issues and was willing to make a change to accommodate students or classes with challenges, students felt seen and valued. One student responded,

> Our teacher stays in really good communication with all the students via email and Brightspace. When a student voices a concern about an assignment/deadline, he relays that concern with the class and is very flexible. If a majority of the students are having issues, he is welcome to the idea of making adjustments for the benefit of the students. He is fair and really listens to the students and implements changes when needed.

In contrast, instructors who were perceived as being inflexible and unwilling to make changes to assignments and due dates were viewed as disconfirming and students noted that they felt like in these situations the instructor was not willing to consider personal issues and difficulties that students were experiencing, “being inflexible and not understanding, refusing to acknowledge and validate hardships, treating students like inferiors or subordinates.”

Frequently mentioned personality traits included being kind, caring, and empathetic. Students described how an instructor’s personality when answering questions, responding to emails, and when interacting with students made them feel valued and as if the instructor cared about them and the class. One student wrote, “Thankfully, he was very kind when it comes to the time he gives us during an exam, being very quick with responding emails, keeping contact with the students, and holding very helpful midterm review sessions.” Another student reported,

> When I met up one-on-one over zoom with some of my teachers to discuss my accommodations, they made it very clear that I would get all of the help and accommodations I needed and that I could come to them if I needed anything. They were very caring and made me feel as if my issues mattered.
Similarly, the word understanding was often used to describe what made an instructor’s behavior feel either confirming or disconfirming. When students wrote about an instructor being understanding they referenced examples when the instructor was sympathetic to them, cared about the student’s circumstances, and was willing to make adjustments to the course or assignments based on students’ issues and concerns. One student wrote,

I was struggling with mental health and trying to stay on top of my assignments at the same time, and my STAT 100 professor talked to me during office hours and was very understanding and really seemed to care about my wellbeing.

The opposite of an understanding instructor was one that did not seem to take students and their situations in account. For example,

When teachers are not understanding. For example, many teachers have hard deadlines, or a significant portion of the grade comes from participation. When we are fully online, there are always bound to be internet issues. Not being able to join zoom one day because one’s internet is down is not an excuse to say they did not participate in class. Not being able to submit something on Canvas because too many people are on and the site is down is not an excuse to dock a grade. These things are out of our control, and we should not be getting punished for it.

Other personality traits that were mentioned as being disconfirming included inflexible, arrogant, not understanding, and rude. One student described these types of negative traits, “being inflexible and not understanding, refusing to acknowledge and validate hardships, treating students like inferiors or subordinates.” Another student wrote, “distant, rude, hard to talk to, condescending, intimidating.”

Feedback

The type, quality, content, frequency, and timeliness of feedback were frequently named as confirming or disconfirming behaviors. Students reported that receiving feedback on everything from comments made in class to discussion boards to assignments was a way that they knew the instructor was seeing them and their work. One explained, “My journalism professor gave me valuable feedback about my participation and engagement in the course as well as how my writing has improved over the semester.” Another offered similar sentiments,

The biggest area in which I feel recognized and endorsed by my teachers is when they are giving me direct feedback on my work. In both ENGL and COMM (both are fully online) my teachers leave comments on my presentations and essays. These comments are for the most part positive and really make me feel good about the work I’ve accomplished for the assignment.

Students repeatedly listed giving little to no feedback as a disconfirming behavior—“Teachers giving grades with little or no feedback.” Students also described delayed and late feedback as being disconfirming.

Discussion

The guiding question of this study aimed to uncover teacher behaviors that communicate confirmation or disconfirmation to students in online courses through students’ own descriptions of their experiences. Analysis of student responses in which they listed confirming and disconfirming teacher behaviors
revealed that students identified a wide variety of behaviors as confirming and provided numerous examples of how those behaviors were enacted in online classrooms. From the analysis, we identified four major areas of behaviors that instructors can use or avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation among online students: communication through email, engagement with the course and students, building a course with an appropriate structure, and behaviors connected to instructor personality.

The first area of behaviors involved instructor’s use or lack thereof of email as a communication tool. This is significant given that in an online class, email may often be a primary or even sole form of direct communication between instructors and students, especially in asynchronous courses where there is no live interaction. Prompt and engaged email responses from instructors were a way for instructors to demonstrate that they were engaged with students and recognized their questions and concerns. Emails that were not answered or were very delayed sent a message to students that they were not important and valued. Knowing this, online instructors may need to prioritize their email and may also need to set expectations for students about likely response times. These findings confirm prior work indicating the importance of timely communication between faculty and students (Pate et al., 2022; Tatum, et al., 2018) as well as research that has found that email communication is a way to create relationships and indicate caring in online courses (LaBarbera, 2013; Oyarzun et al., 2018).

The second area of behaviors pertained to the ways instructors engaged with students on an individual level and engaged with the class as a whole. In general, students valued communication that demonstrated that the instructor cared and was invested in the students, their success, and their ability to successfully navigate the course. These behaviors are consistent with other research that has documented the positive impacts of caring and recognition of students (Burke & Lamar, 2021; Sellnow et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021) as well as work on social presence in online classrooms (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Turk et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). In addition to being responsive to email, students mentioned a variety of behaviors such as responding to student questions posted in a chat feature and sending out frequent announcements about upcoming course content. In the online format, instructors have a variety of options regarding how and when to communicate with students depending on the format of the course. For example, in synchronous classes, in addition to answering questions posed verbally by the students during live sessions, several students mentioned answering questions posed in the chat function of the course. This can present a possible challenge for instructors in synchronous sections who are managing the ongoing conversation and trying to keep up with the chat function. Another behavior that may be unique to students’ preferred teaching style in online courses is frequent and proactive communication about the course which includes behaviors such as sending out a weekly email or using course announcements.

Another form of engagement commonly mentioned was providing feedback that was informative, helpful, and timely. In an online class, the feedback instructors provide is again one of the primary forms of communication and interaction. While students in a face-to-face class have the opportunity to receive informal feedback from an instructor during classes and lectures, this channel is often absent from online courses and especially asynchronous ones. This means that written and verbal feedback provided by instructors in online courses can be even more important as an opportunity for personalized communication with each student. When planning for and teaching an online course, instructors should consider the amount of time and effort it will take to provide individualized communication that students connect to feelings of confirmation.
Another specific behavior that students identified when writing about engagement was instructors showing interest in the students as people outside of the context of the classroom. Frequently, students mentioned the importance of the instructor knowing and using their name. Even in asynchronous courses, instructors could demonstrate knowing a student by using their name in feedback or referring to a student's previous work or comments. Behaviors such as asking about students’ lives out of class and inquiring about their general well-being were also frequently mentioned. Students mentioned the importance of feeling like they were not just another face or number in the class and feeling that the instructor saw them as an individual and unique person.

Third, several comments pointed to the format of the course itself and how the instructor used the online platform as a way that could confirm or disconfirm students. For example, a poorly organized LMS site was viewed as disconfirming behavior and students attributed the lack of organization to an ineffective teaching style. This is unique from prior research on teacher confirmation that has looked at traditional in-person classes where class structure and format have not been a consideration (Ellis, 2000, 2004). This makes sense given that the online platform where the course is held, whether synchronously or asynchronously, highly affects the types of teaching practices that can be incorporated into a course and builds on prior research that has identified course structure as key contributor to student perceptions of the instructor in online courses (Brophy et al., 2021; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Additionally, the online format becomes one of the primary ways that students engage with the instructor and the course.

This is an important finding because some instructors, particularly those who have to quickly move a course to an online format, may not be familiar with designing and laying out an online course which can greatly impact their students’ perceptions of them. One aspect of course setup that is typically unique to the online space was how instructors used video in their teaching. Instructors who are not meeting with their students in person must make decisions about how and if they will use videos of themselves covering course material and how they will use their own and student cameras during synchronous sections. Interestingly, a frequent comment students made was that highly produced videos did not make students feel confirmed as these types of videos felt more like something that was produced and reused in numerous courses versus authentic, tailored communication. Students differentiated between a streamlined and in some ways commodified class structure, where instructional items can be reused each semester and where students primarily read text and submit assignments, versus an online class with instructional items tailored to specific sections each semester and intensive from the instructional end.

Finally, one of the interesting things about the responses in this study was the focus on the instructor’s personality and how instructors’ behaviors demonstrate desired personality traits. Even when asked to describe specific experiences in online courses, student participants often wrote about the type of person or personality traits of their instructors that made them feel confirmed. It is from this long list of desired personality traits that one can begin to get a picture of what students desire in an instructor. Some of the terms that students used such as being understanding, caring, and being flexible could mean different things to different students and further exploration of the corresponding teacher behaviors students identify can provide guidance on teaching strategies and styles.

The findings of this study provide guidance for instructors in online courses on ways to increase students’ perceptions of teacher confirmation. Given that the majority of literature of teacher confirmation has focused on in-person course experiences, these findings are beneficial in that they identify unique
ways instructors can enact confirming behaviors and traits in an online environment. Some examples of confirming behaviors identified here include responding promptly and thoroughly to emails, using email frequently to communicate with students about course happenings, showing a personal interest in students by asking them about their lives outside of the courses, and creating a structured online environment that is easy for students to navigate.

**Limitations and Future Research**

In any research study, there are limitations that need to be examined. First, the project was developed during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and abrupt shift to online instruction. This was, and continues to be, a tumultuous time for higher education. Although the dramatic push for online instruction created some challenges, it also served as an opportunity for faculty and students to explore the possibilities of online teaching and learning. We propose that ongoing research is needed to understand how perceptions of and expectations for confirmation change as more instructors and students adapt to mediated learning environments.

Second, this project captured the perspective of confirmation from the student perspective without exploration of faculty perceptions of their experiences. While this project was focused on student perceptions and outcomes and follows previous guiding research in this area, this practice produces only a partial portrayal of the communicative process that underlies confirmation. As such, future research should not only examine instructor’s perception of confirmation, but also highlight the co-construction of confirmation that is made possible through the interactions of both students and instructors.

Finally, this project identified broad communicative behaviors that students described as confirming. These behaviors are not ranked in terms of importance nor did we measure how each behavior impacted perceptions of confirmation. Future research should build on our work by using the identified communicative behaviors as categories to develop an online confirmation scale that better conceptualizes confirmation in virtual educational environments and analyzes differences from in-person instructional communicative practices when mediated. Additionally, we did not ask participants to directly identify whether the courses they referenced were (a)synchronous in format. While participants’ written answers indicated a variety of online formats (i.e., references to Zoom or recorded lectures), future research should investigate the difference between synchronous and asynchronous online courses as this may impact instructor and student interactions and students’ feelings of confirmation in those interactions.

**Conclusion**

As more and more of our higher education system moves to online and hybrid formats, this study provides detailed descriptions in students’ own words of specific tactics instructors can use and avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation in their students. It also demonstrated the amount of time and labor that teaching an online course requires and the impact that investment has on our students.
References


Perceived Teacher Confirmation and the Online Classroom


**Appendix**

**Survey Questions**

After the brief overview paragraph explaining confirmation, participants were asked the following questions:

1. Thinking about your past experiences in online classes, can you recall a specific experience or incident where you felt confirmed by your college teacher as a valuable, significant individual? Using the space below, describe this specific experience and your teacher’s behaviors that were important parts of that experience.

2. When thinking about your online class experiences in general, what teacher behaviors (things that teachers do) communicate to you that you are a valuable, significant individual? (*list as many examples as come to mind*)

3. When thinking about your online class experiences in general, what teacher behaviors communicate to you that you are *not* a valuable, significant individual? (*list as many examples as come to mind*)
Student Camera Use in Synchronous Classrooms: A Two-Study Exploration of CTML’s Embodiment Principle

Zac D. Johnson and Kevin C. Knoster

Keywords: online learning, cognitive theory of multimedia learning (CTML), student-to-student communication, Zoom pedagogy, camera use

Abstract: Two studies were conducted to ascertain whether or not the embodiment principle of the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning would apply to student’s use of cameras in synchronous online instruction. Results from a cross-sectional dataset indicate that students who utilize their cameras report more positive outcomes than students who do not utilize their cameras. Results from a quasi-experimental design indicate that students do not report any significant differences between experiencing classes where their peers keep their cameras-on or when their peers keep their cameras-off.

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded that colleges adopt new models of instruction (Wong, 2020). This abrupt change left many instructors struggling to translate their standard in-person teaching practices to these new online environments (Schwartzman, 2020). Instructors across higher education were faced with the process of renegotiating expectations for both themselves and their students, with many attempting to reconcile how their classrooms would operate in the new (virtual) normal (Miller et al., 2021). At the center of this renegotiation was the use of cameras in synchronous classrooms.
Pre-pandemic research has demonstrated that students have negative attitudes toward video conferencing, such as the kind of synchronous classroom instruction that became common following the COVID-19 pandemic (Candarli & Yuksel, 2012). These negative perceptions of synchronous video instruction persisted during the pandemic, despite their necessity (Serhan, 2020). Left with few other options, many instructors opted to utilize synchronous video conferencing in an attempt to recreate a sense of normalcy in their pandemic classrooms. However, many instructors struggled with the lack of camera use among students (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Scholars have devoted considerable energy toward investigating how instructors contribute to online learning environments (e.g., Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018), but far less is known about how students contribute to a synchronous virtual classroom. The embodiment principle of Mayer’s (2021) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) provides a potential explanation for how students contribute to and experience these virtual environments. This study sought to explore students’ communication of (non)embodiment on their own experience (Study 1), as well as the effect that peers’ communication of (non)embodiment has on the experience of others (Study 2). More simply, the purpose of this work was to explore differences in student outcomes for those who choose to communicate with their classes via cameras and those who do not, and how those choices impact the student experience.

**Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning**

The Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) asserts that individuals learn more deeply from words and pictures than they do from words alone (Mayer, 2005, 2021). Operating under the assumptions that individuals process information differently through auditory and visual channels (dual processing), have limited processing ability (limited processing capacity), and learn best when they actively engage in processing information (active processing). Notably, CTML shares similar underpinnings of theories that seek to explore how media transfers information (e.g., Media Richness Theory; Trevino et al., 1987). Media Richness Theory posits that media which can transfer more cues, faster, and more personally will result in more information transference and retention among an audience (Lackmann et al., 2021). CTML differs from Media Richness Theory by more directly exploring how media shapes learning, rather than information exchange through media regardless of context; however, it is worth acknowledging that Media Richness Theory originated in the organizational communication domain (Trevino et al., 1987), but that this theory has been applied across contexts included learning (Lackmann et al., 2021). To understand how media impacts learning Mayer offered a series of propositions meant to guide instructional choices.

Mayer (2001, 2005) noted that effective multimedia instruction should support learners in three key ways: reduction of extraneous processing, support of essential cognitive processing, and facilitation of generative cognitive processing. To serve these ends Mayer provides 15 principles for instructors to abide by in their pedagogical choices. In order to reduce extraneous processing instructors should be coherent and contiguous in their presentation of material, while also utilizing signaling and redundancy. For instructors to support essential cognitive processing they should segment their presentations and scaffold their information throughout a lesson and course (i.e., the pre-training principle). Finally, to support cognitive processing “aimed at making sense of the presented material” (Mayer, 2021, p. 52) instructors should, among other things, be visible and conversational in their approach, and use multiple forms of media to convey their lessons. The current study endeavored to explore how one of
Mayer’s proposed principles, embodiment—meant to help students’ generative processing—may apply to students as well as instructors.

The embodiment principle suggests that students’ learning experiences can be meaningfully enhanced when they are able to see a pedagogical agent (e.g., an instructor) engaging in human-like body movements (e.g., pointing, eye contact, facial expressions; Mayer, 2014). Thus, embodiment could be conceptualized as simply as seeing individuals on a screen, rather than only hearing individuals over static images (Knoster, 2021). Indeed, Mayer (2014) asserted that instructors who engage in high-embodiment behaviors (i.e., nonverbal behaviors one might engage in during face-to-face interactions) stimulate students’ motivation to engage more deeply with instructional content by providing positive social cues conducive to positive affective experiences. Research has consistently supported the claim that an instructor’s use of high-embodiment behaviors leads to more positive outcomes for students—specifically retention and transfer of instructional content (Fiorella et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018). While researchers have established that nonverbal immediacy, which is representative of embodiment, plays a meaningful role in student learning and engagement (Witt et al., 2004), less is known about how embodiment may operate in relation to a student’s own actions and their perceptions of peers’ actions.

Student’s interaction with peers is a key component to a variety of outcomes including perceptions of learning, motivation (LaBelle & Johnson, 2018), engagement (LaBelle & Johnson, 2020), and persistence (Tinto, 1993). Researchers have also found that peer interactions in online education environments can reduce loneliness and feelings of isolation (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Unfortunately, students are typically less engaged with peers in online learning (Chen et al., 2008). This was exacerbated by changes in instructional modality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which prevented students from engaging in the kinds of pre- and post-class interactions that facilitate even the most casual of these relationships; even as society has moved into a pandemic management stage of life students have reported strained relationships (Dotson et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021). Further, despite the necessity of online learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, students have generally held negative perceptions of online learning (Serhan, 2020) and are likely to stop using their cameras when able (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). However, given the potential for peer relationships to have a positive impact on student experiences it is worth considering how even micro connections, such as seeing another person (i.e., embodiment), may impact students in positive ways. As society emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, universities are likely to employ more opportunities for virtual and distance learning because of the opportunities afforded as a result of pandemic pedagogy (Benito et al., 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2020). Thus, it is important for scholars to investigate not only best teaching practices, but also to explore the experience of students and their peer-to-peer interactions as they relate to educational experiences. Thus, we reasoned that when students do utilize the camera function in their online classrooms they may be enacting Mayer’s embodiment principle; insofar that camera users know they can be seen and thus identify with a visualized teacher. These students should then report more positive benefits than those who do not. Given this, the following hypotheses were proposed.

H1: Students who kept their camera on the majority of the time will report more perceived cognitive learning than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time.

H2: Students who kept their camera on the majority of the time will report more positive affect for both (a) instructor and (b) content than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time.
H3: Students who kept their camera on the majority of the time will report more state motivation than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time.

H4: Students who kept their camera on the majority of the time will report more peer connectedness than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time.

H5: Students who kept their camera on the majority of the time will report more engagement than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time.

Methods

Sample

Participants were 235 students solicited from a large Western public university; of those participants, 219 (93.2%) took classes via Zoom in the fall of 2020 and 164 were given the option to turn their camera on or off during class. Only students (n = 164) who had both taken asynchronous and synchronous Zoom classes in the previous semester and who were given the option and freedom to turn their cameras on and off were utilized in subsequent analyses. Notably, at the time of data collection this university had been utilizing complete virtual instruction the previous semester.

The average age of the final sample was 21.25 (SD = 4.46; Range = 18–53). The majority of participants identified as female (n = 110; 67.1%) with 38 participants identifying as male (23.2%); two participants identified as non-binary (1.2%); and one participant preferred not to answer (<1%). The sample consisted of students from a variety of class ranks including 74 first-year students (45.1%), 13 sophomores (7.9%), 32 juniors (19.5%), 28 seniors (17.1%), and four graduate students (2.4%). Participants identified as a variety of ethnicities including Latino/Hispanic (n = 89; 54.3%), White/Caucasian (n = 25; 15.2), Asian (n = 17; 10.4%), Mixed (n = 11; 6.7%), Middle Eastern (n = 4; 2.4%), Black/African American (n = 2; 1.2%), other (n = 2; 1.2%), and Pacific Islander (n = 1; <1%). The majority of our sample identified as continuing generation (n = 77; 47%), with 74 (45.1%) participants identifying as first-generation.

Procedures

After receiving approval from the university’s institutional review board participants were solicited via convenience sampling. Specifically, the first author asked other instructors to share the recruitment script and survey link with their students. Participants were solicited at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester (i.e., first 4 weeks) and were asked to think back to their Fall 2020 semester courses and refer to the first course they took during the week (e.g., Monday morning) (cf. Plax et al., 1986). Participants were asked a variety of questions about their use of the camera function during their Zoom classes, before encountering several instruments meant to assess their own experience in the class. Participation was anonymous and voluntary; participants were required to be 18 years or older. Individuals did not receive any compensation for their participation.

1. This choice was made because previous research suggests that students given choices are known to experience classes differently than those who are not (Lewis & Hayward, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, students have described the flexibility of Zoom (e.g., the ability to turn their cameras on or off as they see fit) as the most positive benefit of synchronous online instruction, despite still holding negative attitudes toward online instruction in general (Serhan, 2020).

2. Approximately 13 (7.9%) participants did not complete demographic data (e.g., gender identity, ethnicity).
Instrumentation

In order to assess camera use participants were asked two questions. First, they were asked to respond yes or no to the following item: “In this course I was given the option to turn my camera on or off.” Only data from participants who were given the option to turn their cameras on or off were utilized in Study 1. Second, participants were asked to respond to the following item in order to assess the approximate amount of time they used their cameras: “In this course I kept my camera on about what percentage of the time?” On average, participants kept their cameras on for 47.93% of the time (Range = 0–100%; SD = 34.33). Participants were thus split into students who kept their camera on the majority of the time (i.e., ≥ 51%; n = 64; M = 81.48, SD = 17.10) and those that kept their camera off the majority of the time (i.e., ≤ 50%; n = 78; M = 20.38, SD = 14.66).

Perceived cognitive learning was assessed using the Cognitive Learning Measure (Frisby & Martin, 2010). This 10-item instrument measures students’ perceptions of their own cognitive learning. A sample item from this scale reads as follows, “I have learned a great deal in this class.” Higher scores reflect more perceived cognitive learning. The scale also performed reliably in this study (α = .89, M = 3.70, SD = .82).3

Positive affect was measured using two dimensions of the Affective Learning Measure (McCroskey, 1994). This measure assesses students’ affect for both instructor and content. Participants respond to four statements (e.g., “I feel the class content is . . .”) using four bipolar adjective pairs (e.g., “Good-Bad”). This results with individuals providing 16 total responses, eight each for affect for instructor and affect for content. Participants in this study responded to these items along a 7-point scale (i.e., 1–7). Higher scores reflect more positive affect. Likewise, both affect for instructor (α = .96, M = 5.53, SD = 1.63) and affect for content (α = .92, M = 5.28, SD = 1.39) performed reliably in this study.

State motivation was measured using Christophel’s (1990) state motivation scale. This instrument uses 12 semantic differential items (e.g., motivated-unmotivated) to assess a student’s motivation in regards to a particular class. Participants in this study responded to these items along a 7-point scale (i.e., 1–7). Higher scores reflect more state motivation. The scale performed reliably in this study as well (α = .91, M = 4.26, SD = 1.28).

Peer connectedness was measured using D. I. Johnson’s (2009) 13-item version of Dwyer et al.’s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Inventory. This scale measures students’ perceptions of an open and supportive communication environment among peers along a single dimension. A sample item from this measure reads “I have common ground with my classmates.” Higher scores reflect more connection among peers. The scale performed reliably in this study (α = .95, M = 3.36, SD = .98).

Student engagement was measured using Mazer’s (2012) 13-item student engagement scale, which assesses student engagement along four dimensions: silent in-class behaviors (e.g., “listened attentively to the instructor during class”), oral in-class behaviors (e.g., “participated during class discussions by sharing your thoughts/opinions”), thinking about course content (e.g., “thought about how you can utilize the course material in your everyday life”), and out-of-class behaviors (e.g., “talked about the course material with others outside of class”). Participants responded to items regarding their frequency

3. Unless otherwise noted all responses in both Study 1 and Study 2 were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).
of engagement with each item; a 7-point Likert-type scale with bipolar options (never/very often) was used for participant responses. Higher scores reflect more student engagement. The four dimensions each performed reliably in this study: silent in-class behaviors ($\alpha = .80, M = 5.58, SD = 1.07$), oral in-class behaviors ($\alpha = .88, M = 4.51, SD = 1.79$), thinking about course content ($\alpha = .91, M = 4.65, SD = 1.83$), and out-of-class behaviors ($\alpha = .81, M = 4.40, SD = 1.55$).

**Results**

Zero order correlations for all variables are available in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 posited that students who kept their camera on the majority of the time would report more perceived cognitive learning than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time. An independent samples $t$-test indicated that students who kept their cameras on ($n = 60, M = 3.94, SD = .75$) the majority of the time did report more perceived cognitive learning than those who kept their cameras off ($n = 76, M = 3.68, SD = .83$) ($t (134) = 2.08, p = .02; Cohen's d = .36 [95% CI: .017 – .70]$). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 explores the relationship between camera use and (a) instructor and (b) content. A series of independent samples $t$-test indicated that students who kept their cameras on (positive affect for instructor: $n = 56, M = 6.05, SD = 1.47$; positive affect for content: $n = 56, M = 5.81, SD = 1.32$) the majority of the time did report more affect than those who kept their camera’s off (positive affect for instructor: $n = 71, M = 5.43, SD = 1.68$; positive affect for content: $n = 72, M = 5.17, SD = 1.38$) (Affect for instructor: $t (125) = 2.18, p = .02; Cohen's d = .39 [95% CI: .037–.744]$; Affect for content: $t (126) = 2.67; p = .01; Cohen's d = .48 [95% CI: .12–.83]$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Regarding motivation (H3) an independent samples $t$-test indicated that students who kept their cameras on ($n = 59, M = 5.01, SD = 1.36$) the majority of the time did report more state motivation than those who kept their cameras off ($n = 75, M = 3.87, SD = 1.03$) ($t (105.04) = 5.36; p < .001; Cohen's d = .97 [95% CI: .6–1.32]$). Hypothesis 3 was supported.

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<td>Study 1 Zero Order Correlations</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Perceived Cognitive Learning</td>
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<td>2. Affect for Instructor</td>
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<td>8. Thinking about content engagement</td>
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<td>9. Out-of-class engagement</td>
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<td>Note: All correlations significant at the $p &lt; .001$ level.</td>
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</table>
Hypothesis 4 posited that students who kept their camera on the majority of the time would report more peer connectedness than students who kept their camera off the majority of the time. An independent samples t-test indicated that students who kept their cameras on \((n = 60, M = 3.73, SD = 1.03)\) the majority of the time did report more classroom connectedness than those who kept their cameras off \((n = 73, M = 3.21, SD = .91)\) \((t (131) = 3.12; p = .001; Cohen’s d = .54 [95% CI: .195–.891])\). Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Finally, hypothesis 5 inquired about how engagement might be different among camera users and non-users. A series of independent samples t-tests indicated that students who kept their cameras on (silent in-class: \(n = 60, M = 5.99, SD = 1.06\); oral in-class: \(n = 61, M = 5.48, SD = 1.47\); thinking: \(n = 59, M = 5.37, SD = 1.68\); out-of-class: \(n = 61, M = 4.79, SD = 1.77\) the majority of the time reported more silent in-class engagement \((t (131) = 3.54; p < .001; Cohen’s d = .62 [95% CI: .267–.966])\), oral in-class engagement \((t (132) = 5.26; p < .001; Cohen’s d = .91 [95% CI: .553–1.27])\), thinking about content engagement \((t (130) = 3.42; p < .001; Cohen’s d = .60 [95% CI: .246–.948])\), and out-of-class engagement \((t (116.23) = 2.31; p = .01; Cohen’s d = .41 [95% CI: .064–.751])\) than those who kept their cameras off (silent in-class: \(n = 73, M = 5.36, SD = .97\); oral in-class: \(n = 73, M = 4.02, SD = 1.69\); thinking: \(n = 73, M = 4.34, SD = 1.77\); out-of-class: \(n = 73, M = 4.13, SD = 1.46\)). Hypothesis 5 was supported.

**Study 1 Discussion**

Results from Study 1 indicate that students who utilized their cameras more than half the time in their classrooms reported more positive outcomes—specifically, greater perceived cognitive learning, positive affect, motivation, connectedness, and engagement—than students who did not. There are several plausible explanations for these findings. First, these findings support the notion that students’ own demonstration of the embodiment principle (i.e., their own reported camera use) results in more positive outcomes. Students’ willingness to be seen—embodiment—may encourage them to more thoroughly engage in the course and with material, than if they are not allowing themselves to be seen. To date, CTML and its corresponding propositions have only been applied to instructors. It appears that there is evidence to suggest that students’ own embodiment may impact both their desire and ability to comprehend material. Future studies should continue to explore how students’ own choices, such as camera use, impact their own experiences and that of their peers.

Additionally, the differences observed in this study may be due to camera users being different than non-camera users on a variety of characteristics. For example, these students may be more academically or technologically efficacious than their peers. Goldman et al. (2018) noted that academic self-efficacy might be the most critical factor in explaining differential student outcomes. When approaching virtual instruction, students high in academic self-efficacy might simply be better equipped to deal with the challenges presented to them. It might also be that students who use their cameras, and are thus more technologically efficacious, are simply more prone to succeed because of their own beliefs in their abilities.

Further, it may be that students who use their cameras are simply different types of communicators than their peers who do not. Perhaps camera users would report higher levels of sociability traits (e.g., willingness to communicate, extroversion, openness) and lower levels of traits indicative of apprehension (e.g., communication apprehension, introversion). As such, these students may be more prone to explore
support options when faced with challenges than students who are more reticent. Framed another way, camera users may have been more interested in engaging with others and being seen by others during this time period (i.e., the first semester of fully virtual instruction which coincided with the most stringent lockdowns and distancing). Notably, the current study only explored these relationships cross-sectionally; future research should consider how student characteristics drive camera use and thus outcomes, rather than simply exploring the differences between camera users and non-users.

It may also be that individuals who utilized their cameras were less fatigued than those who did not use their cameras. Bailenson (2021) described that on Zoom individuals must work harder to send, receive, and self-monitor. This may have resulted in individuals often choosing to simply turn their cameras off when given the option. Indeed, Zoom fatigue includes not only visual fatigue, but also motivational fatigue (Fauville et al., 2021). Thus, individuals who may have been required to keep their cameras on for work, other classes, or family/social commitments could have been experiencing greater Zoom fatigue in all its various forms. In the future researchers should consider how external factors such as work, hours spent on Zoom, and even personal characteristics influence Zoom fatigue and therefore moderate the myriad benefits of virtual interactions.

Another potential explanation is that students who keep their cameras off are dealing with a host of other issues unrelated to their education. Indeed, Castelli and Sarvary (2021) found that students do not use their cameras for a variety of reasons, including the strength of internet connection and their physical background being seen by others. They claim these issues likely disproportionately affect underrepresented minorities (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021); this is likely exacerbated by the reality that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color (Karaca-Mandic et al., 2020). Issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion have long been concerns across higher education (see Salmi & D'Addio, 2020), which have only been exacerbated by the increasing prevalence of virtual learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Burgstahler, 2021). Students who keep their cameras off may already be at a disadvantage compared to those who utilize their cameras more frequently. More simply put, these students may not have the support, skills, or opportunities necessary to navigate the new demands of a changing educational landscape. Notably, the ability to blur backgrounds and more easily use virtual backgrounds also reflects issues of equity as this functionality requires more advanced and powerful processing that not all student (or faculty) computers may possess; further, this functionality was first introduced to Zoom users in version 5.5.0 in February of 2021 (Zoom, 2022). These data were collected in fall of 2020 and thus participants of Study 1 did not have that option available to them. As higher education moves forward, virtual instruction should be considered in concert with an understanding that camera use may not be something easily demonstrated by all students.

Finally, it may be that these individuals simply experienced better teaching, and thus reported more positive outcomes. The impact of teachers in online environments is well established (e.g., Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018). The purpose of this study was not to explore the impact of teacher behavior or course policies (e.g., choices related to camera use), but rather to understand how students who use their cameras differ from their peers who do not use cameras with respect to typical instructional communication outcomes. It may be that students who kept their cameras on were subject to more engaging and effective instruction than those who utilized their cameras less. Thus, future research should employ designs that account for not only student choices (e.g., camera use), but also pedagogical differences that may explain students’ online experiences.
Study 1 Conclusion

Overall, these data offer support for the application of Mayer's (2021) embodiment principle in exploring the impact of a student’s own camera use on their online learning experiences. That is, when students allow themselves to be seen, they self-report more positive outcomes than their peers who do not. However, while the current study explored students’ perceptions of their learning, it did not assess the extent to which students actually learned. Further, the current study did not ascertain whether students were able to see their peers during class. Thus, we conceptualized Study 2 to more thoroughly explore how student camera use relates to outcomes similar to those observed in this study.

Study 2 Rationale

Mayer’s (2021) embodiment principle claims that individuals will learn more when they can see a pedagogical agent engaging in human-like behavior. Instructional communication scholars have demonstrated that students learn and are impacted by their interactions with peers (e.g., LaBelle & Johnson, 2018, 2021). Further, Study 1 indicates that within virtual classrooms when students allow themselves to be seen, that is when they utilize their cameras, they similarly report higher levels of positive outcomes. However, Study 1 does not explore the impact of seeing peers. Nor does Study 1 explore the impact that peers’ embodiment might have on actual learning. As research exploring student–student interactions has often been considered both from a sending and receiving standpoint (Z. D. Johnson & LaBelle, 2016) it seems appropriate to consider not only how students’ own embodiment (i.e., sending embodied messages themselves, explored in Study 1) may impact their experiences, but also how seeing others may impact their self-reported outcomes (i.e., that is reception of embodied messages from peers). Based on the principles outlined by Mayer (2021) and the findings of Study 1 it appears that students who encounter embodiment from their peers are likely to report higher levels of positive outcomes (e.g., learning recall, affective learning, motivation, and connection to peers). To that end a quasi-experimental study was conducted to assess the following hypotheses:

H1: Students exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras on will report more cognitive learning than those exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras off.

H2: Students exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras on will report more positive affect for (a) instructor and (b) content than those exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras off.

H3: Students exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras on will report more state motivation than those exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras off.

H4: Students exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras on will report more perceived classroom connectedness than those exposed to a lesson with all peer cameras off.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 119 students solicited from a large Western public university. Participants ranged from 18 to 47 years old. The average age of the sample was 23.82 (SD = 5.44). The majority of participants identified as female (n = 71; 60.2%) with 47 participants identifying as male (39.8%); no participants selected the inclusive options of “non-binary” or “prefer not to answer.” The sample consisted of students
from a variety of class ranks including 24 first-year students (20.3%), five sophomores (4.2%), 32 juniors (27.1%), 56 seniors (47.5%), and one graduate student (<1%). Participants identified as a variety of ethnicities including Latino/Hispanic (n = 49; 41.5%), White/Caucasian (n = 22; 18.6%), Asian (n = 19; 16.1%), Mixed (n = 15; 12.7%), Middle Eastern (n = 5; 4.2%), Black/African American (n = 2; 1.7%), other (n = 3; 2.5%), and Pacific Islander (n = 2; 1.7%). The majority of our sample identified as continuing generation (n = 68; 57.6%) with 50 (42.4%) participants identifying as first-generation.

Procedures
After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, one of the researchers visited Zoom classrooms to invite students to participate. Individuals were directed to an online data collection system. After providing consent participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions presented via a video: (1) a cameras-on condition (10:08 in length) in which a lesson was presented in the gallery view of Zoom with all 22 (21 “students” and one instructor) participant cameras-on and (2) a cameras-off condition (9:22 in length) in which the same lesson was presented in gallery view with only the instructor camera on (this condition appeared as a Zoom room with one visible individual and 21 blocks with no name or face attached). The lesson was scripted and covered the basic tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Videos were created using volunteer students from an upper division communication theory course. Each individual was instructed to change their Zoom display name to a pseudonym and appear engaged and interested in the camera on condition. For the video off condition each participant turned their camera off and remained muted, this allowed for students to still appear to be in the Zoom room. The lecture script and videos are available from the first author. Participants were given the following instructions along with video “Please watch the entire video. Do not skip ahead. You will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding the content of this lecture and your experience after it concludes.” Within the data collection system participants were unable to advance in the questionnaire until 10 minutes had passed for both conditions. A review of the video watch statistics indicates viewership that is reflective of the degrees of freedom obtained within the t-tests described below.

Instrumentation

Test Variables
Learning was assessed using a 10-item multiple-choice test that was developed in accordance with the lecture. The quiz assessed lower levels of learning (e.g., recall, understanding, application). Participants were asked about the various psychological needs purported by the theory (e.g., “If you feel like you’re a master of given tasks SDT would suggest that you have satisfied which of the following basic needs?”), and differences in motivation relative to the broader tenets of SDT (e.g., “Which of the following terms is best described as motivation that occurs as the result of a separate outcome or reward?”). Each question had four possible answers (i.e., one correct and three incorrect). The measure was created by the first author who then asked the second author if it appeared to measure the basic tenets of SDT and the appropriate levels of learning. Participant responses were dichotomized into correct (scored as 1) or incorrect answers (scored as 0). Scores on this 10-item quiz were then totaled for use in subsequent analysis (KR – 20 = .68, M = 7.44, SD = 2.15; Range = 1–10). This measure is available from the first author.

4 While each author is well-versed in the construction and development of both perceptive and objective instruments, neither author is a formal psychometrician and thus, in this case, face validity only represents an appearance of assessing the basic tenets of SDT theory, and not whether or not there were potential testing effects or wording issues with each question.
As with Study 1, positive affect was measured using McCroskey’s (1994) Affective Learning Measure. Participants were asked to respond regarding their experience in the lesson they just watched. Participants responded on a 7-point semantic differential scale. Both dimensions of this scale performed reliably in this study (affect for instructor: \( \alpha = .96, M = 5.44, SD = 1.42 \); affect for content: \( \alpha = .90, M = 5.23, SD = 1.16 \)).

Motivation was measured using four representative items from Christophel’s (1990) State Motivation Scale (i.e., motivated-unmotivated, interested-uninterested, not stimulated-stimulated, don’t want to study-want to study). Participants responded on a 7-point semantic differential scale. The scale performed reliably in this study (\( \alpha = .83, M = 4.16, SD = 1.49 \)).

Connectedness was measured using four representative items from Dwyer et al.’s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Inventory. Items were also adapted for use in the experimental context by adding “I feel like if I were a member of this class,” to the stems from the original scale. For example, the original item “The students in my class are concerned about one another,” was changed to “I feel like if I was a member of this class the other students would be concerned about me.” This scale performed reliably in this study (\( \alpha = .77, M = 3.36, SD = .75 \)).

**Confounding Check Variables**

To ensure that instruction was standard across both conditions, that the conditions (though artificial) were perceived as one in which participants could realistically encounter, and that participants had no great prior knowledge of the content of the lesson several potential confounds were assessed. These confounds were selected based off the work of exemplary instructional communication research which has employed similar quasi-experimental designs (e.g., Bolkan et al., 2016; Kromka & Goodboy, 2021).

Instructional clarity was measured using the five items developed by Bolkan et al. (2016) based off of the work of Chesebro and McCroskey (1998). These five items measure the clarity with which the instructor presented material from the lesson. Higher scores reflect greater perceptions of instructor clarity. Sample items include “This lesson was clear” and “This lesson was easy to follow.” This scale has performed reliably in the past (\( \alpha = .95; \) Bolkan et al., 2016). This scale performed reliably in this study (\( \alpha = .94, M = 4.08, SD = .86 \)).

Plausibility was measured using an adapted version of Cho et al.’s (2014) plausibility subscale, from the Perceived Realism Scale. In this study, the measure ascertained whether participants find this lesson to be representative of an actual classroom experience. Items were adapted for the instructional setting by changing the stems of the original scale from advertising related concepts to “This lesson…” Higher scores reflect more perceived plausibility. This scale performed reliably in this study (\( \alpha = .80, M = 3.94, SD = .74 \)).

Perceived familiarity was measured using Bolkan et al.’s (2016) three-item perceived familiarity scale (e.g., “How familiar were you with this topic before today?”). These items reflect an individual’s prior knowledge of a subject. This scale has performed reliably in the past (\( \omega = .86; \) Kromka & Goodboy, 2021). This scale performed reliably in this study as well (\( \alpha = .93, M = 2.18, SD = 1.1 \)).
Perceived difficulty was measured using one item (e.g., “How difficult would this material be to learn if taught in an ideal manner?”). This item measures an individual’s perception of how challenging they find the material. This has been used by previous scholars as well (Bolkan et al., 2016; Kromka & Goodboy, 2021). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from very difficult (1) to very easy (5) (M = 3.47, SD = .9).

**Results**

**Preliminary Analysis**

In order to assess potential differences between the quality of instruction between the two conditions, participants were asked to report on the clarity of instruction, plausibility of instruction, familiarity with the topic, and perceived difficulty of the topic. No significant differences were observed between the two conditions on clarity of instruction, plausibility of instruction, or familiarity with the topic. A small difference did appear between the groups regarding the perceived difficulty of the topic with the cameras-on condition reporting slightly higher perceived difficulty than the cameras-off condition; this may be due to the one item measure to assess perceived difficulty. Taken together, these results indicate that across the two conditions the groups were largely homogenous in their previous understanding of the topic and perception of the topic. These results are available in Table 2. Zero order correlations from Study 2 are available in Table 3.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Study 2 Manipulation Check</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cameras-On Lesson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>t(116) = −.89, p = .19, Cohen’s d = .16 [95% CI: −.53–−.20]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plausibility</td>
<td>t(116) = .15, p = .44, Cohen’s d = .03 [95% CI: −.33–−.40]</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familiarity</td>
<td>t(116) = −1.04, p = .15, Cohen’s d = .19 [95% CI: −.55–.17]</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty</td>
<td>t(116) = 1.84, p = .03, Cohen’s d = .34 [95% CI: −.03–.70]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M</td>
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Hypothesis 1 posited that students exposed to a cameras-on lesson will report more cognitive learning than those exposed to a cameras-off lesson. An independent samples t-test did not reveal a significant difference between students exposed to a cameras-on lesson (n = 56, M = 7.54, SD = 2.12) and students exposed to a cameras-off lesson (n = 61, M = 7.31, SD = 2.17) (t (116) = −.56, p = .57, Cohen’s d = −.10 [95% CI: −.47–.26]). Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that students exposed to a cameras-on lesson will report more positive affect for (a) instructor and (b) content than those exposed to a cameras-off lesson. A series of independent samples t-test (instructor: t (115) = .84, p = .20, Cohen’s d = .16 [95% CI: −.21–.52]; content; t (115) = .27, p = .39, Cohen’s d = .05 [95% CI: −.31–.41]) did not reveal a significant difference between students exposed to a cameras-on lesson (affect for instructor: n = 56, M = 5.33, SD = 1.5; affect for content: n = 56, M = 5.22, SD = 1.22) and students exposed to a cameras-off lesson (affect for instructor: n = 61, M = 5.55, SD = 1.36; affect for content: n = 61, M = 5.28, SD = 1.11). Hypotheses 2 (a) and 2 (b) were not supported.

Hypothesis 3 argued that students exposed to a cameras-on lesson will report more state motivation than those exposed to a cameras-off lesson. An independent samples t-test did not reveal a significant difference between the cameras-on lesson (n = 57, M = 4.07, SD = 1.49) and the cameras-off lesson (n = 61, M = 4.24, SD = 1.51) (t (116) = .61, p = .27, Cohen’s d = .11 [95% CI: −.25–.47]). Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 posited that students exposed to a cameras-on lesson will report more perceived classroom connectedness than those exposed to a cameras-off lesson. An independent samples t-test did not reveal a significant difference between those exposed to a cameras-on lesson (n = 57, M = 3.42, SD = .72) and those exposed to a cameras-off lesson (n = 61, M = 3.3, SD = .79) (t (116) = −.94, p = .18, Cohen’s d = −.17 [95% CI: −.53–.19]). Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

**Study 2 Discussion**

In contrast to the findings of Study 1, the findings of Study 2 suggest that peers’ camera use may not play a meaningful role in influencing instructional outcomes. Students who encounter embodied messages
from their peers do not appear to be impacted by these messages in hypothesized way. As such, it may be that the embodiment principle has a more nuanced relationship to student-student interactions. Indeed, embodied interactions between peers may exist differently within peer-only interactions (e.g., breakout rooms). Recall that the embodiment principle asserts that students being able to see their instructors behaving in human-like ways will cultivate an increased sense of social presence and thus engagement, as well as other positive outcomes (Mayer, 2021). Simply put, when instructors utilize the embodiment principle by showing themselves engaging in high-embodiment behaviors, students engage almost as a courtesy to another human being. It is plausible that students’ camera use would increase an instructor’s sense of social presence (see Ratan et al., 2022), thus making them feel as though they are interacting with other real individuals who are there alongside them and thereby motivating them to invest more energy when teaching the lesson. Researchers have demonstrated—and we can anecdotally concur—that teaching to students not utilizing their cameras is challenging for a variety of reasons (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Englander & Russell, 2022).

Mottet’s work on student responsiveness can provide further insight into these findings. The ways students respond to teachers have a wide-ranging impact on everything from a teacher’s willingness to comply with student requests (Mottet et al., 2004b) and grading practices (Mottet et al., 2005) to teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Mottet et al., 2004a). In the experimental, and thus somewhat artificial, nature of Study 2, students received instruction that was approximately the same. That is to say, the two lessons were kept consistent in delivery. Mottet’s findings point to a reality that student responsiveness leads to more satisfied and likely more engaging teachers. Given this, it stands to reason that across the course of a semester when students opt to keep their cameras off, thus limiting their responsiveness (i.e., embodiment), teachers who are teaching synchronously and utilizing lectures may experience class in ways that lead to very different teaching than when students are responsive (i.e., cameras on). Future research could also consider how asynchronous and flipped modalities are impacted by the use of student cameras in assignment submissions, or during discussion. Ultimately, it is feasible that students seeing other students might not be what ultimately drives positive outcomes in online environments. Rather, it may be a much more nuanced relationship between students seeing their instructor and an instructor seeing their students.

**General Discussion**

Overall, it appears that Mayer’s (2021) embodiment principle may not apply to students in the same way that it applies to instructors. Given that instructional communication researchers have demonstrated that students and teachers engage in similar processes with unique messages and strategies (Z. D. Johnson & LaBelle, 2016), this is unsurprising. It appears that students’ embodiment, and perception of peers’ embodiment, has differential effects. Perhaps, instead of increased connectedness, there is simply a decreased sense of isolation or stress (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020), or it may be that more visual cues impact a student’s own sense of reticence regarding class participation—especially when considering differences in frequency of camera use among students and potential issues associated with camera use (e.g., background sharing). It may also be that students who use their cameras possess a variety of characteristics which amount to a profile of students in virtual instruction. Likewise, for some students it may be that the extra nonverbal information communicated to peers via camera use makes it more challenging to focus solely on the lecture at hand. While the principles of CTML, specifically the embodiment principle, may not translate to students, researchers should continue to consider how students may impact the virtual learning experience of their peers, especially as the necessity of building
virtual communication skills continues to grow in importance for success beyond the academy. The findings from this study demonstrate that the embodiment principle of CTML is not an appropriate explanatory mechanism for how the virtual student experience is impacted by other students. As such, we encourage researchers to continue exploring how theories of learning and instruction can more readily explain the online learning experience, rather than overlooking the impact that students can have on one another or by approaching the context from a product-process paradigm or a variable analytic framework.

When considering the results from both Study 1 and Study 2, it is evident that more research is necessary to fully grasp the role that students’ camera use plays in their online learning experiences. Researchers have argued that the pedagogical practices of instructors are shaped by their interactions with students (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012; Z. D. Johnson et al., 2018; Mottet et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Further, student-teacher interaction can also impact instructors’ approach to their job (Frisby et al., 2015). It may be the case that less embodiment from students leads to dissatisfaction among teachers, and thus less care and attention in their lesson planning, design, classroom management, and content delivery. Future research in both online and face-to-face environments should consider the reciprocal nature between student behavior and teacher behavior.

Practical Implications

While these results do not support CTML’s application to student camera use as a way to understand student outcomes, these studies still have some practical applications to offer instructors and administrators. Based on the results of Study 1, it seems that students who utilize their camera at least perceive more positive instructional outcomes than students who do not. While Study 2 revealed no differences between cameras-on and cameras-off conditions related to learning, motivation, and connectedness, we did not assess engagement. It may be that students who utilize their cameras are simply more engaged, and thus more likely to report higher levels of positive outcomes. Further, it may be that having their cameras on leads to more engagement, rather than an intrinsic sense of engagement driving the camera use. Certainly, this would be a fruitful area of scholarship, especially as higher education continues to adapt to a post-pandemic virtual sense of normalcy. However, without knowing if cameras drive engagement or if engaged students simply use their cameras more, instructors are faced with the issue of requiring camera use and the myriad of issues raised by such a policy (e.g., equity issues). As noted above, students who are given choices in their experience report more positive outcomes than those who are forced into given circumstances (Lewis & Hayward, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, we do not recommend mandating camera use—instead, it may be that continual encouragement from the instructor to use cameras would be beneficial for students and teachers alike. Indeed, instructors could plan for specific “cameras on” days or have short low-stakes “cameras on” portions of class in order to build efficacy among those who are hesitant to use their cameras. Likewise, it may be beneficial for the class to rotate cameras on moments among groups of students (i.e., students could count off and know that every fifth class they will be expected to turn their cameras on). Such moments may help other students to feel as though they are not alone in their experience. Further, by planning these moments ahead of time, students with equity-based issues could contact the instructor for alternative opportunities, or plan ahead to be sure that turning their camera on will be feasible. While such moments may have only small direct effects for students, they may have largely beneficial effects for the instructor—which in turn serves the students’ experience.
Finally, instructors may also simply take note of camera users and non-users, and make efforts to check in on non-camera users. Given the perceived differences between these students noted in Study 1 such efforts may make notable differences in the experience of non-camera users. This may hold especially true for students who keep their cameras off due to equity issues, as such efforts to connect—from a member of the institution—may help them to feel more connected and thus less likely to depart before degree completion (Tinto, 1993).

**Theoretical Implications**

While the embodiment principle of CTML (Mayer, 2005) does not easily apply to students’ camera use, there may still be theoretical mechanisms that could help to guide future research in this area. First, future researchers should consider the ways that students’ camera use satisfies a basic psychological need for belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It may be that students who utilize their cameras feel as though they are more connected to their peers, instructor, and university community than those who do not, thus they report higher positive outcomes. Similarly, receiving the opportunity to turn their cameras on, rather than being forced to do so, may result in more positive experiences given an instructor’s respect for students’ autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Overall, it may be that Self-Determination Theory works to explain much of the reasoning for student camera use and the differential outcomes reported in Study 1.

Another potential theoretical explanation may be the Actor Partner Independence Model (Cook & Kenny, 2005). APIM explains that dyads (e.g., students and teachers) are interdependent in their actions (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Results from Study 2 indicate that, when teaching is held constant, students report no differences in outcomes from cameras-on and cameras-off conditions. However, as previously noted, instructors’ pedagogical choices are certainly impacted by student behavior (Mottet et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Thus, the differences observed in Study 1 may be the result of student camera use impacting teachers’ approaches to instruction, and thus the experiences of students. Moving forward, researchers should consider the ways in which students and teachers are interdependent, especially in virtual environments.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

These studies were met with several limitations. First, students in Study 1 were not asked whether or not their peers kept their cameras on. It may be that for those students who were utilizing their cameras, their peers were also. While Study 2 partially addresses this limitation in design, it is still an artificial experiment. Real classrooms likely operate somewhat differently. Future research should explore not only student self-report camera use, but also the reported camera use of peers.

Second, as is commonly reported in communication-based experiments (Knoster & Goodboy, 2021), Study 2 utilized a multiple-choice test immediately following a lecture. While short-term recall is a component of learning, it is indeed a lower level of learning compared to synthesis or evaluation. It is possible that student recall over time would be different for students with cameras-on and cameras-off lessons. Goodboy et al. (2018) stated such designs overlook “students’ meaningful efforts to learn that include notetaking, studying, and reading,” (p. 321). Knoster and Goodboy note that future research could use different time intervals to assess learning. Researchers should continue to explore ways to assess meaningful levels of learning, rather than just recall.
An additional limitation of Study 2 was that while efforts were made to ensure that students played the entire video (e.g., timings in the online questionnaire) there is no way to know for certain that they sat and watched the video. They may have been occupied while the video played and they listened, but did not watch, attentively. The freedom afforded students in online environments is often cited as a primary benefit of virtual instruction (Serhan, 2020). Future research should consider designs that offer more control than were available to researchers at the height of the pandemic when data were collected.

Finally, the majority of Study 2 participants were further along in their degree program than participants of Study 1. The most common class rank in Study 1 was first-year (40.9%), while the most common class rank in Study 2 was senior (47.5%). As such, it’s possible that participants of Study 2 were more comfortable listening to a lecture, taking a quiz, and in general engaging with material than participants in Study 1. While there were no differences among the experimental conditions on familiarity with material or difficulty, students closer to degree completion (i.e., those in Study 2) are likely more familiar with some of the ideas apparent in the presented lesson (e.g., intrinsic, extrinsic, theoretical assumptions). Future research should consider issues of class rank when conducting experiments, as students across the spectrum likely have different wants and needs.

References


The Student Veteran Instructional Communication Training (SVIC): An Analysis of Student Veteran Instructional Needs and Corresponding Instructional Behaviors

Trevor Kauer and Marian Houser

Keywords: student veteran, communication, needs-based, training, nontraditional

Abstract: Student veterans’ (SV) transition into academic life is challenging, and faculty/staff are uniquely positioned to support this change. Research calls for academic faculty/staff training to support SVs and aid in their retention and academic success. Framed by Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (RRGT; Mottet et al., 2006), qualitative data identified SVs’ instructional communication needs and produced a faculty/staff training program. Twenty-three SVs were interviewed about their instructional communication needs, namely, a need for Structure, Integration, and Awareness. These needs were translated into instructor communication behaviors, and a student veteran instructional communication training (SVIC) was created to (a) promote organization, (b) facilitate assimilation, and (c) demonstrate conscientiousness to meet the rhetorical and relational needs of SVs.

Introduction

SVs often face difficult and challenging experiences as they shift to academic life, and yet they often face university faculty and staff who have little training to understand and support their transition (DiRamio et al., 2008). While academic enrollment of veterans increases, their graduation rates continue to decrease, compared to nonveteran peers (Smith, 2017). Providing meaningful change in the classroom is paramount to prevent the decline of SV academic performance and attendance (Oberweis & Bradford, 2017), as university personnel are pivotal in their successful transition into a civilian role (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015).
The current study explored the academic communication needs of SVs; findings led to the development of a student veteran instructional communication training program (SVIC) designed to assist and support the SV population in post-secondary arenas. We argue instructors’ communication is a point of intervention to meet SVs’ needs and aid in retention/graduation. Specifically, Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (RRGT) posits teachers and students enter the classroom with specific rhetorical and relational goals (Mottet et al., 2006). Further, students’ impressions of their instructors are created through rhetorical and relational instructional behaviors and when student needs are met, learning is heightened (Knoster et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2018). Yet, commonly accepted instructional “best practices” (i.e., allowing students freedom of where to sit in the classroom, moving desks together to foster discussion, etc.) do not always apply to SVs (see Violette & Borton, 2019 for full discussion). It is vital to train faculty in rhetorical and relational instructional communication behaviors that correspond with SV instructional needs.

**Student Veterans in the Classroom**

Known as student veterans (SV), this group of often nontraditional (e.g., older, learning oriented, etc.; Houser, 2005) students includes any student who is a current or former member of the active-duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or government assistance program use (Vacchi, 2012). Like many student groups, SVs are not monolithic; their identities are complex, and their individual differences dictate their educational experience (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). For example, civilians view male and female veterans differently (Hardy et al., 2019), and mental health symptoms post-deployment also vary by gender (Crum-Cianflone & Jacobson, 2014). Variation in learning preferences and past academic experience, compared to nonveteran peers, also reveals the complexity instructors face in determining beneficial and effective methods of instruction. Yet, many SVs report they are viewed through a homogenous lens, though many differences exist within them (Vaccaro, 2015). If scholars could identify these hidden individuals and their strengths, it could benefit instructors and peers in the classroom. For example, SVs often show elevated levels of leadership, maturity, global/cultural awareness, strong sense of purpose, task orientation, and readiness to learn/apply knowledge to solve problems (B. Smith, 2017).

Even with their strengths, extant research shows they still struggle academically. SVs can secure benefits from educational assistance programs (e.g., Post 9/11 GI bill, Montgomery GI Bill, etc.) that subsidize tuition, housing expense, and books, among other benefits (Veterans Affairs, 2023). Yet, the GPA requirement to retain benefits often causes them to pause degree progress, sometimes permanently by dropping out. Dropping or withdrawing from a class may result in needing to pay back the financial assistance (Veterans Affairs, 2023), causing additional financial stress. Nearly a third of SVs do not graduate and only 12.6% sustain a full-time course load (Cate et al., 2017); it is clear how the compounding difficulties of transitioning to a civilian world accumulate quickly. The current study proposes a needs-based training for faculty and staff, informed by SV participants’ own experiences, to ensure their academic success.

**Reintegration/Transition Challenges**

Indeed, SVs report difficulty reintegrating into academic life (DiRamio et al., 2008). For example, the switch from a culture of military collectivism to academic individualism is challenging (Morreale, 2011). During this transition period, the process of identity (re)formation and (re)negotiation is tempered with role incongruity as they enact a “student” role during deployment and a “military” role during college
(Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Importantly, many scholars argue that SVs’ success in their dual-identity construction (that of a veteran and a student) is in part determined by instructional communication (May & McDermott, 2021).

Consider that in the military each individual serves to fulfill a clear role with clear boundaries within a hierarchical communication structure. At post-secondary institutions, there is comparatively less direction, guidance, and structure of SVs’ daily life, roles, and leader interactions (i.e., instructors, deans, staff, etc.). Further, many feel disconnected from their institution; this causes them to feel lost, disengaged from their degree progress, and in a struggle to redefine themselves (Boettcher et al., 2017). This could be due to the low affiliation many SVs feel in a classroom with nonmilitary peers who are substantially younger, with different life experiences, and a greater perceived in-group/out-group distance (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). The lack of connection is exacerbated when peers and instructors create stereotypical assumptions and generalizations about their previous military role. A stereotype that often plagues SVs is the assumption they suffer from a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI; Roost, 2015). As a result of assumptions, they are not authentically witnessed or “seen” by instructors, leading to a lack of immediacy with instructors and peers (Witt et al., 2004).

**Institutional and Instructional Challenges**

According to Sportsman and Thomas (2015), faculty and staff are unprepared to consider the unique needs of veterans who transition from military service. This has led SVs to avoid seeking academic support, self-silencing out of fear of punishment, or engaging in a “cultural clash” with peers and instructors (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). Vaccaro (2015) calls faculty to learn more about SV experiences to avoid sweeping generalizations. When they are stereotyped, they feel the instructor, institution, and academia at large, misunderstand them or view them as nonconforming or unwilling to learn (Gann, 2012). Cleary and Wozniak (2013) posit that instructors who learn more about SVs via one-on-one communication can overcome these challenges. Instructional communication guidance (i.e., the SVIC training proposed in this study) would equip instructors to ameliorate SV frustration and resistance to course content, which could also reduce attrition or academic failure. Therefore, we argue that with the SVIC training, college instructors will learn and practice the behaviors necessary for SV academic success.

**Improving Student Veterans’ Academic Experience**

**Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory**

RRGT posits instructors and students enter the classroom with specific goals and needs (Mottet et al., 2006). Specifically, instructors have rhetorical goals centered around how they communicate course content and relational goals that focus on how they engage interpersonally with students. Students also have specific rhetorical needs related to learning course content and relational needs regarding connections with instructors and peers. Mottet et al. theorized that when instructors communicate in ways that align with students’ academic and relational needs, learning is maximized. Studies support this assertion, such that relevant instructor disclosures (Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017) and adaption of instructional techniques during the COVID-19 pandemic (McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021) resulted in better aligned rhetorical and relational goals. However, instructor training within institutions of higher education more often cater to traditional students (e.g., 18–24 years old, recent high school graduates) and lack support structures for students outside these demographics (Bahrainwala, 2020).
As discussed, many SVs attempt to hide their military attributes, which adds to cognitive load and academic stress. Elliott et al. (2011) reported the majority of SVs experience difficulty finding their classroom “fit” and therefore suffer a lack of connection with faculty and peers. Perceived stigma that others hold negative attitudes about them (Petri et al., 2016) means that RRGT alignment could also suffer. Comments such as “You are a hero!” and “Did you kill anyone?” are examples of communication that misalign instructor/student relational and rhetorical goals and threaten SV’s identity (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). We argue instructors must attend to rhetorical and relational goals when designing courses and student engagement.

A Call for Training

The U.S. Department of Education outlined the 8 Keys to Veterans’ Success (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) for post-secondary institutions. Of note is the seventh key: “Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.” Some instructors have responded to the Keys by instituting student veteran/traditional student peer groups to address their need to belong (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Hodges, 2018) and syllabus statements that specifically mention SV services (Wilkes, 2017). These actions have been reported to cultivate motivation and engagement in SVs, exhibiting the instructor’s caring nature and attention to their specific needs. Scholars have concluded faculty and staff require training to meet the needs of SVs (B. Smith, 2017), with a specific focus to engender connection among SVs, faculty, and peers. This study proposes that a classroom instructor’s communication behavior can be uniquely positioned to support SVs.

Indeed, the student/instructor relationship is influential in student success (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Yet, as the few examples of SV training at the post-secondary level found, the focus is placed on deficits rather than on SV’s strengths (Hart & Thompson, 2013), or ignore instructor/student interaction (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). A training grounded in SV needs and strengths that teaches instructors to adapt their communication in ways that align with students’ rhetorical and relational needs is particularly compelling as it focuses on the instructor/student communication specifically. RRGT is used as a theoretical framework to support meeting student/instructor goals (Goldman et al., 2017), and can support the translation of instructional behaviors taught in a SVIC training. Therefore, in an effort to identify SV needs which will inform the design of a SV instruction communication (SVIC) training for instructors, we propose the following two research questions:

**RQ1:** According to student veterans, what instructional needs are (a) being met and (b) are not being met/violated by instructors?

**RQ2:** Based on these (un)met needs, what instructional communication behaviors best meet/align with student veterans’ rhetorical and relational needs?

Method

Participants

Following IRB approval, participants interviews were scheduled in quiet campus spaces at their convenience. Participation criteria included: (a) currently enrolled as post-secondary student and (b) identify as a student veteran (as defined above by Vacchi, 2012). Eight participants were initially
recruited via email from a list of key informants recommended by the campus’ veteran success office, and purposive snowball sampling obtained the remaining participants \((n = 15)\). Overall, 23 participants \((n = 20 \text{ male}, n = 3 \text{ female})\) participated: 16 participants in their 20’s, two in their 30’s, and five not disclosing age. Seventeen participants were currently enrolled, one graduated the previous semester, and five did not disclose their status. All participants had attended the same institution (4-year public university in the Southern U.S.).

**Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted face-to-face \((n = 21)\) or via video conferencing \((n = 2)\). Participants engaged in semi-structured, in-depth interviews with two researchers present. Verbal consent to audio record allowed researchers to take field notes and ask follow-up questions. Interviews were conducted via a set of interview questions and lasted an average of 21 minutes (range = 7 to 53 minutes). One researcher asked the interview questions while the other took handwritten detailed field notes (Eaton et al., 2019), both asked follow-up questions. Field notes were electronically transcribed while listening to the audio recording to add detail, poignant verbal exemplars, and nonverbal vocal cues. Using both audio recordings and field notes, the authors built upon the strengths of these data types by combining them in the analysis (Tessier, 2012), which can be just as effective and reliable as verbatim transcripts (Hill et al., 2022). Interview questions sought SV’s overall experience at the institution, experiences with instructors in- and out-of-class, and suggestions/advice for teaching the SV population. In total, 80 single-spaced typed field notes and 486 minutes of audio were collected and analyzed.

**Data Analysis and Qualitative Rigor**

Following the grounded theory tradition, we used purposive sampling of SVs, memoing after every interview, and engaged in concurrent data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, by using constant comparison method to understand and organize the data, as well as track theoretical saturation and sensitivity. Our goal to utilize grounded theory for data analysis was to code for the naturally emerging SV academic needs and raise them to a higher conceptual level by translating them into corresponding instructional behaviors to comprise a needs-based training. RRGT was identified through the participants own needs emerging from the data and, following the analysis, supported the training’s scholarly underpinning. In the end, researchers were able to identify participants’ naturally emerging experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and construct a set of student needs with corresponding instructional behaviors for the training (Suddaby, 2006). See Figure 1 on the following page for a visual depiction of the conceptual design.

Data analysis consisted of five steps: (a) the research team immersed themselves in the SV literature, grounded theory, and data analysis. To gain a holistic view of the data, field notes and audio recordings were read/listened to in entirety. (b) While listening to the audio recordings, field notes were open coded with notes added to the transcript margins to better clarify the data. Memos with initial codes and interpretations were created from the audio files. Special attention was given to both verbal and nonverbal messages, and initial codes reflected participants’ own words. (c) Informed by the three data sources (audio, field notes, and memos), initial codes were discussed between the researchers. These discussions served as investigator and data triangulation to strengthen and validate the analysis. This occurred with researchers coding data independently, discussing preliminary findings, and coming to a consensus about theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation was reached when no new initial codes,
FIGURE 1
Conceptual Figure of The Current Study

The Student Veteran Instructional Communication Training (SVIC) categories, or themes emerged from the data, and the research team reached consensus. (d) Intermediate coding occurred where initial codes were then collapsed into larger core categories while also engaging in constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). (e) Finally, advanced coding occurred where researchers viewed the categories and combined/organized them into larger themes where theoretical coding could weave the themes together into a cohesive training program. Once results were compiled, researchers engaged in negative case analysis, comparing the final themes and training program back to the field notes, memos, and audio files. Pseudonyms were created as exemplars were selected to demonstrate connections between the data and researchers’ interpretations (Suter, 2009).

Results
To answer the first research question regarding the met and unmet instructional needs (i.e., the rhetorical and relational goals) of SVs, three overarching themes emerged: (a) need for structure, (b) need for integration, and (c) need for awareness.

Need for Structure
Across interviews, SVs expressed the need for structure from both the interpersonal communication with the instructor and the written communication in the course. These both aligned with a rhetorical goal need, specifically to: (a) exhibit organization/preparation and (b) present clear syllabi and lesson planning.

SVs expressed the desire for instructors to be organized and communication during class relevant to course topics. For example, John stated his instructors, “ramble about stories that are important to him [the instructor].” In addition, participants expressed a need for clarity concerning instructor
A second rhetorical goal emerged as a need for a clear syllabus and course assignments. For example, Jeff explained, “I know all the due dates . . . I know everything ahead of time so I can work when I want to work.” George agreed, “I know what to expect and I can work at my own pace.” In particular, Aaron identified an academic structure/military link, “When I was in the Marine Corps, I had to make lesson plans to teach . . . it’s a ubiquitously used structure—everyone uses this format; you get very used to it. So that could perhaps be entirely reliant on it [my military experience].” These exemplars explain why SVs desire clearly written course documents and how it impacts their academic outcomes. A structured course syllabus gives SV perceptions of control and flexibility and helps instructors set clear expectations in writing.

Need for Integration

SVs expressed a need for integration into academic/student and civilian life, which align with relational goals, and expressed in terms of (a) academic and (b) relationship outcomes.

Participants identified a desire for integration into academic student life, which impacted them academically. Kyle expressed, “I didn’t know what to study, or what route to study . . . there wasn’t any insight.” This statement describes the perceived lack of academic support from instructors and other departmental staff (e.g., academic advisors). The military provides very clear instructions on pathways to success and who to contact for help, as a result when academia is not as clear, frustration and academic failure occurs. Felix echoed this frustration and failure:

For example, there’s two pre-requisites I have to take here before they allow you to even apply for the program, and I didn’t know that. I could have taken them both in one semester, but because that part wasn’t explained to me, I took one in one semester, and in my second semester I took another one, when I could have just done it in one [semester]. I felt like I always had to play catch-up because of that.

These exemplars illustrate the need to integrate SVs into civilian/academic life, and the role faculty and staff can play in this process. As the participants suggested, advising points of contact and understood pathways is highly desired, especially given their military background.

Many interviewees identified an explicit goal to cultivate relationships with instructors and peers but struggled to do so for a variety of reasons. Ron expressed, “It [Involvement] is one of the most important parts of the university experience. But not everyone experiences it.” Additionally, Frank explained, “I’ve struggled because I’m not necessarily out to be the most popular kid on the block, but I do value a small
group of friends. . . . looking for those individuals has been a challenge.” These comments express a desire to belong, yet also acknowledge the difficulty to building community and connection with their peers. They would benefit from academic institutions that establish an inclusive sense of community that is welcoming and integrates SVs into the campus and the classroom. In addition, given the need for integration, belongingness for SVs meets both their rhetorical and relational goals.

**Need for Awareness**

A third theme emerged as SVs expressed a need for identity awareness, which called to meet relational goals by respecting intersectionality and individual difference.

SVs identified the multifaceted, intersectional, nature of their own identities, that were often overlooked or generalized. For example, Jordan explained, “The word veteran doesn’t have to be so black and white, ‘hero’ or ‘baby killer.’ I have many other qualities—veteran is just part of my story.” Many participants deemphasized their military identity. Danny stated, “Being a Marine was something I did in the past and that’s pretty much it.” Participants wanted to be viewed as complex and unique as any other student. This finding emphasizes that faculty and staff should avoid assuming sameness of SVs; they should recognize the intersections of their identity, which along with their veteran’s status includes many other social identities.

Additionally, SVs conveyed instructors’ cultural insensitivity regarding their military experience and social identity. This need was expressed as a desire for instructors to avoid stereotypes or assumptions about their military experience. Jordan described “She [the instructor] assumed I was a violent, angry person.” Further, misunderstandings about SVs also impacted their ability to connect with instructors. Felix described feeling singled out when an instructor asked him about his views on the U.S. Constitution’s Second Amendment. Felix explained, “They [the instructor] will ask me, ‘well what do you think of the second amendment?’ and don’t ask anyone else that. And I am sitting there wondering—why are they asking me that?” While Tyler described an instructor who questioned his veteran status, “One teacher did not understand that student veterans could live on campus whenever they are in the military. We don’t have to live on base.” These comments illustrate the damage that assumptions and generalizations can have on the instructor’s credibility and their perceived ability to meet the students’ relational goals. These exemplars show how inappropriate instructional communication can be perceived as lacking awareness, specifically related to intersectionality and individual difference.

**Discussion**

The needs of structure, integration, and awareness suggest there are specific rhetorical and relational goals (Mottet et al., 2006) of SVs. Namely, structure needs can be met with RRGT behaviors directed at aligning rhetorical goals, and integration and awareness needs align with relational goals. When these needs are satisfied, they engender positive community, retention, and graduation outcomes reported in extant SV literature (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013; Oberweis & Bradford, 2017). When needs are not satisfied, negative SV outcomes such as isolation, withdrawal, and dropping-out might result (Oberweis & Bradford, 2017). In total, facilitating structure, integration, and awareness through a needs-based instructional communication training, such as SVIC, can have significant implications for instructor rhetorical and relational communication in and outside of the classroom.
The SVIC Training: Connecting Student Veteran Needs to RRGT Instructional Behaviors

Research question two asked what instructional communication behaviors best meet/align with SVs’ rhetorical and relational needs. We propose the Student Veteran Instructional Communication (SVIC) training, for faculty to develop productive instructional communication behaviors that benefit SVs and the classroom. To our knowledge, no post-secondary institution currently trains faculty in instructional behaviors centered in SV needs. So, unique to this study, the SVIC training is grounded in SV instructional needs and supported/framed by RRGT behaviors. Given the findings of RQ1 viewed through the lens of RRGT (Mottet et al., 2006), instructional behaviors that align with SV needs call for instructors to engage in communication behaviors that (1) *promote organization*—in course design and delivery, (2) *facilitate assimilation*—to cultivate academic and relationship outcomes, and (3) *demonstrate conscientiousness*—by recognizing and acknowledging SV diversity (see Table 1 and Appendix A).

First, structure needs through an RRGT (Mottet et al., 2006) lens translate to *promoting organization* via clarity, competence, and assertiveness behaviors. Results of this study identified SVs need written and oral communication from instructors who express clear expectations and organization. Clarity, an instructor’s ability to communicate the intended meaning of course content (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001), and competence (credibility), the perception of expertise knowledge (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), predict students’ understanding of course material and create learner empowerment (Finn & Schrodt, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Learning Objectives for Student Veterans Training</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student Veteran Need</td>
<td>RRGT Instructional Behavior¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
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*Note:* ¹RRGT instructional behaviors were selected from Goldman et al.’s (2017) 10 rhetorical and relational instructional behaviors and characteristics and aligned with student veteran needs that emerged from the interviews. ²Learning objectives reveal the intended outcomes from the training, grounded in the student veteran needs which were translated into instructional behaviors.
The Student Veteran Instructional Communication Training (SVIC) 120

Given that SVs, a subset of nontraditional students, have a tendency to be learning motivated, rather than grade motivated (Houser, 2005), clarity is necessary. As RRGT predicts, higher motivated students achieve better academic outcomes—and emphasizing clarity and competence as an instructor can meet rhetorical needs (Mottet et al., 2006).

One practical way clarity and competence can be achieved is through a well-planned syllabus that instructors follow strictly and that can be met through the assertiveness behavior of RRGT (Wanzer & McCroskey, 1998). SVs are familiar with standard operating procedures (SOP) or systematic approaches via training manuals, procedural lists, or military training handbooks. SOPs provide guidelines for what is expected, and many are taught not to question orders that challenge authority or go beyond the SOP (Roost, 2015; Roost & Roost, 2014). When instructors communicate in a confident and self-assured nature, the assertive style is reminiscent of the communicative script set when interacting with those in a position of authority. As the behavioral norms of college campuses greatly differ from that of the military (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014), as our data suggests, glimpses of military structure and behavior can benefit SVs. The proposed SVIC training suggests methods of creating course information documents, such as syllabi and instruction sheets that communicate competence and a balance of clarity and assertiveness. Future research should investigate how rhetorical goals are met via the course syllabus to better convey what these students consider clear and organized communication.

Second, RRGT (Mottet et al., 2006) behaviors such as trustworthiness, caring, self-disclosure, humor, and immediacy can meet SV integration needs by facilitating assimilation with their civilian peers/faculty. Central to SVs’ integration need is a desire to be connected with and socialized into the academic community, in other words to assimilate into their new communities. Trustworthiness reflects how much they trust their instructor, and caring is concerned with how much they perceive the instructor is concerned with their academic and personal well-being (McCroskey & Teven, 1999); both are part of perceived instructor credibility. Instructor/student communication is a point of intervention to engender assimilation; confirming messages from instructors increases student connections, which is also predictive of student involvement (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). In addition, RRGT behaviors such as humor and self-disclosure can serve integration needs, as both instructor behaviors predict student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction with learning (Imlawi et al., 2015). Immediacy (Andersen, 1979) also increases feelings of connectedness among the instructor and SV.

To facilitate assimilation and, ultimately, connect SVs to their peers, instructors, and support systems within their institution, instructors might include a military-related assignment in the course, or create a class discussion related to military topics. For example, Whitfield and Conis (2006) developed a service-learning project for their interpersonal course that asked students to interview veterans for their memoirs, and projects such as this significantly reduce the civilian-veteran knowledge gap (Smith, 2018). Of course, the instructor should also be wary of singling out SVs, or other military affiliated learners (e.g., spouses, children, etc.). As our data suggests, it could be perceived as a violation of their academic need to be viewed as a whole person, not only as a veteran. Nevertheless, attempts to reduce the SV’s self-perceived barrier of peer communication should be prioritized as classrooms can function as a space for breaking barriers and building bridges among student sub-populations (Hosek et al., 2017). Future research should expand on the need to socialize and assimilate SVs within the larger student population by exploring concrete steps institutions can take to invite integration.
Finally, training instructors to engage in RRGT (Mottet et al., 2006) caring, responsiveness, and immediacy behaviors will demonstrate conscientiousness and meet SVs' relational goals. Confirmation messages increase caring (credibility) perceptions, and immediacy is related to communication satisfaction and higher learning outcomes (Myers et al., 2014). In fact, immediate behaviors can increase one's credibility and in turn increase student's intent to persist in their academic career (Wheeless et al., 2011). Additionally, instructors who facilitate a responsive sociocommunicative style will arguably be the most effective at demonstrating conscientiousness, as they respond in appropriate and sensitive ways and are reactive communication to student needs (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Taken together this leads to increased affective learning (Allen et al., 2008) and communication satisfaction (Frymier, 2005).

Extant research describes how social identity (i.e., SVs as a group) influences student participation in the classroom (Hosek et al., 2017). Specifically, teachers should communicate respect and an appreciation for veteran identity, intersectionality, and difference within their daily interactions and course documents. Indeed, when SVs’ dual identities are highly integrated and reflected back to them by instructors, they report increased commitment to completing their degrees and an openness to faculty and peer assimilation (Meiners, 2019). The SVIC training suggests one method for meeting their need for awareness is to place trainees in the shoes of SVs to cultivate empathy, compassion, and mindfulness.

**Limitations and Conclusion**

We would have preferred a more equally representative sample in terms of SV gender. When compared to SV census data, however, SVs in the United States are 78.9% male and 21.1% female (Cate et al., 2017). Thus, our sample does represent the population to some extent. Further, we were unable to collect fully descriptive demographic features for our sample, as some were hesitant and asked for confidentiality. However, because our focus was on instructor behaviors and (un)met SV needs, we argue the absence of fully descriptive demographic information does not skew results. Second, the behaviors in SVIC training are considered good teaching practices; they are not novel. However, the SVIC training is novel and will improve teaching effectiveness for SVs specifically as the learning objectives are grounded in the results. It would be an added benefit to all students that instructors receive instructional communication training. In any sense, the study serves as a reminder that instructional communication does influence students, and training of these behaviors is essential.

This study documented the instructional needs of SVs and translated them into rhetorical and relational instructional communication behaviors, which can be taught to instructors’ campus wide through professional development. Framed by Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (Mottet et al., 2006), qualitative interviews with SVs revealed three primary needs: structure, integration, and awareness. Capitalizing on the grounded and needs-based nature of this study, we translated these specific needs to instructor communication behaviors viewed through the lens of RRGT. Specifically, these results advance the training learning objectives: to promote organization, facilitate assimilation, and demonstrate conscientiousness which prepare instructors to meet SVs’ rhetorical and relational goals, often in concert (e.g., components of credibility were translated from all three SV needs, see Table 1). We call institutions and department administrators across the country to action to implement this empirically-based training. We especially encourage this training in community colleges, college-readiness programs, or vocational institutions where veterans are more likely to be enrolled (Cate et al., 2017). As the emerging demographic of SVs on college and university campuses continues to grow, empowering instructors to support SVs becomes increasingly vital.
References


Appendix A

SVIC Training Plan

Please contact the authors for permission to use this training at your institution.

Learning Objectives

1. Trainees will promote organization by:
   (a) constructing a structured course information document
   (b) communicating expectations in oral & written communication
   (c) recognize the negative effects of off-topic discussions

2. Trainees will facilitate assimilation by:
   (a) identifying advisor/mentorship strategies that support student veteran military to civilian/student transition
   (b) guiding student veterans in building and maintaining positive relationships with instructors and peers
   (c) promoting involvement in university activities

3. Trainees will demonstrate conscientiousness by:
   (a) recognizing and appreciating the multifaceted nature of student veteran identities
   (b) acknowledging and communicating respect for aspects of military culture and student veterans’ diverse experiences

Preparation

Materials

Pre-Test Assessment
Lecture/Knowledge Check
   1. PowerPoint Presentation (available by contacting authors)
   2. Printed Slides Handout
   3. Needs/Behavior Connections Handout
Structure Activity
   1. Examples of Good/Bad Syllabus Statements
   2. Paper & Pencils
Integration Activity
   1. Paper & Pencils
Awareness Activity
   1. Sharpies & Colored Paper
   2. Positionality Worksheet
Lecture/Knowledge Check
Post-Test Assessment
Procedures (Total Time: 3 hours)

Open with Administrative Details (10 minutes)
Lecture/Knowledge Check (30 minutes)
   a) Report of Veteran Needs Study
      1) Literature Review & Method
         i) What do we know about Student Veterans?
         ii) How did we explore their needs in the classroom?
      2) Results: Student Veteran Needs & Learning Objective
         i) Need: Structure & Learning Objective: Organization
         ii) Need: Integration & Learning Objective: Assimilation
         iii) Need: Awareness & Learning Objective: Conscientiousness

Activity: Structure—Promoting Organization & Preparation

1. Create Your Own Syllabus Statement for Student Veterans (30 minutes)
   a) Identify “good” and “bad” syllabus statements for targeted student populations
   b) Practice writing own syllabus statement for student veterans in their courses
   c) Share original syllabus statements with class
   d) Discuss strengths and weaknesses of syllabus statements
2. Off-Topic Lecture Case Study (30 minutes)
   a) Identify characteristics of unfocused lecture from video examples
   b) Think-Pair-Share discussion of areas of improvement

Unpack
Description
How did you complete the syllabus statement? What were some common themes you recognized in the statements written? Similarities/differences between groups?

Inference
How does this relate to the needs identified by veterans? Do the syllabus statements you created “fit” the student veteran population?

Transfer
How can you take what we did in this training and implement it into your teaching? What take-home messages do you have?

Activity: Integration: Facilitating Assimilation

1. Create an assignment that incorporates a military-related topic to reduce military–civilian knowledge gap. (30 minutes)
   a) Work in small groups to conceptualize veteran-centered assignment
   b) Set related learning objectives for assignment
   c) Create a plan for combining civilian and military identities
   d) Present assignment to audience
Unpack
Description
What did you all come up with? (View presentations)
Inference
Where can we improve this lesson plan or assignment idea? How can it include and relate to the identified student veteran needs?
Transfer
How can you see these assignment ideas worked into your future course design and syllabus?

Activity: Awareness—Demonstrating Conscientiousness
1. Identity Placard Activity (50 minutes)
   a) Identify own positionality in the world
   b) Create positionality statement
   c) Brainstorm hurtful comments regarding one’s own multifaceted identity
   d) Identify the role of generalizations, stereotypes, etc. in hurtful comment
   e) Create placard refuting/reinforcing comment/identity

Unpack
Description
What just happened? How did the activity unfold? What were some common themes you recognized? Similarities/differences between individuals’ identities?
Inference
How does this relate to the needs identified by veterans? What are the possible identities that veterans may have?
Transfer
How can you take what we did in this training and implement it into your teaching? What take-home messages do you have? How should student veterans’ multiple identities influence your instruction?

Assessment (15 minutes)

On face value, each instructional behavior and associated activity have take-home, tangible resources for participants to take back to their departments and offices. It is our hope that these take-home activities inspire and remind participants to incorporate the knowledge and skills they have received into their course syllabi and daily interactions with students. The following instructional behaviors will be taught, and their take-home resources listed:

1. Promoting Organization
   a) Syllabus Statement & Sample Case Study
2. Facilitating Assimilation
   a) Military/Civilian Knowledge Gap Assignment Ideas
3. Demonstrate Conscientiousness
   a) Intersectionality/Difference Identity Placards
Overall, the training can be assessed by ensuring participants can recall specific student-veteran needs and their associated instructional communication behaviors. This can be done through a summative assessment in the form of an “exit slip” or brief questionnaire, for example, asking the following questions:

1. What are 3 different student veteran needs in the classroom?
2. What are 3 things you can do as an instructor to meet these needs?
3. What is something you learned today that you did not know before?
4. Where do you see the importance of today’s topic?
5. What can you do to meet the needs of student veterans in your classroom?

Lastly, a pre-test/post-test assessment should be administered to participants to track potential learning. The pre-test can show pre-existing military and student veteran knowledge, as well as give a baseline starting point to understand participants’ progression throughout the training. The post-test will show any evolution of knowledge regarding student veterans’ needs and allow trainers to evaluate the training.
Surveilling the Web, Mobile, and Language Accessibility of Communication’s Digital Presence Within Institutions of Higher Education Globally

Alicia M. Mason, Elizabeth A. Spencer, Megan C. Westhoff, Kristen M. Livingston, and Josh Compton

Keywords: digital divide, accessibility, higher education, Communication

Abstract: This study aims to understand the general web accessibility of digital information networks which may serve as barriers for access to the global discipline of Communication through institutional and departmental websites, specifically for persons with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency (LEP). Our exploratory content analysis relies on computer-aided software to systematically analyze the departmental home pages of websites of institutional members of the International Communication Association (ICA), $N = 77$, representing 26 countries, globally. Findings from this study help us to: (1) better understand the general web, language, and mobile accessibility of discipline-related online information; (2) identify strengths and opportunities for improvement; and, (3) to reflect upon the anticipated barriers impacting persons with disabilities when accessing higher education information online.

Introduction

Scholars have sought to better understand and improve digital access. Web accessibility, an attribute of the digital presence of an organization, has been studied across many domains and contexts, including
private businesses (Burks, 2013; Gonçalves et al., 2013), public governmental institutions (Goodwin et al., 2011; Hong et al., 2008; Shi, 2006), and institutions of higher education (Caravajal et al., 2018; Hackett & Parmanto, 2005; Harper & DeWaters, 2008). And yet, too often, persons with disabilities continue to experience a “digital divide” (Duplaga, 2017)—a gap between digital resources for people with disabilities and people without disabilities. In 2013, the National Communication Association (NCA) reaffirmed its position on the digital divide by urging for the development of accessible communication technologies, which are widely available and operable by diverse users globally. NCA’s position further advocates for active scholarship that highlights the access, usability, and empowerment issues related to the digital divide (NCA, 2013). Such is the nature of this study. Amplified calls for scholarly attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion involves investigating matters which serve as barriers and limitations, in this case digital environments, for persons with disabilities, including the four types of disabilities (visual, auditory, cognitive, and motor) identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2018) as especially relevant to web accessibility (Bradbard & Peters, 2010).

Existing efforts in higher education are helping to close the digital divide, including a variety of assistive and adaptive tools. The term assistive technology (AT) is defined as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, IDEA, 2004, sec. 602). Adaptive technologies are a type of assistive technology whereby users adapt existing tools for personal use.

Assistive technologies can help students with disabilities to better negotiate collegiate learning environments. ATs offer alternative formats especially related to academic needs, including reading and writing (Heiman & Shemesh, 2012). Assistive technology may include screen hardware/software solutions, such as enlargers and magnifiers, screen readers, text scanners, Braille displays, Braille digital converters, speech synthesizers, and speech browsers (Kumar & Lin, 2013). Persons who have print-reading-related disabilities may rely on Digital Accessible Information Systems (DAISY), which converts books into an interactive format (Leas et al., 2008). Such systems allow users to navigate to specific locations within a text such as chapters, sections, pages, or bookmarked areas. In distance or online learning environments, students with disabilities may use such technologies as AccessNote® (a notetaking tool for those who are blind or visually impaired, created by the American Federation of the Blind), TapTapSee® (an app to help identify everyday objects), and/or NaviDys® (a program to adapt and adjust webpage reading preference settings, including font augmentation, e.g., Dyslexie font). Additional technology can be used for hearing and auditory support. For persons who are deaf or hard of hearing (HOH), the inclusion of accurate captions, transcripts of video or audio information are helpful tools to facilitate user experiences. For example, Otter.ai® provides a live transcribe feature for audio that utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) software. These mobile and online platforms allow users to record, create notes from live transcripts, and record lectures in real time (e.g., by way of Zoom video conferencing), while also sharing notes with others.

Such assistive technologies are major steps forward in bridging the digital divide. And yet, their efficacy is often contingent on the web accessibility of digital information provided through departmental websites and learning management systems. That is, without accessible data, tools to help interpret the data are hindered.

Thus, barriers continue, including the focus of this present study: webpages that are difficult to navigate. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is an international organization that oversees standardization
and operation of the web and produces the globally recognized Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) (W3C, 2022). W3C posits four general principles for evaluating the content of web accessibility: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust; together these elements are known as the POUR framework. We use the W3C POUR framework to describe our approach and discuss the implications of our findings. The WCAG 2.1 guidelines provide a pathway for making web content more accessible to persons with disabilities (and, consistent with Universal Design [UD] principles, more accessible for all; see Rose, 2000). Perceivability means users can use their “vision and hearing senses through the browser or by using assistive technologies such as screen readers” (Geiger et al., 2011, p. 4). Operability means users can operate the technology or interface, including the mouse, keyboard, or other assisted technology, to interact with the content. Understandable websites offer clear content, including both the information and the operation of the interface. Robust content must be discernable by many users, including those relying on assistive technology. W3C subsequently provides guidelines for implementations and evaluative success criteria. W3C provides three performance ratings: A (lowest), AA, and AAA (highest). In January 2017, the U.S. government accepted the WCAG 2.0 Level AA guidelines as the new national standard in the U.S. (Younghood & Brooks, 2018). We use the Level AA guidelines to assess the online information included in this analysis.

Our exploratory content analysis relies on computer-aided software to systematically analyze the departmental home pages of institutional members of the International Communication Association (ICA). In doing so, we aim to: (1) better understand the general web, language, and mobile accessibility of discipline-related online information; (2) identify strengths and opportunities for improvement; and, (3) to reflect upon the anticipated barriers impacting persons with disabilities when accessing higher education information online.

This paper is organized as follows. We first provide an overview of the relationship between disabilities and web accessibility in the global context. We next summarize relevant literature relating to the importance of web accessibility in higher education. This is followed by a description of the methods and computer-aided software technologies we used to assess web and mobile accessibility. We then present a report of findings with discussion, implications, and future directions for the Communication discipline.

**Web Accessibility, Universal Design, and W3C**

A limited number of exploratory studies have been conducted on web accessibility. Studies have revealed that websites are not designed for web accessibility, even with standard accessibility statements on their domain pages (Bradbard & Peters, 2010). Universal Design (UD) theory guides the interface of products and online environments for university websites and web accessibility for all persons. The Disability Act 2005 characterizes UD as the design and composition of an environment so that it may be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest possible extent, in the most independent and natural manner possible, in the widest possible range of situations in regard to electronic systems, so that they may be used by any person (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2020).

The approach of website accessibility falls within the seven principles of the UD approach integrated by instructional designers and disability agencies. These principles include equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2020). Web accessibility recognizes that visual and auditory disabilities need a design approach which encourages equitable use, the flexibility of design, and simplicity of interface for users. Universal Design offers a singular
solution for persons who are considered abled and for persons with disabilities. UD is different from web accessibility, however, because of legal implementations for institutional funding and operations, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) integrates both UD and web accessibility to aid consistency of information organization on educational and corporate websites.

The W3C via the Web Accessibility Initiative developed a series of accessibility standards and guidelines to inform the creation of websites that adhere to POUR principles (perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust). Mason et al. (2021) recently argued that addressing web accessibility problems can improve “experiences for everyone—for people with disabilities and for people without disabilities,” (p. 6). Extant literature using experimental methods also supports this observation. Schmutz et al. (2016) found that a website's conformance to WCAG 2.0 guidelines lead to higher task completion rates and lower task completion time in nondisabled populations. Furthermore, participants using websites meeting Level AA guidelines gave higher ratings of usability, aesthetics, and trustworthiness and lower ratings in workload than participants in the other conditions. These findings indicate that web accessibility has important, distinct, and beneficial impacts for all users, not only persons with disabilities. Still, little is known about how the global discipline of Communication, represented by institutional members of ICA, adheres to web accessibility principles.

**Web Accessibility in Higher Education**

We approach the issue of web accessibility in higher education from a stakeholder management theoretical perspective. Stakeholder theory posits that organizations should ethically manage relationships with internal and external, as well as primary and secondary stakeholder, groups in the pursuit of organizational goals and objectives (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2004). Previous scholarship has focused on persons with disabilities in digital environments in higher education (see Carroll et al., 2020; Fuller et al., 2009; Vogel & Adelman, 1992; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Our choice to focus on the departmental home pages of institutional members of the International Communication Association was motivated by the reality that a variety of stakeholders may be impacted by poor web accessibility emerging from these specific home pages, as they often serve as gateways to other important department- and discipline-related information. Current faculty, staff, administrators, and students in need of accommodation, who are engaging in traditional or distance learning, may be impacted by poor accessibility (Gregg, 2007). Furthermore, former students and alumni may, through aging, become susceptible to developing or acquiring conditions or illnesses resulting in a disability that impairs online information processing. Future students who are interested in the discipline of Communication in general may also be impacted. Web accessibility is an important factor in retention and recruitment, alumni engagement, and the daily work and learning environments of individuals within and related to the Communication discipline.

The overall objective of this study is to evaluate the general accessibility of the global discipline of Communication reflected via the home pages of institutional members of the International Communication Association using WCAG 2.0 AA guidelines. To do so, we address the question:

**RQ1:** What is the general accessibility of the International Communication Association institutional members’ departmental home pages?
Globally, the United Nations (U.N.) Program on Disability/Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SCRPD) falls under the purview of the Division for Social Inclusive Social Development (DISD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The U.N. defines and recognizes persons with disabilities as those “who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (U.N., 2006a, para. 27).

Today, a multi-level legal and regulatory framework has been developed to help ensure web accessibility for persons with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Article 24 states that member States shall promote disability awareness, and support the use of “appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities” (U.N., 2006b, para. 4). The U.N. further maintains that persons with disabilities should be able to “access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others” (U.N., 2006b, para. 5).

There are global efforts, then, to recognize and address barriers faced by many persons with disabilities—a population that continues to grow. Current data estimates that over 1 billion people are living with some form of disability (WHO, 2021). This corresponds to about 15% of the world’s population, with up to 190 million (3.8%) people aged 15 years and older having significant difficulties in functioning, and often requiring health-care support services. The number of people living with a disability is increasing, in part due to aging populations and an increase in chronic health conditions (WHO, 2021). These populations may be more pronounced in certain regions. For example, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2018) estimates 61 million or 26% of the U.S. population lives with some form of disability, and the number of Americans with disabilities is anticipated to increase as the U.S. population ages. The U.S. Census Bureau (2017) Population Projections projects the number of Americans aged 65 and older will nearly double from 52 million in 2018 to 95 million by 2060. This projection is not exclusive to the United States. The World Economic Forum (2021) reports increasing aging populations in Japan, Poland, Australia, Germany, among others. The anticipated increase in aging populations will result in more individuals with physical, cognitive, and visual impairments who may become reliant on assistive or adaptive technologies to access and engage in digital environments. In terms of college students, one of the fastest growing groups on college campuses is students with disabilities (SWD), but their rates of bachelor’s degree completion remain low (Carroll et al., 2020). From a stakeholder management perspective, web accessibility may impact a variety of internal and external higher education stakeholders groups beyond current or future students including both past and present faculty, staff, and alumni. To better understand potential manifestations of such regional differences in web accessibility adherence, we ask:

**RQ 2:** Are there regional differences in the frequency of web accessibility issues in higher education reflected by differences in the total (a) alerts, (b) errors, and (c) error density among ICA institutions?
In this analysis, three additional features were considered as potential contributors to general web accessibility: language accessibility, mobile accessibility, and content readability. W3C’s WCAG Guideline 3.1 (2021) maintains language accessibility is directly related to inclusion, a contributor toward broader web accessibility goals. Low language accessibility may act as a barrier to education messages and resources (West & Miller, 2006). Accessible language refers to language that accommodates people of all ages and abilities, including those with cognitive disabilities, persons with low literacy skills, and those with limited English proficiency (LEP) (W3C.org, 2021). Websites included in our analysis were evaluated to determine if the information was available in at least one other language. WCAG Guideline 3.1 is also known as the “Readable” guideline. To assess this metric, our study considers content readability using three indices: Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease, Gunning Fog, and the Coleman-Liau Readability Formula. The Flesch-Kincaid scores the difficulty of the language. Gunning Fog estimates the years of formal education needed to understand a text. The Coleman-Liau Readability Formula complements the Gunning Fog by estimating the level of U.S. education likely needed to comprehend a text. All three measures are useful indicators of the understandability dimension of the POUR framework.

Mobile accessibility aligns to the principles of robustness and operability in the POUR framework, due to the proliferation of personal mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, and the rise in mobile-based applications (Paglialonga et al., 2018). Situational disabilities are common for mobile users. That is, they may be “unable to listen to audio while browsing in a crowded environment, or if they’re browsing from an unstable connection, images might not load” (Bureau of Internet Accessibility, 2021, para. 2). Therefore planning and designs for mobile accessibility ensures users also receive high-quality experiences using mobile devices. The robustness principle in WCAG refers to web content that is compatible with a variety of “user agents,” including browsers, or assistive technologies. A solution is considered robust if there is a high degree of compatibility between user agents and assistive technologies. Factors such as page speed and site speed are indicators of mobile accessibility. We assessed the mobile site speed of websites using Google’s computer automated Test My Site feature. Mobile site speed is a meaningful indicator of a website’s performance. With these important features in mind, we pose our next research question:

**RQ3:** What is the (a) degree of language accessibility, (b) mobile accessibility, and (c) content readability level of higher education information in ICA member institution websites?

In addition to the general web accessibility of these institutional departmental home pages, we were also interested in better understanding the features and attributes of the websites. We coded the presence of accessibility policy statements. Accessibility policy statements are a valuable feature as they are an indicator of an organization’s recognition of accessibility and consideration of user experiences. Furthermore, such statements provide users with information about the accessibility of content and demonstrate commitment to accessibility and to social responsibility (World Wide Web Consortium, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, accessibility policy statements include information on assistive and adaptive technologies available to users and often include information for monitoring or reporting issues if users experience difficulty accessing specific content areas. Because these statements can be important, we ask and answer:

**RQ4:** Are accessibility policy statements available to persons with disability when interacting through the home pages of the Communication discipline?
To show how we answered the research questions posed in this study, the following section of the manuscript documents the strategies for sampling the units of analysis, describes the computer-aided software used to assess the variables presented, and documents the process by which intercoder reliability was obtained.

**Methods**

Units of analysis for this study were sampled from the International Communication Association (ICA) institutional member database. The dataset was accessed through the membership directory of the ICA website in October 2021, with coding and analysis continuing through November of 2021. Researchers relied on the institutional affiliations of the “points of contact” shared by ICA members in the ICA member database. We relied on computer-aided software to process the URLs of the home pages of ICA member’s higher education (HE) institutions. We chose to focus only on department home pages as a metric for general web accessibility. Home pages are often the most accessed pages on a website and are the gateway to the rest of a website’s content (Mason et al., 2021). Home pages not only tend to receive the most attention, but research indicates a correlation between issues detected on a home page and other website pages (Web AIM, 2020). Additional descriptions of the measures and methods employed in this analysis are described below.

**Web Accessibility.** Web AIM WAVE software, available through the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University, was used to assess the general accessibility of the websites included in this sample. WAVE® is a free online evaluation tool developed by Web Accessibility in Mind (WEB AIM), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “expand the potential of the web for people with disabilities by providing the knowledge, technical skills, tools, organizational leadership strategies, and the vision to empower organizations to make their own content more accessible to people with disabilities” (Web AIM, 2020, para. 4). WAVE assesses whether a website is accessible and WCAG-compliant by evaluating all content within a webpage, not just visible content.

Four researchers processed each website home page URL through WAVE AIM software which presents the results in red, green, or light blue. For the purpose of this study, only red errors were coded and evaluated. Researchers strictly analyzed and coded red error messages to better understand the most prominent and immediate critical accessibility errors in higher education institution websites. We considered the WAVE analysis of red errors as these are indicators of identifiable accessibility issues that are most likely to undermine POUR web accessibility principles. We also considered WAVE alerts, represented by yellow icons. Alerts are not meant as indicators of accessibility compliance, but do indicate elements on a webpage which warrant further review. Each webpage received a total error count, with higher counts indicating an increased potential for disruptive accessibility failures. Additionally an overall error density score was calculated for each webpage, this represents the ratio between errors and page elements. Larger error densities indicate a lower prevalence of accessibility errors, relative to the total elements within each webpage. A general description of the accessibility errors identified in the sample, an explanation of their connection to WCAG 2.1 Success Criteria, and how these errors likely impact end users are documented in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Relation to WCAG 2.1 Success Criteria</th>
<th>WCAG Mapping to Section 508 Functional Performance Criteria (PFC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contrast Errors/Very Low Contrast</td>
<td>Very low contrast between text and background colors; Adequate contrast of text is necessary for all users, especially users with low vision.</td>
<td>1.4.3 Contrast (Minimum)</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals with limited vision; or those without the ability to perceive color.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Links</td>
<td>A link contains no text; If a link contains no text, the function or purpose of the link will not be presented to the user—this may create confusion for keyboard and screen reader users.</td>
<td>2.4.4 Link Purpose (In Context)</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals with limited manipulation; in addition to those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Image missing ALT Text</td>
<td>An image without alternative text results in an empty link: Images that are the only thing within a link must have descriptive alternative text. If an image is within a link that contains no text and that image does not provide alternative text, a screen reader has no content to present to the user regarding the function of the link.</td>
<td>1.1.1 Non-text Content</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken ARIA References</td>
<td>Indicates an aria-labeledby or aria-describedby reference exists, but the target for the reference does not exist; Aria labels and descriptions will not be presented if the element referenced does not exist in the page.</td>
<td>1.3.1 Info and Relationships 4.2.1 Name, Role, Value</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition to those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing ALT Text</td>
<td>Indicates an image's alternative text is not present; Each image must have an alt attribute. Without alternative text, the content of an image will not be available to screen reader users or when the image is unavailable.</td>
<td>1.1.1 Non-text Content</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Buttons</td>
<td>Indicates a button is empty or has no value text; When navigating to a button, descriptive text must be presented so that screen reader users understand the function of the button.</td>
<td>2.4.4 Link Purpose (In Context)</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing form Labels</td>
<td>Indicates a form control does not have a corresponding label; If a form control does not have a properly associated text label, the function or purpose of that form control may not be presented to screen reader users.</td>
<td>1.1.1 Non-text Content 1.3.1 Info and Relationships 2.4.6 Headings and Labels 3.3.2 Labels or Instructions</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Headings</td>
<td>Indicates a heading contains no content; Some users, especially keyboard and screen reader users, often navigate by heading elements. An empty heading will present no information and may introduce confusion.</td>
<td>1.3.1 Info and Relationships 2.4.1 Bypass Blocks 2.4.6 Headings and Labels</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition to those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken ARIA Menu/Links</td>
<td>Indicates an ARIA menu does not contain required menu items; ARIA menus are application menus—like those used in software menus—with specific keyboard interactions; These aren't used for navigating links on a web page and must contain at least one menu item, menu item checkbox, or menu item radio element.</td>
<td>2.1.1 Keyboard 4.2.1 Name, Role, Value</td>
<td>Errors are likely to impact individuals without vision, with limited vision, in addition to those with limited language, cognitive, and learning abilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Error types listed in order of prominence in study; Descriptive information and relation to WCAG 2.1 framework were extracted from WAVE AIM (2022, web); Mapping to Section 508 Performance Criteria conducting using https://www.section508.gov/content/mapping-wcap-to-fpc/
Content readability. WebFX®, an online automated software, was used to assess the readability of the home pages of ICA member institutions included in this study. As with prior variables, computer-aided technology was used to conduct the readability analysis. Each website URL was processed through WebFX Readability Analysis tool. Three indices were selected: the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Index, the Gunning Fog Index, and the Coleman–Liau Readability Formula. The Flesch–Kincaid reading ease index is based on a ranking scale of 0–100, and the higher the score, the more reading ease (Kincaid et al., 1975). Low scores indicate text that is complicated to understand. A score of 65 is considered to be a good target, and scores between 60 and 80 should generally be understandable to lay audiences. A website with an average grade level around 7 means that the website should be easily understood by persons 12 to 13 years old (WebFX, 2020). A secondary index was used for comparability. The Gunning Fog Index counts the number of exact words and syllables, then divides the total number of words in the sample by the total number of sentences in order to calculate an Average Sentence Length (ASL). A Gunning Fox Index score of 7 or 8 is ideal, while anything higher than 12 is considered too complex. The Coleman–Liau (CL) Readability Formula was created to help the U.S. Office of Education calibrate the readability of all textbooks for the public school system. This readability assessment approximates the usability of a text. Unlike the Gunning Fog Index, the CL Formula does not require analysis of the characters that create the words (such as syllable counts)—only their length in characters.

Mobile accessibility. Google’s Test My Site® feature, provided by Think With Google®, allows users to measure their website’s performance across devices, from mobile to desktop, and provides a list of specific fixes that can help the site connect more quickly with others online. Similar to other variables, the website URLs were processed through the Test My Site platform, which provides feedback about current website speed. Site and page speed are critical measures of the quality of a user’s experience and tie directly to how engaged a user is and how likely they are to return to the site. Page speed is the speed of an individual page within a website and site speed is the speed of all pages contained on a website. Websites are considered good if they load in less than 2.5 seconds, need improvement if between 2.5–4 seconds, and poor if taking 4 seconds or longer to load. This tool also provides additional insight as to whether there have been recent changes in the processing speed of the websites: speeding up, slowing down, or no recent change (Think with Google, 2020).

Additional Accessibility Considerations. This analysis includes two additional factors related to web accessibility: language accessibility and the inclusion of accessibility policy statements. In order to assess language accessibility, we noted whether the institutional websites offered the information in at least one other language or provided links to translation software to aid in comprehension. These were independent evaluations that were not assessed using computer-aided technology. Intercoder reliability was established by two coders cross-referencing records on 30% (n = 24) of the data set initially coded by a third researcher. Reliability for these measures was established by using Scott’s Pi, which discounts the level of “observed agreement” by the level of “expected agreement” due to chance and is the accepted standard for intercoder reliability for nominal data in communication studies (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Although Scott’s Pi has been argued to be appropriate only for nominal variables and with two coders, Craig (1981) suggested an expansion to three or more coders, as in this study, is acceptable. Reliability results showed a high degree of agreement on the factors of language accessibility (a = .96) and the inclusion of accessibility policy statements (a = .96).
A variety of descriptive and univariate quantitative statistical tests were conducted in order to answer the RQs advanced in this study. The following section documents the results of these tests beginning with the descriptive statistics used to characterize the sample.

**Report of Findings**

The higher educational institutions of approximately 305 individual ICA members were identified for possible inclusion in this study (i.e., the sampling frame). If multiple scholars were affiliated with the same institution, the institution was only analyzed once. Websites were omitted if they were inoperable or were incompatible with the computer-aided analysis software used in this study. This resulted in a total sample of \( N = 77 \) institutional home pages representing the discipline of Communication across 26 countries. The Higher Education Market Report TC 2261 (2020) was used to classify the regions of global higher education representation. The sample is 53.2% Europe (EUR, \( n = 41 \)), 16.8% Asia Pacific (APAC, \( n = 13 \)), 2.5% Latin America (LA, \( n = 2 \)), 24.6% North America (NA, \( n = 19 \)), and 2.5% Middle East and Africa (MEA, \( n = 2 \)). A map of specific countries is available below.

**FIGURE 1**

Geographical Map of ICA Member Institutions Represented in This Sample

\[ \text{Note: Map created using Online Software Mapchart.net/world} \]

*RQ 1* & *RQ 2* sought to understand the general accessibility of online information reflected by the departmental home pages of ICA member institutions. To begin, 74% (\( n = 56 \)) of the websites included in this analysis had detectable WCAG Guidelines Level AA accessibility failures on the home pages. Results presented in Table 2 indicate that a variety of W3C critical failures are currently present on the department home pages, including low contrast (\( n = 3,086 \)), empty links (\( n = 665 \)), missing form labels (\( n = 475 \)), links missing ALT text (\( n = 369 \)), and missing ALT text (\( n = 252 \)).
TABLE 2
Identified Web Accessibility Errors Types in ICA Institutional Member Department Home Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contrast Error</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Link</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Image Missing</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken ARIA Reference</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing ALT text</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Contrast</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Buttons</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Heading</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Form Labels</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken ARIA Menu</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken ARIA Link</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: WAVE AIM™ software was used to identify the most prominent error types likely to impact accessibility of digital information that need to be reviewed using WCAG Level AA Guidelines.

To more fully answer RQ2, and in order to explore regional differences, the HE regions were collapsed from five to three due to low sample size in specific regions (i.e., LA, MEA regions). To address this issue, the LA region was collapsed with the NA region and the MEA region was collapsed into the APAC region, resulting in three regions for comparability. Researchers used a MANOVA with region as the fixed factor and total errors, total alerts, and error density as the dependent variables. The results revealed no significant differences $F(6,142) = 1.16, p = .33$. Results presented in Table 3 show that higher education institutions in the MEA and APAC region report the highest number of errors on institutional home pages, while the EUR region averaged the highest number of alerts.

In order to answer RQ3, a series of univariate analyses were computed with region as the fixed factor and the reading indices as the dependent variables. No significant differences were found on the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index, $F(2,74) = 1.22, p = .30$, the Coleman-Liau Index, $F(2,74) = 2.50, p = .08$, nor the Gunning Fog Index, $F(2,74) = 2.33, p = .10$. Further review of the Flesch-Kincaid scores indicates the home pages may be difficult or hard to understand for some audiences. A score of 65 is considered to be a good target, and scores between 60 and 80 should generally be understandable to lay audiences. ICA member institutions’ scores varied between 28–40 across all regions. The Gunning Fog averages are in an acceptable range, while the Coleman-Liau, which equates to the grade level of U.S. education, indicates a person would likely need a 17 or 18 grade level to process the information within the home pages. This may impact early undergraduate recruitment efforts, those with limited English proficiency (LEP), or individuals emerging from nontraditional, primary education systems.
TABLE 3
Regional Differences ICA Institutional Members’ Website Content Readability, Web Accessibility, & Other Accessibility Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EUR Region</th>
<th>LA &amp; NA Region</th>
<th>MEA/ASAP Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 41</td>
<td>n = 21</td>
<td>n = 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M = SD =</td>
<td>M = SD =</td>
<td>M = SD =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Readability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleman Liau Index</td>
<td>17.47  6.44</td>
<td>18.20  1.63</td>
<td>13.85  7.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease</td>
<td>29.58  26.15</td>
<td>28.70  13.35</td>
<td>40.49  29.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gunning Fog Index</td>
<td>8.81  3.14</td>
<td>7.97  2.52</td>
<td>6.89  2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Errors</td>
<td>13.71</td>
<td>10.67</td>
<td>21.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Alerts</td>
<td>58.39</td>
<td>32.62</td>
<td>40.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error Density Score</td>
<td>.35  .57</td>
<td>.16  .25</td>
<td>.74  1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Accessibility Attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Accessibility</td>
<td>87.8% Yes</td>
<td>12% No</td>
<td>23% Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=36)</td>
<td>(n=5)</td>
<td>(n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility Policy Statements</td>
<td>53.6% Yes</td>
<td>46% No</td>
<td>47.6% Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=22)</td>
<td>(n=19)</td>
<td>(n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Computer automated analysis of the website’s URL home pages relied on WebFX™ Readability Test software to determine the readability indices as well as total word counts and text complexity. WAVE AIM™ software was used to assess Total Errors represent critical errors likely to impact accessibility of online information that need to be resolved using WCAG Level AA Guidelines; Total Alerts refers to web elements that warrant further review, Error Density divides the total number of errors from the total number of page elements; Significant difference is equal to \( p < .01 \); Scores for language accessibility and accessibility policy statements refer to the % of each present in each category of website extension.

A univariate analysis of variance was computed to assess the general mobility of the home pages. Significant differences were found \( F(2,48) = 5.93, p < .01 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .21 \) between the regions. Further review of the mean scores shows MEA/ASAP regions processed information more slowly \( (M = 4.89, SD = 2.54) \), compared to the EUR region \( (M = 2.79, SD = 1.16) \) and the LA and NA regions \( (M = 2.87, SD = 1.46) \). Following this, we also examined the overall site speed. Google’s Test My Site measures the speed of all the pages that make up a site based on world data collected via the Chrome User Experience Report (CrUX). The CrUX report is updated monthly and is publicly available. If the URL was not listed in the CrUX database, the institution was dropped from this portion of the analysis. As a result, 29 home pages were removed from this portion of the analysis. The results found that 87.5% of the institutional home pages from the MEA and APAC regions were not processing quickly, which may affect how long visitors wait on the page to load before moving on to other areas. Across all regions, there had not been a great deal of change in the processing speed in recent months, with no changes in site or page processing speeds reported in 58.3% of the EUR region, and 64% in the LA and NA regions.

RQ4 further explored the prevalence of accessibility policy statements. Higher education institutions in the regions of the Americas (47.6%) and European regions (58.3%) were found to include accessibility policy statements on institutional home pages, compared to higher education counterparts in other regions (6%). Implications and discussions of these findings will be further reviewed in the following section.
Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusions

The concentration of this study was to address the content considerations of information networks which may serve as barriers for access, thus marginalizing certain individuals, specifically persons with disabilities, or in some cases those with limited English proficiency (LEP). Findings from this study revealed that 74% of departmental home pages of ICA member institutions sampled have indicators of WCAG guidelines Level AA accessibility failures on their home pages. This finding alone may suggest detrimental effects on a variety of higher educational stakeholders, including both past and present students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Seventy-four percent is a clear majority of the sample, but is a smaller proportion than error rates found in other contexts, including popular environmental websites (95.3%; Mason et al., 2022) and popular health websites (91.3%; Mason et al., 2021). Furthermore, a 2021 WebAIM report evaluated home pages for the top 1,000,000 websites worldwide and found a 97.4% critical error rate on home pages. So while the current rate of indicators of errors on departmental home pages of ICA member institutions is not ideal, it is better than recent comparable studies addressing specific types of online information (e.g., health and environmental) and general online web content. Comparably, institutions of higher education in the Communication discipline performed better than general web accessibility studies previously cited in the public and private sectors. Of course, room for improvement remains.

Although the language complexity and reading difficulty were noted in the general readability findings, simply addressing the common W3C critical errors would greatly enhance the user experience for stakeholders interacting through discipline-related home pages. For example, low contrast errors, combined with empty links and missing form labels, were the most prominent errors. Contrast errors are most likely to impact the perceivability POUR principle. Individuals with visual acuity barriers are most likely to be impacted by this error; therefore, addressing this one type of accessibility error would likely impact a broad array of web users interacting through departmental website home pages.

As we further move toward the visual and digital world, accessibility failures can be easily identified, addressed, and resolved to improve the user experience of broad audiences interacting through these platforms. For example, empty links particularly affect persons who are blind or with limited vision. Links inform users what will happen if they click on a link with their mouse or select a link with their screen reader. If the link’s text describing the functionality is missing, screen reader users will not know where the link will take them and they are less likely to click or trigger the link. Missing form labels may also be difficult to perceive and will impact navigation through websites and/or instructional materials. These errors are most likely to impact the POUR framework of not only perceivability but also operability. While the availability of assistive technology may aid in the transition into higher education learning environments, additional advocacy for web accessibility and universal design is needed. These specific findings lend support to Communication scholars and administrators for refinement and, if needed, enhancement of specific accessibility attributes within their department’s digital presence.

Limitations

With these findings in mind, it is important to acknowledge that all computer-automated tools, including WAVEAIM, WebFX, and Think with Google, have limitations. The computer-aided software used for this analysis indicates potential accessibility errors and does not mean the content is necessarily inaccessible to the end user. These findings should not be generalized to broader academic institutions. For example,
this analysis only considers the departmental home page of ICA institutional members. As a result our findings are a limited representation of the broader Communication higher education landscape. Future analysis of data in this context may opt to use different sampling procedures to gather data outside the home pages of departmental websites. While website home pages are important and serve as gateways to other areas of a website, additional focus on the contact pages of websites—designed to facilitate communication between users and organizations—may reveal barriers resulting from other accessibility error types than were identified in this study. Institutional constraints may be a contributing factor to the accessibility errors identified. For example, institutional branding may not conform to WCAG standards and therefore impact the frequency and degree of WAVE AIM color contrast error indicators.

Our analytical approach did not account for all possible accessibility-related content features. As a result, certain accessibility attributes such as the captioning of embedded videos, scrolling images, and the document accessibility of downloadable .pdfs were excluded. Moving forward future research could focus on a wider array of accessibility features of departmental websites and may reveal more prominent error types which may impede learning, and/or potentially disrupt organizational stakeholder relations efforts. These content features provide opportunities for further analysis and review moving forward.

Finally, there are multiple ways to evaluate web accessibility—computer automation is but one (see Billingham, 2014; Lee et al., 2014). Opposed to using computer-automated analysis techniques scholars may opt for an alternative method (i.e., user experience approaches). A user experience approach informed by expert evaluation involves persons with disabilities (PwDs) or those with LEP evaluating web accessibility through direct, personal experience. This approach is likely to reveal more diverse and rich qualitative data points for interpretation and consideration.

**Practical Implications**

In light of these findings, it is clear there are opportunities for improvement related to public information, educational service offerings, and the outreach of departments of Communication, and closely related disciplines, globally. Several professional development training associations have emphasized conformance to WCAG web accessibility POUR principles via course design and management such as: Quality Matters®, Online Learning Consortium®, and MRCC Group®. Extant literature has found that faculty who received professional development (e.g., five, 1-hour training sessions) significantly increased their frequency of UD application across the semester in all major areas (e.g., presenting material in multiple formats, making course materials more accessible) (Davies et al., 2013; Schelly et al., 2011).

Findings also suggest additional opportunities for better messaging about digital accessibility. It is easy to incorrectly assume that with the number of assistive technologies now available (e.g., Braille digital converters, live transcriptions) the digital divide has been closed. This mistaken belief can impede progress and actually widen the gap. Findings like what we have shared here can help to inoculate against these misperceptions, communicating the idea that despite improvements in assistive technologies, basic accessibility failures are impeding access. Scholars have made the case that inoculation messaging (messages that raise and refute counterarguments, creating weak challenges to motivate resistance to stronger challenges encountered later; see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964) can help digital users work through technology frustrations (Compton, 2012), but before that, we need to help those in charge of creating digital content and systems fix the actual technology barriers, making the digital experience less frustrating in the first place.
An advantage that higher education institutions of Communication hold, compared to their private sector counterparts, is a broad institutional framework of support through administrative, marketing, and digital support personnel. As such, the practical and social value of these findings provides a pathway for immediate, actionable remedy. To address W3C web accessibility critical errors, institutional members of ICA can request support from designated university web support personnel to resolve the identified errors that may not be conforming to basic WCAG Accessibility Level AA guidelines—citing findings such as those presented here and using inoculation or another persuasive messaging strategy. The tools and software used for this analysis are free, user friendly, and accessible online, and the results are independently replicable. Collectively, letters of request with supporting evidence from these computer-aided software platforms can provide a pathway for university administrators and support personnel to quickly make changes and resolve issues, thereby generating immediate outcomes for persons with disabilities and others reliant on these web interfaces. Adopting a clear focus for planning and review into annual or semi-annual departmental evaluations would be a beneficial strategy to ensure highly accessible information moving forward.

With 74% of departmental home pages of ICA member institutions sampled in this study indicating potential WCAG Level AA accessibility failures on the departmental home pages, it is clear that we need to increase our efforts to not only recognize barriers, but more importantly, remove these barriers. It is appropriate for the Communication discipline to take the lead in these efforts—to protect educational access and opportunity for all higher education stakeholders.

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The Basic Communication Course and College Student Retention: A Longitudinal Analysis

David E. Schneider and Jennifer D. McCullough

Keywords: basic communication course, college retention, hybrid BCC, college retention, public speaking

Abstract: This longitudinal study examined the relationship between two content formats of the basic communication course (BCC) and first-year college student retention over a 4-year period (N = 5,653). Chi-square and logistic regression models indicated students who completed the BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not complete the BCC. While completing the BCC was associated with retention for both formats, the hybrid BCC was more consistently related to retention than the public speaking BCC. Students from certain demographic groups who completed the hybrid BCC were retained more frequently than students from the same demographic who did not complete the hybrid BCC. Demographics for the public speaking BCC revealed a different retention profile. Implications and future directions concerning the BCC are discussed.

Introduction

Entering college is an exciting, challenging, and anxiety-provoking experience. According to the National Student Clearing House (2020), the average first-year student retention rate was 76% and dropped to 67% when measuring return by the institution of origin. A 67% retention rate is common as rates vary widely across institutions (Freshmen Retention Rate, 2022). Elite institutions tend to experience higher retention rates, above 90%, while students at most other institutions, especially community colleges, struggle to adjust.
Long ago, Tinto (1975) articulated the complexity of retention, noting that students arrive with differing goals, backgrounds, aptitudes, and opportunities and that retention also appears to be influenced by institutional characteristics. Worth noting, institutional departures are frequently voluntary rather than being rooted in substandard academic performance. Using institutional data, the present study investigated the longitudinal relationship between first-year student retention and the basic communication course (BCC) at a 4-year public university. After reviewing some key retention literature as well as research on the BCC, 10 research questions were proposed and analyzed. The BCC was associated with improving first-year student retention. Implications, limitations, and future directions are examined.

Research literature on college student retention spans more than a century. Crede and Niehorster (2012) conducted a meta-analysis that accounted for 700 studies over 100 years. Demographics failed to predict retention, suggesting, to some degree, that college is an equal opportunity for all students. A consistent personality profile of success emerged: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, self-efficiency, internal locus of control, and positive self-esteem. Problem-solving coping skills, as opposed to students’ emotional coping skills, were associated with success. Adjustment was academic and social. Institutional and faculty support along with secure parental attachment were moderately related to retention. All told, Crede and Niehorster found grades to be the single strongest retention predictor and institutional attachment to be the strongest link to grades and retention.

Tinto (1988) recognized college student retention as a socialization process. Accordingly, the need to establish a sense of belongingness among first-year students has become a focal point in retention literature (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; O’Keefe, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Whitten et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). Belonging is a form of institutional identification. First-year students identify with their new school by establishing relationships with peers and with employees. Background or situational characteristics have been found to impede the development of belongingness. Minority students, for example, often face social adversity when entering a new campus environment (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Belongingness is more challenging for working-class students who lack campus-based social capital as compared to middle- and upper-class students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Moreover, commuter students are more likely to rely on faculty relationships to develop belongingness as access to peers is more limited and competing demands mean spending less time on campus (Whitten et al., 2020). Indeed, developing a sense of belonging is not a uniform process for students.

First-year experience courses (FYE) and affinity groups have been used as vehicles for developing belongingness. FYE courses involve developing cohorts, or smaller groups of students. Klatt and Ray (2014) found that students who completed an FYE seminar were more likely to be retained and were more likely to graduate. Likewise, Miller and Lesik (2014–15) found an increased retention rate for first-year students who completed an FYE and an increased likelihood to graduate; however, academic ability moderated this finding.

Retention, by definition, is longitudinal. It takes a year to know if students are retained. Wills et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal analysis using institutional data over a 6-year period (1998–2004) and found three retention predictors via regression analysis: academic preparation, grades, and merit or academic scholarship. Smaller class sizes were also correlated to retention. In a 4-year longitudinal study, Ting (2003) discovered noncognitive factors, such as coping with racism, leadership experience, and community service, to be stronger predictors of retention for first-generation students (FGCS) of color. Longitudinal studies help to identify patterns and to assess the effectiveness of treatments and programs.
In sum, college student retention is complex. Though essential, academic performance alone fails to improve retention. Institutional identification requires relationship development with peers, faculty, and staff. FYE courses have served to foster belongingness. As the basic communication course (BCC) is frequently taken by first-year students and offers socialization content relevancy, the relationship between the BCC and retention deserves exploration.

**Basic Communication Course and Retention**

BCC scholarship has been abundant. Anderson et al. (2021) completed a meta-synthesis of 98 BCC articles published in four key journals across the last decade and found that research focused on the BCC structure, student-teacher relationships, and academic assessment. In a meta-synthesis of 11 BCC surveys covering 60 years, LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020) found enrollment to be driven by participation in university-wide general education requirements as well as an emphatic trend toward public speaking as a basic course format (60%) followed by the hybrid format (28%). These findings are consistent with trends identified in a systematic review of the same 11 BCC surveys (Morreale, 2020) as well as the most recent survey of the basic course (Morreale et al., 2023). Altogether, scholars point to the need for transcending research that establishes the relevance of the BCC beyond the discipline (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020), for demonstrating connections to the institutional mission to garner administrative support (Morreale, 2020) and for longitudinal research that extends to constituents outside of communication (Anderson et al., 2021).

Although college student retention scholarship enjoys a rich history, research on the BCC and retention is sparse. Three specific studies merit review. First, McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2020) examined the hybrid BCC in conjunction with an FYE course related to retention over a 2-year period (cohorts). Students who took the BCC and who completed an FYE course were more likely to be retained than students who only took an FYE course. Further, students who took the BCC and FYE courses reported higher levels of emotional support and higher levels of classroom connectedness than students who only took the FYE course. There was no difference in emotional work (surface acting). Overall, however, emotional support, emotional work, and classroom connectedness were not related to retention.

Second, Farris and Burns (2022) focused on integrating the university value system in the BCC and examined the impact on student recall and retention. Three groups of BCC students were compared. One group took the BCC with the core messaging values of the institution integrated into the curriculum. Another group completed the BCC with the core institutional messages being integrated into the course along with an out-of-class core message group experience. The third group served as a control. Students in both experimental conditions demonstrated higher levels of recall with respect to messages reflecting the institution's core values. While neither experimental condition was associated with retention, Farris and Burns encouraged more exploration between the BCC and student retention.

Third, Sidelinger and Frisby (2019) studied the longitudinal impact of a one-credit FYE BCC in relation to social integration, proactivity, and academic outcomes. Self-report surveys revealed a relationship between the BCC and persistence (likelihood of returning for a second semester). As the first semester progressed, the BCC was associated with increases in student perceptions of classroom connectedness, self-regulation, peer learning and connectedness, participation, and proactivity.

Collectively, none of the three BCC studies reviewed above have researched the BCC as a stand-alone relationship with retention. Contributing to college student retention research literature meets
the call by Hess (2016) for communication programs to enhance our institutional value. First, and foremost, it would help more students to succeed. Given that retention is a socialization process (Tinto, 1988), the field of communication should be front and center in terms of contributing to the improvement of student retention. Second, retention influences institutional enrollment management, something that is likely to garner administrative support (Morreale, 2020). Third, identifying connections between the BCC and retention would also enhance our discipline’s standing in general education programs, the source of enrollment growth for communication programs across the nation (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020).

Based on the literature review above, 10 research questions were advanced; the first question being straightforward. It would be useful to know the relationship between the BCC and retention, independent of an FYE course or some other contingency variable.

**RQ1:** Are students who complete the BCC retained at a higher rate than students who do not take the BCC during the first year of study?

Beyond RQ1, a set of research questions focused on the BCC format. While early BCC retention research points toward a significant relationship, the studies conducted by McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2020) and Farris and Burns (2022) were operationalized using the hybrid BCC format. The third BCC retention study reviewed above involved a tailored FYE one-credit course that was hybrid-like in nature in so far as it addressed interpersonal communication, conflict management, and mediated communication in the context of academic and personal success (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019). While public speaking serves as the dominant BCC format at most institutions across the nation (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020; Morreale, 2020; Morreale et al., 2023), any relationship between retention and public speaking is unknown. Theoretically speaking, competencies developed in the hybrid course (interpersonal communication, small group communication, perception, listening) might be more immediately relevant to first-year students who enter institutions needing to form new human relationships. It is also plausible that skills developed in public speaking may be valuable in this regard (e.g., communication apprehension, verbal communication skills, improved self-confidence). Indeed, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) found an association between the basic course and improved mental health. Put simply, we do not really know if the BCC format plays a role in retention. Hence, research questions two, three, and four were posed:

**RQ2:** Are first-year students who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than those who do not take the hybrid BCC?

**RQ3:** Are first-year students who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than those who do not take the public speaking BCC?

**RQ4:** Is there a difference in retention rate between public speaking and the hybrid BCC?

Affinity groups are popular in retention research. Theoretically, the idea involves socializing students in smaller groups designed to foster belongingness. Accordingly, it would be valuable to know if the BCC helps to improve retention for first-year students who are members of affinity groups. Athletes, for example, enter the institution as team members who are engaged in enduring relationships (coaches, teammates). Another group of students at the institution used in this study include those admitted into a scholarship community. These Academic Scholars take two FYE courses together and are engaged in common social–professional activities as the year progresses. Resident scholars are encouraged to live
near the same residence hall. Interestingly, by definition, Academic Scholars remove the question of academic skills from the retention question; failure to retain these students would not be due to a lack of academic skills. Together, these two groups presented the opportunity to see if the BCC course plays a role in retention. Skills learned in the BCC may be readily applicable to managing positive human relationships within the affinity groups (team conflict, personality differences, small group roles). Thus, four additional research questions were formulated:

**RQ5:** Are college athletes who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than athletes who did not take the hybrid BCC?

**RQ6:** Are college athletes who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than athletes who did not take the public speaking BCC?

**RQ7:** Are Academic Scholars who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than Academic Scholars who did not complete the hybrid BCC?

**RQ8:** Are Academic Scholars who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than Academic Scholars who did not complete the public speaking BCC?

Finally, by definition, retention is longitudinal. Students need to return to school year after year until they graduate. Sidelinger and Frisby (2019) observed a longitudinal influence, within the scope of the same semester, of a one-credit FYE BCC experience in terms of social integration, proactivity, and academic outcomes with respect to persistence (likelihood of returning for the second semester). If the BCC is related to retention, does the timing of the course matter? Should students take the BCC in their first semester of study or is taking it in the second semester sufficient? Thus, the ninth and tenth research questions were posed:

**RQ9:** Is there a difference in the retention rate between students who take the hybrid BCC in the fall as compared to the spring semester?

**RQ10:** Is there a difference in retention rate between students who take the public speaking BCC in the fall as compared to the spring semester?

**Method**

**Context**

Data for this study was collected at a small public comprehensive university located in the Midwestern United States enrolling about 8,000 students. Over 95% of first-year students attend full-time, with about one-third living on campus. Institutional retention rates hover in the mid 70% range (74.14% in 2018–19, 77.37% in 2019–20, 73.33% 2020–21). Retention was measured based on the return rate of first-year students (including transfers) for the second year of study at the institution. Students take one of two BCC courses (hybrid or public speaking), among other choices, to fulfill a university general education requirement. Academic advisors encourage students to complete oral competency during their first year, but this is not always possible due to seat availability and other scheduling needs. The data includes some transfer students, who still qualify as first-year students at the institution for retention purposes. All BCC instructors work from a core syllabus and use a common textbook. A common subset of multiple-choice
questions within the scope of the instructor’s larger comprehensive final exam are administered as related to program-wide cognitive assessment. The core syllabus includes the course description, identifies course goals and objectives, and specifies a range of assignments (e.g., tests, types and kinds of speeches, and class activities). Each instructor develops their own syllabus that comports with the core syllabus. The hybrid BCC addresses seven competencies: interpersonal, verbal, nonverbal, listening, perception & identity, small group dynamics, and public speaking. Six competencies are addressed in the public speaking BCC: argumentation and reasoning, types of evidence, audience analysis, verbal language, arrangement, and visual aids. Said competencies are in alignment with the recommendations of the National Communication Association.

Both the hybrid and public speaking BCC are mainly delivered in a traditional face-to-face format. During the middle year (2019–2020), due to the pandemic, a high flex model was employed to provide instruction (limited in-person class meetings, relaxed in-person attendance policies, synchronous and asynchronous experiences). BCC enrollment is capped at 25 students in each section.

**Procedure**

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), longitudinal data was collected from existing records covering four consecutive academic years (2017–2018, 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021). Data was de-identified prior to being shared with the researchers, negating the need for participant consent.

Using SPSS, frequencies, chi-square, and logistic regression were conducted. The initial analysis of the data consisted of a series of chi-square tests to examine the association between various categorical variables (e.g., completion of a BCC) and retention (outcome variable). Two categories of retention were labeled as retained and not retained. Chi-square tests were run for the overall samples (4 years combined) as well as each year individually. Logistic regression, which is justified when attempting to predict the impact of a series of independent variables on a categorical dependent variable (Mertler et al., 2021), was used to further examine demographic variables as retention predictors.

**Participants**

Our sample included 5,653 first-year students. A demographic profile of those students appears in Table 1 on the following page. Some of the participants in the sample belonged to affinity groups including athletes and Academic Scholars. Retention is a key aspect of student athlete recruitment at the university. Between two thirds and three fourths of the athletes are on scholarship (mostly partial scholarships). Athletes participate in NCAA Division II level of competition across a range of sports. There were 567 athletes in our sample (10%). Academic Scholars are admitted as a cohort each year on a select basis (entrance exam scores, high school GPA, and interviews). They take two general education classes together (FYE) and are invited to certain social–professional activities across the year. Academic Scholars composed 2.9% of the sample (\( N = 165 \)).

Participation in the BCC was measured based on enrollment numbers for the hybrid and public speaking BCC courses. In total, 3,634 students (64.3%) took at least one BCC with 82 students (1.5%) who took both BCCs. The hybrid BCC was the more popular course with 2,858 students (50.7%) enrolled. A total of 930 students (16.5%) took the public speaking BCC. There were 1,937 students who did not take either BCC. Retention was measured based on return rates for each fall (beginning of the academic
TABLE 1  
Demographics of Sample Participants (n = 5653)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2056</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3597</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4364</td>
<td>77.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>2388</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-First generation</td>
<td>3265</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter</td>
<td>2205</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>3448</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall retention rate for our sample was 75.2% (4,249 students). Retention rates per year remained consistent throughout the 4 years of data collection (77.3%, 74.1%, 77.3%, 72.2%).

Results

RQ1 asked if students who take a BCC are more likely to be retained than those who do not take a BCC. A three-way chi-square test was conducted crossing the variables BCC (completed both hybrid and public speaking BCC, completed one BCC, did not complete a BCC) with Retained (yes, no). Results indicated a statistically significant difference in retention rates, $\chi^2 (2) = 1.91.14, p < .001, \Phi = .18$. Students who took at least one BCC (either hybrid or public speaking) were more likely to be retained (80.4%) than those who did not take a BCC (64.4%). Students who took both BCCs were most likely to be retained (95.1%).

RQ2 explored the hybrid BCC format in relation to retention. Results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the hybrid BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not take it, $\chi^2 (1) = 120.54, p < .001, \Phi = .15$ with 81.4% of students who took the hybrid BCC being retained compared to 68.8% of students who did not take the hybrid BCC. Results for individual years were also significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2 (1) = 50.29, p < .001$; 2018–19: $\chi^2 (1) = 69.05, p < .001$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2 (1) = 32.93, p < .001$; 2020–21: $\chi^2 (1) = 36.32, p < .001$.

RQ3 examined the public speaking BCC format. Results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the public speaking course were more likely to be retained $\chi^2 (1) = 14.57, p < .001, \Phi = .05$ with 80.1% of students who took public speaking being retained while 74.2% of students who did not take public speaking. Results for individual years were not all significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2 (1) = 5.96, p = .02$; 2018–19: $\chi^2 (1) = 2.55, p = .11$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2 (1) = 2.37, p = .12$; 2020–21: $\chi^2 (1) = 3.38, p = .07$. 
TABLE 2
Retention Rates Based on Completion of BCCs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Public Speaking</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Overall Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>5653</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–18</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018–19</td>
<td>1576</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–20</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–21</td>
<td>1382</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ4 asked if differences in likelihood of being retained existed between students who took public speaking versus the hybrid course. To address this question, a chi-square test comparing type of BCC (public speaking, hybrid) with retention (yes, no) was conducted. Interestingly, a higher percentage of students who completed the hybrid BCC were retained (81.0%) than those who took the public speaking BCC (78.7%). However, this difference was not statistically significant, χ² = 2.23, p < .14, Φ = .03.

Retention rates based on the completion of BCCs appear in Table 2 above. The table accounts for all 4 years. In each year, students who completed both BCCs were retained at a higher rate than any other category including the overall institutional retention rate.

RQ5 and RQ6 focused on student athletes. For RQ5, results of a two-way chi-square test indicated a statistically significant difference in retention among athletes who took the hybrid course, χ² (1) = 6.77, p = .01, Φ = .11 with 80.5% of athletes taking the hybrid course being retained compared to 70.7% of athletes who did not take the hybrid course being retained. For RQ6, the difference in retention rates for athletes who took the public speaking course (77.8%) and those who did not (77.2%) was not statistically significant, χ² (1) = .01, p = .91, Φ = .01.

RQ7 and RQ8 examined Academic Scholars. For RQ7, results of two-way chi-square tests indicate that although a higher percentage of Academic Scholars who took the hybrid BCC were retained (98.6%) than those who did not take the hybrid BCC (94.7%), the difference was not statistically significant, χ² (1) = 1.77, p = .18, Φ = .10. Concerning RQ8, the difference in retention rates for Academic Scholars who took the public speaking course (93.9%) and those who did not (97.0%) was not statistically significant, χ² (1) = .69, p = .41, Φ = -.07.

RQ9 and RQ10 compared fall and spring semester BCC retention rates. For RQ9, results of the two-way chi-square test indicated students who took the hybrid BCC in the spring had a higher rate of retention (83.2%) than students who took the BCC in the fall semester (80.1%), χ² (1) = 4.38, p = .04, Φ = .04. Results for each year individually are not all statistically significant, 2017–18: χ² (1) = 1.18, p = .28; 2018–19: χ² (1) = 3.68, p = .06; 2019–2020: χ² (1) = .41, p = .53; 2020–21: χ² (1) = .31, p = .5 As for RQ10, results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the public speaking BCC in the spring had a higher rate of retention (85.2%) than students who took the BCC in the fall semester (77.81%), χ² (1) = 6.78, p = .01, Φ = .09. Results for each year individually are not all statistically significant, 2017–18: χ² (1) = 2.91, p = .09; 2018–19: χ² (1) = .50, p = .48; 2019–2020: χ² (1) = .70, p = .40; 2020–21: χ² (1) = 5.29, p = .02.
TABLE 3
Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Being Retained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>95% CI for Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCC Hybrid</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>160.64</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>2.6***</td>
<td>[2.24, 3.01]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCC public speaking</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>42.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>1.93***</td>
<td>[1.59, 2.36]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>35.62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
<td>[0.56, 0.75]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>17.13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>1.56***</td>
<td>[1.26, 1.92]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic scholar</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>22.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>8.66***</td>
<td>[3.52, 21.26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>[0.9, 1.47]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>41.97</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>1.58***</td>
<td>[1.78, 1.81]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential status</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>[1.04, 1.38]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** p < .001.

Existing research indicates BCC’s impact on retention works with additional student demographic factors. In addition to addressing our research questions, a binary logistical regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of the BCC along with other variables relevant to retention research on the likelihood of students being retained. The model included six independent variables (Academic Scholar (y/n), athlete (y/n), gender, race, residential status, and first-generation status). The full model containing all predictors was statistically significant, indicating the model was able to distinguish between respondents who were retained and those who were not retained, χ² (8, N = 5653) = 322.19, p < .001. Overall, the model explained between 6.4% (Cox and Snell R square) and 9.6% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variances in retention and correctly classified 76.5% of the cases. As shown in Table 3 above, six of the eight independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The strongest predictor of retention was being an Academic Scholar, recording an odds ratio of 8.66. The next two strongest predictors were completion of the BCC courses. Students who completed the hybrid BCC were 2.56 times more likely to be retained while students who completed the public speaking BCC were 1.93 times more likely to be retained.

Additional chi-square tests were conducted to examine differences in retention rates based on BCC completion for each demographic variable. Chi-square values appear in Tables 4 and 5.

Finally, researchers investigated if differences in the likelihood of being retained based on completion of a BCC were influenced during the pandemic as Covid dramatically influenced course delivery and structure. Hence, comparisons were made between pre-Covid years (AY17–18/AY18–19) versus pandemic years (AY19–20/AY20–21). The likelihood of being retained did not differ for students who took a BCC during pre-Covid years (hybrid, 82%; public speaking, 80.6%) versus those who took a BCC during Covid years (hybrid, 80.7%; public speaking, 79.6%).
### TABLE 4

Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Hybrid BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Φ</th>
<th>Retention %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2056</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>73.11***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.35***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018–2019</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30.52***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.41***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–2021</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.25**</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3597</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>65.34***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>83.5</td>
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<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.94**</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018–2019</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.04***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.86**</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–2021</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.09***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commuters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2205</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>57.05***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22.88***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>74.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018–2019</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.66***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>442</td>
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<td>7.48**</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–2021</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.62***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3448</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60.91***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018–2019</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38.84***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>1028</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.58***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>81.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020–2021</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.45**</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Generation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2388</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50.1***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>77.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.12***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018–2019</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.22***</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.53*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>76.2</td>
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Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
### TABLE 4 (continued)
Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Hybrid BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

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Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

### TABLE 5
Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Public Speaking BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

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<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Φ</th>
<th>Retention %</th>
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### TABLE 5 (continued)

Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Public Speaking BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

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</table>

Note. * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \).
Discussion

Though retention is complicated, the answer to RQ1 is straightforward: Students who completed the BCC during their first year of college were retained at a higher rate than students who did not complete the course during the first year. Hence, the BCC was emphatically associated with retention. Other findings were encouraging, but more nuanced.

RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 addressed BCC format. While the collective 4-year retention rate for students who completed public speaking was significantly higher than students who did not complete public speaking during the first year, the breakdown for individual years is more revealing. In the first year of the present analysis, students who completed public speaking were retained at a significantly higher rate than students who did not complete public speaking. In years two, three, and four, the retention rate for public speaking students was higher than for students who did not complete public speaking; however, the difference was not statistically significant. In contrast, students who completed the hybrid BCC during their first year of college were more likely to be retained than students who did not complete the hybrid BCC for each year individually. Comparatively speaking, the hybrid BCC was more consistently aligned with retention than public speaking. Logistic regression bore this out further, as students who completed the hybrid BCC were 2.56 times more likely to be retained while students who completed the public speaking BCC were 1.93 times more likely to be retained. Most noteworthy, the overall retention rate for students who completed both BCCs (hybrid and public speaking) during the first year was 95%, which falls in the range of elite institutions wherein retention is not a problem.

RQ5 and RQ6 examined student athletes as an affinity group in relation to the BCC and retention. Athletes who completed the hybrid BCC during the first year were retained at a significantly higher rate than athletes who did not complete the hybrid BCC. Conversely, athletes who completed public speaking were not retained at a significantly higher rate than athletes who did not complete public speaking. This finding is consistent with results from the larger sample overall and held for each year over the 4 years.

Academic Scholars were also studied as an affinity group, accounting for RQ7 and RQ8. While scholars who completed the hybrid BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not complete the hybrid BCC, the reverse was true for students who completed public speaking. Results should be considered in context. Findings related to Academic Scholars underscore what is known about retention in general: Students with higher GPAs and academic skills are more likely to succeed in college (Crede & Niehorster, 2012). In this study, the retention rate for Academic Scholars exceeded 93% for all conditions in all years (with logistic regression indicating 8.66 times more likely to be retained).

RQ9 and RQ10 explored BCC timing. The overall retention rate was higher for students completing the hybrid BCC in spring as compared to fall term. However, this finding did not hold for each individual year. Likewise, the overall retention rate for students who completed public speaking during the spring was higher than those who completed it in the fall. This finding held in one individual year. Although retention rates between spring and fall for both courses were not significant every year, findings consistently favored the spring. Persistence may explain this finding; students enrolled in the spring persisted from the fall (completed fall and returned for spring). Hence, the lower retention rate might be explained by fall term departures.
The retention rate for students who completed the hybrid BCC was significantly higher than those who did not complete the hybrid BCC for every demographic subgroup: males, females, commuters, non-commuters, first-generation, non-first-generation, White, and Black. Retention rates increased as follows: Black students (22%), males (17%), commuters (15%), and first-generation students (13%). In contrast, the retention rate increase for students who completed the public speaking BCC was significantly higher than those who did not complete the public speaking BCC for select demographic variables: females, commuter, non-commuter, non-first-generation, White. Commuter students experienced the largest advantage (8%). Black students, first-generation students, and males did not experience a statistically significant advantage when completing public speaking. Clearly, students from all demographics fared better in the hybrid BCC. Perhaps the content of the hybrid BCC helps minority students to better understand issues related to social diversity (Walton & Cohen, 2011) and working-class students to see the need for developing campus-based capital (Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

Implications

It is encouraging to learn that the BCC was related to a higher rate of college student retention, independent from an FYE course or any other contingent variable. Indeed, communication research is central to understanding Tinto’s (1988) theory of retention as a socialization process. Our findings represent an emphatic welcome mat to our BCC as a “front porch” (Beebe, 2013). These findings establish institutional value for administrators and stakeholders outside of our discipline (Anderson et al., 2021; Hess, 2016; Morreale, 2020).

At the same time, the findings of this study suggest the hybrid BCC was more consistently related to retention than public speaking. The only other BCC studies related to retention were operationalized using the hybrid BCC (Farris & Burns, 2022; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2020). If the hybrid BCC format is more aligned with higher retention rates, then institutions should examine their choice of BCC format. And, since 60% of our institutions employ the public speaking BCC (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020; Morreale, 2020; Morreale et al., 2023), we might be missing an opportunity to enhance the value and our “front porch.” Given that students who completed public speaking and the hybrid BCC experienced the highest rate of retention, institutions might consider expanding the general education requirements to include two communication courses in lieu of an FYE course.

Reasons behind the hybrid BCC’s more consistent association with retention merit theoretical speculation. Content addressed in the hybrid course (perception, interpersonal communication, conflict management, coculture communication, listening skills, verbal communication, small group conflict, and role theory) offer immediate application for first-year students navigating relationships with classmates, roommates, teammates, student organization members, and new friendships. Though not related directly to retention, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) offer evidence associating basic instruction (hybrid and public speaking) with higher levels of well-being (belongingness, flourishing, and lower levels of loneliness) for students enrolled in the second semester of their first year of study. Interpersonal communication skills meet student needs; developing those skills in a timely manner may contribute to retention.
Limitations and Future Directions

While the present analysis is based on 4 years of historical data, additional studies are needed as our results are confined to a single institution. Both formats of the BCC were positively associated with retention, yet the hybrid format was more consistently related to retention than public speaking. Interestingly, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) found a similar consistency trend when comparing the hybrid BCC and public speaking BCC with respect to student well-being. Since previous BCC retention research has focused only on the hybrid format (Farris & Burns, 2022; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2020; Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019), more BCC format comparisons are needed. Does the hybrid course content affect retention? Also worth noting, chi-square and logistic regression analyze frequencies and are not cause-effect models. Moreover, the affinity groups (athletes and Academic Scholars) in this study were not operationalized as a treatment condition. Other affinity groups (e.g., band, choir, student government, residential life) in relation to the BCC and retention deserve examination. Some experimental research is in order.

Morreale et al. (2023) and LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020) identified consistency across sections as one of the most challenging issues for BCC delivery. Findings from the present study might, in part, be due to the use of a common core syllabus and common textbook. Small class size has also been associated with retention (Wills et al., 2018). Enrollment was capped at 25 for both formats (hybrid and public speaking) in this study.

Scholars concerned with communication pedagogy and with the BCC should focus more on college student retention. To summarize, the BCC is emphatically related to retention independent from any contingency variable. This finding enhances the value of our discipline to the wider academic community and to other stakeholders. Communication scholars and administrators should reconsider the content format of the BCC. Faculty and administrators in the discipline might advocate to have students complete two courses in communication instead of communication and an FYE course. Communication scholars contribute to the base of college student retention research where we have been largely absent (retention is social and academic). An established research base will enhance our value to the academic community.

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Challenging the Positionality of Western Mainstream English Through the Implementation of Communication Action Statements

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Keywords: land acknowledgments; communication action statement; communication norms; communication diversity; antiracist practices; Western Mainstream English (WME)

Abstract: Communication is the most powerful tool we have to challenge the plague of invisibility impacting our Indigenous communities. As we continue to challenge the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives touted by our institutions, we need to move beyond mission statements to motion (i.e., action required for meaningful transformation to take place) (Qassataq, Inupiaq, 2022). To call attention to and name the silencing of language and knowledge systems outside of Western Mainstream English (WME), the present paper proposes the concept of Communication Action Statements (CAS). Based on place and space, CASs recognize, label, and affirm the negative effects of WME, as well as call attention to the silencing associated with the reinforcement of WME as the ideal form of communication. Moreover, CASs seek to normalize other knowledge systems outside of the rigid Western model that defines higher education. In conjunction with CASs, to initiate motion, we provide four strategies to take action to move beyond acknowledgment and challenge the Communication discipline to continue working to decenter whiteness.

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**Introduction**

As argued by Rudick (2022) we must name white supremacy to address and change it. Settler colonialism continues to plague higher education today, implicitly and explicitly embedded in the norms and values expected in written, verbal, and nonverbal communication, upholding white supremacy (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Squire et al., 2018). Used as spaces of colonization and assimilation, Indigenous communities have faced centuries of cultural erasure from Western education, and a tenuous relationship remains (Jacobs, 2006; Masta, 2022).

However, for many, post-secondary degrees provide increased economic opportunities and an estimated 65% of jobs require some form of postsecondary credential as of 2020 (Geiman, 2021). Histories of oppression and violence, as well as current exclusion related to Indigenous knowledge, culture, and practices, may make Indigenous students hesitant to enroll in post-secondary education, furthering racial and economic disparities and presenting barriers to their long-term success as they navigate spaces not designed to support their overall development (Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2019). To better support our Indigenous students and peers, we must acknowledge how current perpetuations of WME further colonization and erasure and may contribute to increased barriers to success in higher education, as “culture, identity, and traditional ways of knowing and being are fundamental to and beneficial for Indigenous students’ thriving in higher education” (Alejandro et al., 2020, p. 679). Moreover, grounding Indigenous knowledge as an equal partner to Western knowledge is empowering and beneficial to all communities (Terrill, 2022), especially as we experience a resurgence in the explicit communication and perpetuation of white supremacy and settler colonialist ideals through the recent passing of state legislation such as the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ban in Florida (Diaz, 2023) with many additional Republican controlled states seeking to pass similar laws (Quilantan, 2023). Further, in the coming months, the United States (U.S.) Supreme Court is set to release its decision on keeping or overturning the Indian Child Welfare Act (Chimenti, 2023; Fonseca & Sherman, 2022). This vital federal legislation was enacted in 1978 to stop the removal of Native and Indigenous children from their families and end forced assimilation via boarding schools that has resulted in generations of trauma and cultural epistemicide. Thus, it is more important than ever that we seek to empower Native and Indigenous students and scholars to mitigate current and future legislations’ planned erasure of Indigenous cultural and ethnic knowledge.

As such, this paper seeks to continue discussions of disruption related to the continued erasure of communicative diversity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Inoue, 2019; Ladva, 2020; May & McDermott, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012), specifically among Native and Indigenous Learners within the context of higher education and within the Communication discipline specifically. The authors propose a CAS loosely inspired by Land Acknowledgments (LA) to name and acknowledge the role of white supremacy in communication norms and expectations taught in many classrooms across the United States. From the implementation of CAS, we further challenge Communication scholars and educators to engage in motion (Qassataq, Iñupiaq, 2022). Motion, described by Iñupiaq activist Ayyu Qassataq (2022) in a workshop facilitated by the First Alaskans Institute entitled Alaska Native Dialogues on Racial Equity Project, encapsulates the action orientation of creating meaningful and sustained change. A powerful, single word call to action, motion requires us to adopt and implement tangible change via policies and strategies to continue to
decolonize our communication practices and shift from deficit models to equity-based models that normalize Indigenous knowledge systems and different ways of knowing in Communication classrooms and scholarship.

First, we begin with an overview of the ongoing violence inflicted on Indigenous Learners and by extension their lands, peoples, and sovereignty as Nations. Second, we consider the positionality of WME as the “superior” and oppressive form of communication and language norms. Third, we overview research on the effects of codeswitching in higher education. Fourth, we explore the intersection of communication and motion. From this intersection, we argue for the adoption of a CAS. We argue CASs are a tool for communication scholars and the broader academic and professional communities to not only acknowledge but take action to redress the disparities associated with the positionality of WME in much of our language spaces. Lastly, we close with a recommendation for developing and tailoring your own CAS based on place and space, and consider how the CAS may inform strategies and policies related to catalyzing motion for Indigenization of the communication discipline.

Authors’ Positionality

To begin, we find it essential to define our positionality in relation to this topic. We acknowledge our white privilege as cisgender white women in academia and that we hold the position/identity of being settlers. We seek to use our (white) privilege(s) to advocate and empower Indigenous Peoples’ epistemic inclusion to disrupt the continued epistemicide of knowledge systems that fall outside of colonized higher education expectations and to call attention to the injustice of linguistic silencing (Hall & Tandon, 2017). As educators in a predominately white institution with a large Indigenous student population, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, we live in the tension of being settlers and trying to best support our students through decolonizing pedagogies (Azmat & Masta, 2021) as we have seen the negative effects of settler colonialism through the higher education systems and expectations on Indigenous students and peers (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For example, we have seen the negative effects of the perpetuation of WME in higher education classrooms, especially within oral intensive classrooms, that can result in language and identity erasure. Further, because WME norms may be in direct contradiction to Indigenous students’ cultural communication practices and values, we have seen high withdrawal rates and increased communication apprehension and anxiety for Indigenous students in oral intensive classes (PNPI, 2019).

As Indigenous scholars and activists, such as Iñupiaq elder Willie Hensley (n.d.), continue the “epic” fight against settler colonialism to protect their language and cultures, we find it imperative to consider “what are my responsibilities as a settler in academia” (Azmat & Masta, 2021, p. 14) and take action. We believe one responsibility is to challenge communication behaviors that devalue, degrade, and demean Native and Indigenous communities. This is the perspective with which this piece is positioned, continued disruption of white supremacy and settler colonialism in communication through naming (Rudick, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012), as well as challenging the Communication discipline to catalyze change.

1. In line with guidance put forth by the Associated Press, the authors specifically chose to use a lowercase “w” when referring to white as “capitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs” (Bauder, 2020, para. 5).
2. The authors are intentionally vague here as Native and Indigenous Learners come from distinct cultures, each with uniquely defined communication norms and values.
3. We acknowledge that many students may have increased communication apprehension and anxiety, such as students who speak English as a second language, neurodivergent students, and other students of color. For the purpose of this paper, we focus specifically on Indigenous students’ experiences.
Literature Review

In this review of literature, we first explore settler colonialism in higher education. Second, we situate WME and deficit theory in higher education and its effects on Indigenous Learners. Third, we contextualize current research on codeswitching and its potentially negative effects on linguistic diversity in higher education. Fourth, we consider the intersection of communication and motion.4

Settler Colonialism in Higher Education

Within the context of higher education and society at large, invisibility is “the modern form of racism used against Native Americans” (the American Indian College Fund, 2019, p. 5; see Grande & McCarty, 2018; Lechuga, 2014; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Termed settler colonialism, settlers have often sought to make Indigenous lands their new home through the erasure of Indigenous People and their culture. Settler colonialism continues to reverberate in Indigenous communities today, as the violence of colonialism is “not contained to the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Settler colonialism operates through the seizing of lands and resources (external colonialism) and the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people through institutions, such as schooling and policing (internal colonialism), to uphold white supremacy. As such, settler colonialism results in a “total appropriation of Indigenous life and land” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Within the U.S., settler colonialism has and continues to impact the lives of Indigenous People as many Indigenous groups have been forcibly removed from their lands, their children have been placed involuntarily in boarding schools (internal colonialism), and their lands have been desecrated for the exploitation of natural resources (external colonialism).

While the structure and norms of settler colonialism continue to operate throughout many institutions today (e.g., prison, policing, marginalization), this manuscript is focused on settler colonialism in higher education (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Pihama and Lee-Morgan (2019) explain that “education was both a target and tool of colonialism, destroying and diminishing the validity and legitimacy of Indigenous education, while simultaneously replacing it with an ‘education’ complicit with the colonial endeavor” (p. 2; for a full review of Indigenous experiences in education see Masta, 2022, and Jacobs, 2006). Ultimately, education continues to be used as a tool of assimilation and erasure (Daniels-Mayes et al., 2021). For example, as argued by Alejandro et al. (2020), earning a postsecondary degree may represent educational and economic opportunities, however, “[it] also induce[s] threats of marginalization, racism, and US ethnocentrism, which affect [Indigenous students] sense of belonging and cultural identity development” (p. 679). Masta (2018) explored how Native American graduate students made sense of their experiences in higher education. The findings of this research demonstrated that participants’ perceived tension related to the complexities of their identity and sense of belongingness in academia. Participants reported challenging encounters in and out of the classroom, such as having to defend their Native identity and experiencing ongoing colonization that resulted in feelings of exhaustion (Masta, 2018). Overall, research documents the many negative experiences Indigenous students may face in education today result from microaggressions (Clark et al., 2014; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Sonn et al., 2000), ranging from exclusive curricula from colonial perspectives (Alejandro et al., 2020; Masta, 2022) to limited mentorship and representations among faculty (Andersen et al., 2008; Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). Further, recent legislation banning the funding of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (DEI)

4. Motion, as described by Iñupiaq activist Ayyu Qassataq (2022), is a powerful one-word call to action and accountability that signals a commitment to creating meaningful and sustained change (e.g., through policies, funding, accountability).
in public universities, as well as outlawing the ability for students and educators to talk about the effects of discrimination and exclusion (Diaz, 2023) perpetuate white supremacist ideologies and perspectives, silencing those outside of the dominant group.

In the context of Western education, research from scholars and activist organizations across the globe report low enrollment of Native and Indigenous Peoples in post-secondary educational programs and overall degree conferment (PNPI, 2019). In Australia, for example, Aboriginal students make up less than 2% of all university enrollments (Analysis and Policy Observatory, 2012). In Canada, First Nations students are more likely to attend college, but still lag behind their peers in terms of degree completion, 65% compared to 53% respectively (Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, 2021). Compared to the larger U.S. population and other learners of color, Native and Indigenous students account for only 1% of undergraduate student population (PNPI, 2019). Oftentimes, these students do not register as a blip for many colleges and universities (Chelberg & Bosman, 2020) due to low enrollment numbers, being reduced to the “other” category in demographic data reporting. The lack of data on Native and Indigenous People has resulted in the “asterisk nation” moniker “because an asterisk, instead of data points, is often used in data displays when reporting racial and ethnic data” (National Congress of American Indians, 2022, para. 5; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This continuation of erasure remains a significant barrier for achievement (e.g., allocation of resources, acknowledgment of identity) among Indigenous students in higher education.

Although white, non-Indigenous scholars may perceive the classroom as transformative, empowering, the path to future success and greatness, for many Indigenous students and scholars higher education can be a “dangerous” place (Qassataq, Iñupiaq, 2022; see Yang, 2017). No matter how much we read, study, and learn from our Indigenous communities, as white settlers, we will never truly understand the trauma, emotional labor, and layers of grief and sadness exacted upon these learners and faculty peers as they navigate a system that has and continues to take so much from them (Jacobs, 2006; Qassataq, Iñupiaq, 2022). However, allowing settler colonialism in higher education policies and practices to remain invisible and unnamed helps to rationalize and maintain a white supremacy status quo (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

**Situating Western Mainstream English and Deficit Theory**

As noted above, the legacy of settler colonialism continues in higher education through a variety of modes (e.g., late policies, penalization, expected language norms). Related to the Communication discipline, communication norms and expectations within higher education create and recreate cultural norms of the dominant majority (i.e., white supremacy), defining not only what is considered acceptable but what is considered deficient or less than by extension. This is inherently part of the legacy of colonization as “the cultural practices that the conqueror-colonizer found were deemed inferior” (Garcia, 2021, para. 5), including the communication norms that were markedly different from early Western settlers. Within academic and workplace communities, communication norms are defined within the framework of WME, also called Academic English (AE). We define WME/AE from a synthesis of the work of MacSwan (2020) and Rolstad (2014) that WME/AE is a form of English which positions the language of the educated classes as more advanced and cognitively complex than others, situating AE as the only suitable language for educational achievement and the primary way people demonstrate intelligence. However, no language is more cognitively complex than another. Ranking language is a cloak for deficit theories derived from racism. As argued by Valencia (2010), “deficit thinking is a pseudoscience founded
Challenging the Positionality of Western Mainstream English

on racial and class bias. It ‘blames the victim’ for school failure instead of examining how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning” (p. i).

Further, as Baker-Bell (2020) argues, WME/AE privileges those of European descent who have adopted a very rigid, rule-based pattern of communication. WME/AE forces Learners of Color to adopt the language of their colonizers while simultaneously devaluing the communication norms of their respective cultures. When communication norms are violated, the end result is often linguistic discrimination. Linguistic discrimination is a form of discrimination driven by a perceived failure to use language in a way that affirms the dominant majority (Squire et al., 2018). As such, communication and language remain one of the least socially acceptable ways to engage in discrimination (McDermott et al., 2022). Since language is culturally defined, linguistic discrimination is a form of racism (MacSwan, 2020).

Baker-Bell further argues, “academic English [is also] the language of school, the language of power” (2020, p. 9). While universities and departments have pushed for creating and maintaining neutral, unbiased language, Nguyễn (2021) argued that the absence of overt racism in speaking tips and expectations does not mean that an institution is “anti-racist” (i.e., viewing different races along with their unique practices as equals in terms of value; Kendi, 2019). We provide resources and create programs to address a deficiency versus acknowledging the system is broken, preserving white supremacy (Masta, 2022). Qassataq, Iñupiaq, (2022) challenges this flawed thinking with a plant metaphor in the narrative tradition. A nurturing gardener with a sick plant analyzes the soil, tests the pH, ensures the integrity of the pot used for planting, measures air quality, assesses the hydration, considers distance from the sun and other plants, and so forth, all to ensure the entire system is operating properly. Instead of blaming the plant for failing to thrive, the entire system and its parts are broken down, assessed, primed for interconnectivity, and re-established to promote well-being.

Codeswitching

Unfortunately, unlike the plant metaphor illustrated above, linguistic and communicative diversity may often be seen as a deficit in traditionally white language spaces resulting in the need for People of Color to engage in codeswitching to succeed. Codeswitching is defined as “the use of two different languages or language varieties within a single conversation or written text” (Benson, 2001, p. 23). Situational codeswitching “occurs when the languages used change according to the situations in which the speakers find themselves: they speak one language in one situation and another in a different one” (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014, p. 98). For example, in the classroom or workplace, Learners of Color may use WME/AE to fit within Western norms, yet at home they may use African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or blended forms of English mixed with Native words and phrases (Leap, 2012). Research reports that People of Color who switch to WME/AE in the workplace are perceived to be more “professional” than those who do not (McCluney et al., 2021). For many Learners of Color, switching to AE may be used as a coping strategy and tool for success (Hall et al., 2012).

Johnson and colleagues (2021) argue codeswitching is a “neutral practice in itself and one that nearly everyone engages in during social interactions” (p. 2). However, for some groups, “these adaptations do not have the same psychological antecedents and consequences” (Johnson et al., 2021, pp. 2–3). Language is intertwined with identity, culture, race, and experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987; Baker-Bell, 2020; Young, 2009). Therefore, when we require people to engage in codeswitching to satisfy WME/AE standards, we may be telling them that part of their identity is not allowed, accepted, or wanted. Further,
there is a double standard when it comes to engaging AE and codeswitching. As Martínez and Martinez (2019) point out, “white subjects” who use non-normative language are often called “innovative” for their appropriation of AAVE or other dialects/varieties, whereas People of Color are criticized for using “slang” or “inappropriate” language and grammar.

Ultimately, for People of Color, codeswitching may demand them to switch away from their “authentic selves” to fit within the dominant cultural norms and narrative (Johnson et al., 2021). As such, previous research has found that codeswitching can be mentally and emotionally exhausting for those who must engage in it (Hall et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2021). As argued by Liahnna Stanley (Mvskoke, Poarch Band, personal communication, December 7, 2022), “In many spaces, one can save themselves the exhausting and traumatic labor of being themselves in front of people who are not capable of holding and accepting them.” The intense focus on WME/AE disempowers AAVE speakers, as well as speakers of other English Varieties, which may lead to burnout and disillusionment. Over time, chronic decisions about how to linguistically represent oneself to avoid discrimination may lead to the diminished congruence between a person’s perceived authentic self and outward presentation, as well as result in added stress and negative health effects (DeJordy, 2008).

Recently, scholars have sought to challenge the perpetuation of WME/AE and need to engage in codeswitching in the discipline of Communication. For example, Ladva (2020) challenged Communication Centers to consider how racism may manifest through the silencing of Black Language (Ladva, 2020). Similarly, May and McDermott (2021) have argued the communication basic course privileges Western communication norms, silencing Indigenous ways of communicating and knowing and perpetuating violence against Native and Indigenous Learners. Our English discipline peers have argued for 50 years that students have a basic human right to their own language and ways of communicating, which challenges a “school’s right to interfere” (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2014, p. 8). While these pieces have furthered important conversations regarding expectations of communication norms and language in public speaking classes and Communication Centers, as a discipline, Communication scholars can be nurturing gardeners (Qassataq, Iñupiaq, 2022) and put into motion decolonizing practices that help transform the discipline and ultimately our institutions (Inoue, 2019). As argued by Anzaldúa (1987) “we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates” (p. 304). Thus, we can no longer perpetuate WME/AE as the superior form of communication that silences other forms of communication norms and behaviors. Disrupting and dismantling the power associated with WME in silencing other forms of communicating is an important step in the recognition of past wrongs and suffering (Kendi, 2019), as well as for reaffirming peoples’ cultural identities and communication behaviors. Acknowledging the role of communication for constructing our reality, through the intersection of communication and motion, we can identify places for disruption of settler colonialism in higher education.

The Intersection of Communication and Motion

The communication discipline has faced intense scrutiny for its lack of diversity. #Communicationsowhite (Chakravartty et al., 2018) is an example of activism that calls out the lack of diverse representation in faculty appointments, publications, awards and recognition, and leadership. As argued by Liahnna Stanley (Mvskoke, Poarch Band, personal communication, December 7, 2022):

#Communicationsowhite critiques whiteness as it structures systems and practices of knowledge production (i.e., citations, publication processes, impact factors) that erase and write
marginalized peoples out of the discipline, and then use those same terms to justify their failure (i.e., through terms like “rigor” and “merit”).

Within the context of Indigenous Studies specifically, the National Communication Association (NCA) has lagged. As evidence, the Indigenous Caucus was only sanctioned by NCA Legislative Assembly in 2020 (NCA, 2020) after the Indigenous scholar and activist, LaRoyce Batchelor (Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Creek), navigated the NCA bureaucracy. In the communication classroom, many of us rely on the traditional canon of white cisgender male scholars (e.g., Aristotle’s persuasion, Schramm [1949] communication model, and McLuhan’s [1966] research on media studies). Indigeneity as a pedagogical practice is in its infancy amongst many communication scholars and practitioners. Yet, communication is one of the most powerful tools we have to challenge the plague of invisibility and continued epistemicide impacting our Indigenous communities. Jefferson Keel, Chickasaw, executive board president for the National Congress of American Indians, underscores the importance of communication for Native communities by noting “our future success as tribal nations is directly linked to how effectively we communicate, and advocate for, the issues important to all of our people” (National Congress of American Indians, n.d., p. 2).

As white non-Indigenous scholars, inspired by Ayyu Qassataq, Iñupiaq, (2022) call to action of motion, we offer the following idea to disrupt our discipline and challenge others to engage in meaningful and sustained change to further DEI initiatives beyond performative social justice: A Communication Action Statement (CAS) to guide our pedagogical practices that allow Native and Indigenous Learners to “fully step into their gifts” (Qassataq, Iñupiaq, personal communication, December 2, 2022). While inspired by Land Acknowledgments (LA), a CAS moves beyond acknowledgment to motion, challenging us to decenter whiteness and Western communication practices to normalize different ways of knowing.

**Communication Action Statement**

In this section we begin with an overview of Land Acknowledgments (LA). Next we overview Communication Action Statements (CAS). We then consider what CASs look like in motion. Finally, we provide guidance for creating your own CAS.

**Land Acknowledgments (LA)**

While varied in their presentation globally, LAs are typically statements read at the start of an event or printed on handout materials that “tell our Indigenous students and colleagues that we believe their experience and the experience of people like them is important and meaningful to the history of our institution” (Whitemore & Carlson, 2022, para. 1). They typically acknowledge specific tribes whose ancestors lived on and cared for the lands currently occupied by the institution and surrounding communities. These statements are commonplace at many colleges and universities, purportedly to support Native and Indigenous Learners, and continue to spread into mainstream practices especially after Standing Rock protests were covered so heavily by various media outlets (St. James, 2022).

LAs, despite their good intentions, are criticized and debated among activists, Native and Indigenous Peoples, and academics alike. Activist and author Michelle Cyca, for example, invited Twitter users to share the worst LAs they’ve ever seen after calling out Vancouver Island University and Washington State Department of Corrections for their insincerity and lack of depth (Cyca, 2022). Indigenous Peoples and organizations that support their communities have varied and complex responses to the use of
LAs, ranging from “condescending bullshit” to feeling “really nervous” (Isador, 2019). Other activists take offense to how clumsily readers of LAs stumble over Native words and names of tribes. As argued by Robinson et al. (2019) “a lot hinges on the language we use to describe how we occupy the lands we live and work upon” (p. 20). Thus, the communication and language norms used in LAs are important to consider. Robinson et al. (2019) poignantly argues, “I’d like to acknowledge what happens when you stumble over our nations, our names—when Indigenous language falls carelessly out of the mouth, shatters upon the ground—is heard as a certain kind of acknowledgement too” (p. 20). Finally, within the context of higher education, LAs may be perceived as checking a required box in an attempt to appease Native and Indigenous Peoples versus a truly informed, reflective practice (Daigle, 2019).

Most importantly, LAs acknowledge but ultimately lack motion (i.e., words without corresponding action and sustained improvement). Motion, according to Ayyu Qassataq, Iñupiaq, (2022), is required for meaningful transformation to take place. Within the context of our respective institutions, motion allows us to go beyond the surface to challenge the existing social, cultural, and institutional practices that ultimately provide the milieu designed to support learners.

The Communication Action Statement (CAS)

Embracing motion, CASs seek to explicitly name the perpetuation of white supremacy through WME/AE as an expected communication norm and create the space for linguistic and epistemic freedom. Below we provide an example of a drafted CAS for the authors’ home institution among the Dena People of the lower Tanana River:

We recognize and make space for the communication norms and values of the Dena People of the lower Tanana River and their ancestors who care for these lands. Alaska is home to at least twenty distinct Indigenous languages. More than just dialectal variants, these different languages reflect the diverse cultural heritage of Alaska’s Native Peoples. We acknowledge the communication norms we know and practice are based in western knowledge systems that uphold white supremacy. We invite learners to share with us their language, Elder wisdom, and communication practices so that we may grow together as a community.

This statement is important for a few reasons. First, it seeks to recognize and affirm the importance of place and cultural diversity in communication norms. As argued by Masta (2022), Indigenous perspectives and worldviews are often dismissed and diminished in higher education classrooms. Therefore, explicitly acknowledging and affirming the value of cultural diversity in communication norms and expectations may help to decolonize communication spaces. Second, this statement seeks to dismiss the idea of a linguistic hierarchy by placing equal value on communication norms that define Native and Indigenous cultures. We seek to move from theory to practice, we communicate the value of “learn[ing] from (not about)” our Indigenous students and peers (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 330). Moreover, similar to the importance of communicating pronouns to affirm gender identity, a CAS can create the space for open discussion related to identity, as well as signal mutual respect, and cultivate a more welcoming and tolerant environment (National Institute of Health, 2022). Third, this statement seeks to challenge the idealization and reverence of WME in academic and professional spaces. It specifically names and calls out WME in upholding white supremacy (Rudick, 2022) and seeks to bring attention to the notion that current conceptualizations of linguistic norms and knowledge are based on ranking grounded in colonization and deficit theory (MacSwan, 2020). Finally, CASs seek to get people

5. “We” should be further defined in practice to specify the faculty member, department, and larger community.
thinking about challenging steadfast systems they may have come to expect and accept, such as when and where linguistic and epistemic freedom is “allowed.” Because of the cultural significance of place and space, culture, and identity, related to Indigenous ways of being, we need to critically assess how settler colonialism may manifest in higher education to move toward belonging for Indigenous students (Alejandro et al., 2020).

**What Does a CAS Look Like in Motion?**

As defined above, *motion* requires tangible, meaningful, and sustained action. Thus, CASs require additional work outside of the statement itself. Specifically, the *motion* of the statement must manifest in tangible strategies and policies for disrupting settler colonialism in higher education. We provide some of the strategies we use in the classroom as we grow with our Native and Indigenous communities and invite other Communication scholars and practitioners to continue to develop and refine the implementation of *motion*-based actions:

1. Expand the definition of credible sources. Oftentimes, we limit credible sources to academic and peer-reviewed articles pulled from the campus library. For Native and Indigenous Learners, Elders are the credible sources for disseminating knowledge, and they have been for thousands of years, long before the educational systems of the west were established (thousands of years compared to roughly 500, respectively) (Hall & Tandon, 2017). To exclude them as credible challenges foundational cultural norms and values while simultaneously dehumanizing members of their community. Moreover, it is a form of epistemicide (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

2. Provide learners with language options. At a recent intensive (i.e., a condensed) course in Alaska, one of the authors was asked by Yup’ik members of her learning community to allow them to present in Yugtun, their native language. We agreed on slides in English; however, they were allowed to present their entire speeches in Yugtun. The entire learning community came alive and learners engaged with the course content in profound and new ways. While the author did not understand the language, she fully understood the meaning of what was happening between learners. And for the professor, it was a reversal, requiring extensive labor to sit in the discomfort of being the only one who did not understand the language, cultural references, and jokes that resulted in a room full of laughter.

3. We challenge our peers to consider how other ways of knowing are introduced into the curriculum. Qassataq, Iñupiaq, (2002) argues that as educators we play a critical role in defining what is perceived as important, and by extension, what is not important, as we introduce/omit content, scholars, and community members into our learning communities. The Alcatraz Proclamation (Indians of All Tribes, 1969), for example, is a powerful example of persuasion and opens up an important part of the Civil Rights movement, that of the American Indian Movement, which is often lost or neglected in U.S. primary and secondary institutions. Educators are challenged to partner with community agencies and cultural resource centers that represent Native and Indigenous communities and tap into campus resources. The authors, for example, are privileged to have access to an Elder network known as Visiting Elder Professor. This program matches Elders with educators. The Elders visit classrooms and share their knowledge, language, and experiences with the campus community, leading the learning community in partnership with the instructor of record.
4. Create an inclusive rubric for evaluating speeches in partnership with your students, faculty peers, and basic course director. The current rubric used in many communication classrooms is derived from the National Communication Association's Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (NCA, 2007). This competency-based model privileges Western communication norms (e.g., setting an ideal speech pattern, grammatical structure, organizational pattern, and delivery specifics). In reality, this form assesses a student's ability to assimilate versus communicate in a way that speaks to their cultural norms and values. While we acknowledge that WME norms are an important skill for people to be able to codeswitch into to participate in today's job market, how WME norms are presented via the rubric and course content needs to be carefully considered. For example, in current public speaking courses, 15 weeks of course content is often focused on refining the speaking skills related to WME expectations. Basic course directors and instructors are challenged to consider how additional public speaking norms could be introduced and integrated into the curriculum. For example, how can alternative speaking assignments outside of the traditional informative and persuasive speeches be used to teach students about public speaking globally?

Create Your Own CAS

While we provide a basic CAS as an exemplar, consider drafting your own CAS to reflect the place you are in physically or virtually, as well as identify ways to put it in motion. As Robinson et al. (2019) argues related to LAs, “To read and repeat prescriptive acknowledgement without variance runs counter to the foundational values of acknowledgement” (p. 21). Therefore, we recommend that you adapt and tailor your CAS based on place, space, and community.

Amnesty International (2017) has a simple three-step guide to developing LAs, which provides a simple starting point for reflection: (1) Name the Indigenous territories you are currently on; (2) explain why you are acknowledging the land; (3) address the relevance of Indigenous rights to the subject matter of your event or meeting or to your activist work in general. We used these three steps as a framework for creating a guide to developing a CAS: (1) Acknowledge the positionality of WME/AE in your environment and the other languages and knowledge systems it silences; (2) explain why you are acknowledging the silencing of additional languages and knowledge systems; (3) address the relevance of communication, linguistic, and knowledge diversity to the subject matter of your event or meeting or to your activist work in general.

Importantly, putting motion behind your CAS is vital. Without motion, the CAS may become a piece of performative social justice. Calling out WME/AE and implementing strategies to challenge white supremacy must be done in tandem to work toward building higher education and Communication as a discipline as a decolonializing space.

Limitations

As scholars with white cisgender privilege, we seek to use our privilege(s) to empower and stand with Native and Indigenous Peoples' epistemic inclusion in the communication curriculum discipline-wide. We seek to call out and name the settler colonialism still embedded in Communication that upholds white supremacy and results in erasure of others. While we did solicit feedback from our Indigenous
peers at our respective institution and selected members of the Indigenous Caucus at NCA, we need feedback, discussion, and debate from the larger Indigenous community. We welcome feedback to help uncover flaws in our argument that may be hidden by our privilege. Moreover, we published this piece in hopes of starting a larger conversation within our discipline. CASs need to be reviewed, debated, and challenged by the larger discipline and framed within existing power structures to ensure relevancy and that we are not doing unintended harm with this idea. We encourage scholars who work within other silenced spaces, such as those in the Black Caucus, the Latino/Latina Communication Studies Division, the Asian/Pacific American Caucus, and International Communication scholars, to continue building on or challenge this conversation and to add in information about the silencing of their own languages and knowledge systems. Finally, without action, there will be no change. Adopting a CAS without accountability fails to bring about transformative change. Adopting a model of accountability is a needed area of focus moving forward: “let us be graceful with ourselves, and commit to grace with others. Making sure to hold each other when we inevitably ‘mess up.’ We cannot let ourselves become neutralized in fear” (L. Stanley, Mvskoke, Poarch Band, personal communication, December 7, 2022).

**Conclusion**

We must continue to assess and consider how settler colonialism may manifest in higher education and create exclusive learning communities, especially through the communication norms we teach and expect. Because of the cultural significance of place and space, and culture and identity, related to Indigenous ways of being, acknowledging the role of WME in the erasure of Indigenous Peoples, lands, identities, and cultures through settler colonialism is the first step in creating *motion* (i.e., meaningful and sustained change) within the Communication discipline and higher education. Thus, serving as a microaffirmation, CASs can call out the preservation of white supremacy in higher education through linguistic and communicative norms and practices. From the creation of CAS, theoretically, this manuscript considers the role of Communication as a discipline and practice for disrupting settler colonialism in higher education. Further, this manuscript seeks to continue discipline-wide discussions for understanding how communication theory can be critiqued, expanded, and implemented to create more equitable communication spaces, as well as reinforce the need for the development of new theoretical frameworks that encompass decolonized communication norms and expectations. Practically, we seek to move from theory to practice, to “learn from (not about)” (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 330) Indigenous students and peers by intentionally making space for communicative diversity and engaging in *motion*. Through the naming of white supremacy in our language and communication spaces, combined with meaningful changes in policy and practice (e.g., public speaking norms we expect, what we deem credible sources) we can signal mutual respect and seek to create spaces of belonging that begin to reframe and reposition Western education as collaborative vs. colonizing, equal vs. hierarchical.
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Responding to Neoliberal Individualism: Developing an Ethic of Empathy Through Critical Communication Pedagogy

David H. Kahl, Jr. ©

Keywords: neoliberalism, critical communication pedagogy, empathy, social justice pedagogy

Abstract: The university's mission involves educating students to become civic leaders, balancing both individual and collective goals. However, neoliberal influences have shifted the balance to focus on the individual over the collective. Communication curriculum has also shifted over time, with a sizeable percentage of its classes designed to prepare students for individual economic success, with the byproduct being a deemphasis on collective thinking. The communication discipline can resist this neoliberal encroachment by redefining three of its goals and applying commitments of critical communication pedagogy to aid in the process. Doing has the potential to work toward the development of an ethic of empathy, an ethic that can assist students in pursuing their goals while concomitantly (re)learning compassion for marginalized groups.

Introduction

Students in the contemporary university experience concern about their future careers. Thus, they complete coursework in the discipline of communication, or in myriad other areas of study, in order to apply their knowledge to their future careers. They work diligently because they understand the importance of individual success. Students realize the merit of preparing for their futures and of cultivating aspirations for what they desire to achieve in their lives. The importance that students place on individual success is a crucial feature of an individualistic culture. Individualism is the cultural practice of independence, prioritizing personal goals over group goals, and behavior based on personal attitudes instead of group norms (Hofstede, 2001). Alternately, collectivism is the cultural practice that
is predicated on interdependence and prioritizes group goals over those of the individual (Hofstede, 2001). Neither practice, individualism nor collectivism, is inherently negative. In fact, cultures could be considered dysfunctional that are not amalgamations of both perspectives (Triandis, 1995).

However, the problem in contemporary universities is that, instead of fostering both individual and collectivistic perspectives, they place greater importance on individualism, while deemphasizing collective thinking. Many courses place emphasis on the value of individual success and the detriment of individual failure. This emphasis teaches students that learning is not something that is done for the benefit of the collective. Instead, they learn that it is done to create hierarchies and to shape their individual identities as learners (Blinne, 2021). One example of how universities promote individualism is through their grading systems. The vast majority of grading systems that universities offer are individual in nature, which serve to inculcate the individualization of work (Blinne, 2021). Grading instills the belief that students are responsible for themselves and no one else. Therefore, grading, at least in its traditional form, teaches students that “struggle is individualized and transformed into something that should be solved individually” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.), while often deemphasizing how collective thinking can ameliorate struggle. Such practices also foster vertical individualism—cultures that promote inequality (Triandis, 1995). The rise of neoliberal thought creates this emphasis on individualism, both in the university and society.

**Overview**

The following sections will develop the idea that universities’ and communication courses’ deemphasis of collectivism has led to the overemphasis on neoliberally driven, individualist thinking. This individualist mindset has played a part in refocusing the university’s mission away from emphasizing the development of civically minded citizens toward the development of employees who learn to focus their attention only on a small circle of acquaintances. Because of this, educators must assist students to develop an ethic of empathy to counter this problem through the application of critical communication pedagogy in order to (re)focus the university on balancing individualistic and collectivistic goals. The public speaking course will serve as an example of how instructors can assist students in cultivating and applying an ethic of empathy.

**The Rise of Neoliberal Thought**

Neoliberalism is the hyper-capitalist state that has existed since the late 1970s. Unlike the traditional capitalist ethic that placed some value on collaboration, the social contract, and a favorable wage-productivity ratio, neoliberal capitalism has instilled values of disposability, profit at all cost, and complete devotion to work by developing indefatigable employees (Kahl, 2018b). Neoliberal entities have accomplished this goal in numerous ways, but a primary rhetorical tactic has been to instill the value of individualism into the populace. Individualism eschews collectivism and inculcates the idea that people can only obtain success, wealth, and happiness through the actions of the self. In this vein, “success remains unequivocally and continuously measured in and pursued as individual wealth” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.). Thus, reliance on others is anathema to neoliberal ideology. The irony of neoliberally inculcated individualism is that those who already hold power reap the vast majority of profit and wealth (Leopold, 2016). Employees actually create wealth for others; they typically do not attain wealth for themselves. Additionally, although neoliberalism promotes individualism as the means to fulfilment, individualism actually results in anxiety, the breaking of social bonds, the dissolution of community, and a decrease in happiness (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014).
The Neoliberal University

Although the university was founded, at least in part, on the importance of critical thought and the development of the engaged citizen, neoliberal ideology has hindered this goal. The neoliberal axiom, “There is no such thing as society” (Degen et al., 2022, n.p.) provides evidence of the individualistic goals that obviate the university’s original mission. The contemporary university now excels at promoting individual pecuniary success. It works diligently to demonstrate to prospective students the monetary value of a college degree and emphasizes metrics such as return-on-investment. Consequently, it often de-emphasizes the idea that students will leave the university as critical thinkers who can work together to solve problems and mitigate marginalization. While critical engagement may still be an ancillary benefit of a university education, the student-as-consumer model of education reigns supreme (Bunce et al., 2016). The neoliberal encroachment on the university creates difficulty for instructors who feel pressure to participate in neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberalism creates a situation in which instructors feel pressure to focus course content and instruction around careerism, individualism, and reward/punishment systems (such as individual grades). Thus, instructors tend to place less emphasis on considering ways in which they can use course content to mitigate hegemony and foster empowerment collectively. The neoliberal system creates cognitive dissonance for instructors who may wish to subvert hegemony, but also hold concerns that universities will evaluate their pedagogical performance through a neoliberal lens.

Neoliberal education produces deleterious effects as it emphasizes the betterment of the individual because, as a consequence, students do not gain a critical awareness of the ways that hegemony marginalizes others. For example, the discipline of communication has corporatized the focus of many of its courses (Palmer, 2014). While not inherently negative, a focus on corporate communication (unintentionally) privileges individual success. As a result, the courses de-emphasize and/or ignore material relating to developing collective success. Concomitantly, corporatized communication courses often ignore matters of hegemony, as these areas do not (seem to) relate to the subject matter, which often focuses on “market preparation” (Palmer, 2014, p. 46). In a market-driven system such as neoliberalism, individual success necessitates others’ individual failure.

Neoliberalism inculcates an ethic of individualism that it has taught contemporary students to speak fluently because they have been raised in a neoliberal culture that values individual success, consumerism, and profit. For this reason, contemporary students have had little opportunity to learn an ethic of empathy, which is a cornerstone of collectivism. The neoliberal emphasis on individualism has deprived students of the opportunity to care for others who experience marginalization. This is evidenced by the fact that college students experienced a 40% decline in empathic concern for others between 2000 and 2011 (Konrath et al., 2011). To counter this problem, communication pedagogy can draw on the broad base of critical literature that exists in the discipline, specifically through the lens of CCP. Learning an ethic of empathy based in communication pedagogy allows students to pursue their own goals in life while demonstrating compassion for people who do not have the same advantages. The following sections will describe how an ethic of empathy can be developed through critical communication pedagogy (CCP), a critical response to neoliberal education.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) is an ideological framework through which instructors and students can collectively examine the marginalizing effects of hegemony in the classroom and society.
Extending the work of critical pedagogy, CCP includes the examination of the meaning of messages to gain a more complete picture of the ways in which messages serve to either marginalize or liberate. CCP also plays an important role in empowering students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Specifically, CCP approaches student empowerment by, “facilitat(ing) discussion, provid(ing) alternative spaces for engagement and dialogue, and also offer(ing) new opportunities for students, particularly historically marginalized students, to articulate their voices and experiences with course content” (Atay & Fassett, 2020, pp. 1–2).

CCP lies at the intersections of the critical examination of ideas, the meaning of messages, and instruction. CCP articulates 10 commitments that constitute how CCP can be applied to make communicative change. Three commitments are especially applicable to this analysis. Through the application of Commitments 2, 8, and 10, CCP can become the foundation for building an ethic of empathy. Commitment 2 discusses the idea that power is complex. This commitment questions what is inherent in a system of education that puts students at risk (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Commitment 10 focuses on dialogue as a method by which change can occur (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Commitment 8 articulates the idea that change can occur when instructors and students work collectively, often with other groups, to engage in praxis (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Overall, CCP “provides a language for recognizing how teaching communication knowledge should be understood within a political-moral imagination that centers social justice” (Golsan & Rudick, 2018, p. 16). These commitments of CCP can be applied to the problem of individualist thinking in order to assist students in developing an ethic of empathy.

**Developing an Ethic of Empathy**

Calloway-Thomas (2010) defines empathy as the “ability imaginatively to enter into and participate in the world of the cultural Other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally” (p. 8). An ethic of empathy involves the application of empathy to enact change. An ethic of empathy resists the neoliberal focus on individualism because it focuses on ways in which educators can use pedagogy to assist students to care for each other and for those around them. Doing so “is to nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom they come in contact” (Noddings, 1984, p. 49). Such action involves utilizing empathy to “help global citizens respond to and manage intercultural encounters caringly and competently” (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 214). Calloway-Thomas (2018) argues for the integration of instruction of empathy in communication programs, stating that they should “should have lessons and units stitched into them that model how citizens are supposed to behave in the presence of others, without violating humans’ sacred rights” (p. 496). Empathy is crucial to the functioning of society, as it serves as “the moral glue that holds civil society together” and “unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble” (Calloway-Thomas, 2022, p. 7).

Instructors can develop an ethic of empathy in the communication classroom by instructing students how to communicate empathetically and to recognize and resist neoliberal hegemony that inculcates individualism. An ethic of empathy involves dialogic listening. This practice is based on Conquergood’s (1985) notion of dialogic performance, in which he describes communicative pitfalls that performers/interlocuters must avoid in order to communicate with others who are different from them (McRae, 2015). These pitfalls include communicating for reasons that are selfish, ignoring difference, focusing exclusively on difference, and avoiding communication with people who are different (Conquergood, 1985). It is important to note that an ethic of empathy is the first step in the development of a social justice orientation. The scope of this discussion here is to focus on communicating empathy because students
must be able to first experience and communicate empathy before empathy becomes a truly applied practice. Breaking the bonds of neoliberally inculcated individualism that fosters a lack of empathy is the first step. After this occurs, students can later learn to put their empathy into practice to ultimately lead to civic engagement.

In order for students to move toward the development of an ethic of empathy, based on Conquergood’s (1985) principles, and toward critically engaged pedagogy, a need exists to redefine three aspects of education in the discipline of communication: (1) the goals of communication pedagogy, (2) the role of the student, and (3) the outcome of the pedagogical act (Palmer, 2014). In this way, communication pedagogy can become transitional, an approach that identifies “first steps that can lead to transformation” (Artz, 2017, p. 370). Instructors can redefine these aspects of communication pedagogy by applying CCP Commitments 2, 10, and 8—to examine the hegemony present in education (Commitment 2), to use dialogue to create change (Commitment 10), and to work collectively toward praxis (Commitment 8). Such a model paves the way for incremental change toward the goal of developing an ethic of empathy. The following sections examine how instructors and students can redefine the three aspects discussed above by applying Commitments 2, 10, and 8. Further, these aspects and commitments will be applied to the public speaking course in order to provide some concrete examples of how empathy can be applied to a public speaking course. In addition, each example will briefly discuss how Conquergood’s (1985) dialogic listening principles can aid in the development of an ethic of empathy.

**Redefining the Goals of Communication Pedagogy**

Developing an ethic of empathy involves redefining communication pedagogy’s goals. The discipline of communication is committed to the goals of social justice and the amelioration of marginalization. However, the discipline has not been immune to the ravages of neoliberalism. The ideologies of social justice and neoliberalism stand in stark contrast to each other. For example, Communication departments sometimes administer the public speaking course in ways that encourage students to speak about career goals. When this occurs, Communication programs further inculcate students with the corporatized version of university education that produces employees ready for the market. Certainly, communication students desire to attain fulfilling, well-paying careers upon graduation. However, neoliberal influence takes individual success a step further by designing a large percentage of courses to promote entrance into the corporate world and (often intentionally) to promote the individualistic notion that “If you fail in the market, you should accept the consequences” (Ciepley, 2017, para. 41). This ideology eliminates empathy from corporate life. Numerous courses taught in the communication discipline are either professional or corporate-supportive in nature, such as a career-focused public speaking course (Palmer, 2014). The proliferation of these types of courses may have the unintended side effect of inculcating neoliberal beliefs, especially when their instructors do not balance them with critical evaluation.

**Application of CCP Commitment 2**

Instructors can apply Commitment 2 of CCP to this problem to assist in redefining communication pedagogy’s goals. Doing so involves examining the neoliberal pedagogical practice of using communication coursework to foster individualism. In this case, Commitment 2 involves deemphasizing neoliberal ideologies that put students at risk of losing their connectedness with others. Applying this commitment involves moving from the traditional goal of, “produc(ing) market-ready personnel,” to the critical goal of “build(ing) social justice communities” (Palmer, 2014, p. 53). From a CCP
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A shift in goals entails moving away from the banking concept of education that Freire (1970) describes. Doing so involves ceasing the practice of making deposits of neoliberal information in students' minds. When instructors abandon the banking concept, students learn how to use knowledge about the neoliberal marketplace to change it. When students learn to think about communication with others through the lens of inclusion and collectivism, they recognize that communication is not/should not be designed to compete with others but rather to foster empathy for them.

In the public speaking classroom, one way in which instructors can apply Commitment 2 is by assigning speeches that ask students to examine hegemony in society. For example, students could research social issues/problems that affect humanity, learn about the (possible) neoliberal causes of these problems, and work to craft arguments that attempt to convince classmates that they should take action to mitigate their effects. This dialogic performance works toward the development of an ethic of empathy as instructors challenge students to engage in audience analysis and speak about issues that marginalized students in their classes may experience (Conquergood, 1985). Reimagining pedagogical goals allows for communication coursework to foster a social justice orientation, an important step in the development of an ethic of empathy.

Redefining Students' Role

The development of an ethic of empathy also involves redefining students' role in the university. Under the current corporatized model, universities educate students to fulfill the role of a future employee (Palmer, 2014). Such a model, although perhaps unintentional, propagates the ideals of “exploitation (profit from others’ labor and creativity), inequality (accumulation of wealth through dispossession), alienation (isolated consumers with little political power), and oppression (access to resources determined by race, gender, nationality, and social class)” (Artz, 2017, p. 371). This pedagogical model has the negative effect of preparing students to become corporate power’s apprentice (Giroux, 2014).

Application of CCP Commitment 10

To counteract the role that neoliberalism has designated for students, communication pedagogy can educate students to become public intellectuals who (can) serve as social activists (Palmer, 2014). When this occurs, students develop a voice that they can use to speak out against neoliberal individualism. Instructors can apply Commitment 10 of CCP in the communication classroom to advance this goal. As opposed to the banking concept of education in which students act as passive vessels who are not allowed to actively critique ideas, Commitment 10 utilizes dialogue as a means to foster change. By employing dialogue, communication students can converse about how neoliberalism has silenced them and can develop resistance strategies to it. In the public speaking classroom, students can employ Commitment 10 by building impromptu speaking skills in order to engage in dialogue about the silencing effects of neoliberalism. Instructors can develop an activity or assignment, for example, which asks students to craft impromptu speeches about research they have conducted about (1) the marginalizing effects of neoliberal individualism, (2) what can be done to resist this marginalization, and (3) how community can be built through resistance. This dialogue is emblematic of an ethic of empathy in that it requires dialogic listening and challenges students to speak with each other so that they cannot ignore difference or avoid communicating with students who are different from themselves (Conquergood, 1985). Such dialogic interaction fosters empathy, as students learn to relate to those who are affected by neoliberal subjugation.
Redefining the Outcomes of Communication Pedagogy

Developing an ethic of empathy also involves a redefinition of what communication pedagogy should accomplish. Communication is a discipline that holds civic engagement, social justice, and action as its core values. For this reason, communication as a field is well suited to teach students to use course content to make meaningful change in the world. To do so, however, the communication discipline must resist the neoliberal influence on course outcomes. Certainly, it is necessary for communication curriculum to teach students to communicate and be successful in the corporate world. These traditional outcomes, which are not inherently negative, are focused on the development of skills and abilities that are useful in corporate settings (Kahl, 2014). However, critical outcomes, centered around critical goals, must permeate the communication curriculum as well. These outcomes challenge students to “examine and question issues of power, class, privilege, hegemony, marginalization, sex, gender, and economic status” (Kahl, 2018a, p. 38).

Application of CCP Commitment 8

Instructors can apply Commitment 8 of CCP to aid in accomplishing the goal of redefining outcomes. In order for instructors and students to collectively redefine what the curriculum (in the classroom) and what the results of the curriculum (in the community) look like, they must engage in praxis. Pedagogy in the discipline of communication involves engaged action. Praxis, in terms of pedagogical outcomes, can take many forms. In this case, Commitment 8 can aid in creating an ethic of empathy by articulating pedagogical outcomes that challenge students to critique neoliberal outcomes that focus only on using communication for individual attainment. When instructors redefine outcomes, students learn to communicate in ways that promote empathy that can result in action. In the public speaking classroom, students can employ Commitment 8 by presenting their previously discussed speeches about community problems that neoliberalism has created to a public audience. A public audience on campus or at a community organization will allow students to connect their messages to the broader community. By doing so, instead of ignoring community, empathy with action builds community by asking “how might students develop . . . unique concepts for dealing with a community’s problems?” (Del Gandio, 2017, p. 377). This type of praxis fosters the development of an ethic of empathy in that it challenges students to communicate with unfamiliar audiences, conduct audience analysis, and engage in dialogic performance and listening (Conquergood, 1985), which aids in building an ethic of empathy.

Conclusion

The neoliberal emphasis on individualism in the university causes students to develop an individualistic orientation which devalues the collective nature of society. This orientation makes students largely unaware of how neoliberalism marginalizes others. In order to counteract the impact of neoliberal individualism, the communication discipline needs to redefine communication pedagogy’s goals, the role of the student, and the outcomes of communication pedagogy. Such a process involves dialogic listening/performance so that students can gain awareness of the ways in which they should communicate and listen to others/marginalized groups with whom they interact (Conquergood, 1985). As discussed, instructors can help to build such an orientation in communication courses like public speaking. Overall, the application of CCP principles 2, 10, and 8 provides a framework for redefining these three aspects of communication pedagogy that can lead to the development of an ethic of empathy that promotes communication as a means by which people care for others. Reimagining the pedagogical goals of Communication coursework has the potential to foster empathy as a social justice orientation.
Consequently, when students graduate, they can have successful careers and can also begin to make empathy an applied practice as they become engaged citizens who work together to solve problems and obviate marginalization.

References


In preparation for writing this Presidential Spotlight, I reviewed Spotlights by Central States Communication Association (CSCA) Past Presidents Alberto Gonzalez (2021), Chad McBride (together with Chad Edwards, 2020), and Amy Aldridge Sanford (2019). I also reviewed Past Executive Secretary (a term used before Executive Director), L. Miller’s reflection (2007). All were excellent examples of how to create an historical record for CSCA that reflects what is simultaneously an intensely personal and an intensely organizational experience. Here I enter into CSCA’s historical record how we moved through the COVID-19 pandemic challenge so that CSCA emerged on a solid foundation.

CSCA has navigated multiple challenges over the years: legal, financial, and often both. When I began my officer rotation as second vice president, it was no different. However, in the last 3 years of my rotation, the primary challenges were born of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (I say that because COVID-19 continues today), with all its real and potential consequences. McBride and Edwards (2020) and Gonzalez (2021) have described those challenges from the perspectives of their roles and the context of the beginning of the pandemic. My perspective is primarily from a 2-year experience as first vice president (2020–2022) and 1 year as president (2022–2023) as we navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic emergency.

I want to clearly note that none of what I will report is ever done alone. Input and support from then-President Al Gonzalez, then-Finance Committee Chair Don Ritzenhein, and the respective Russian
members of the Executive Committees over those years was essential to CSCA's ability to survive as an organization through the pandemic. Above and beyond that, absolutely critical to any success that CSCA has had in effectively moving through and beyond those pandemic challenges was due to the work of Executive Director, Tiffany Wang. Tiffany and I discussed nearly every detail, brainstormed options, jointly imagined the potential outcomes of various strategies, sought input, reviewed vendors and hotel contracts, and supported each other through countless scenarios where we never had enough information. In no way, shape, or form is the fact that CSCA is not only still existing, but is moving ahead, due to my efforts alone. I humbly and deeply thank everyone who played a role in our survival.

As has been noted in the previous Spotlights, the 2019–2020 Executive Committee voted to cancel the 2020 CSCA conference as we were nationally entering pandemic lockdowns. No one was willing to take the risk that we might lose even one member to a COVID-19 infection that might occur due to holding the Chicago conference in person. Chad Edwards and Tiffany Wang shouldered the enormous work of negotiating with the Chicago conference hotel and several vendors to release us from our contracts due to a phrase we came to know well: force majeure. Basically force majeure means “an event or effect that cannot be reasonably anticipated or controlled” (Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary, 2024). While it took considerable effort to convince our hotel partner that the pandemic was such a circumstance, eventually they did agree. CSCA lost no money in the pandemic in 2020, due to Chad’s and Tiffany’s efforts. (Note: All of our hotel contracts have a force majeure clause.) We just never imagined having to implement it. Hopefully we will never face a pandemic like that again, but the whole point is that we could not foresee circumstances such as a global pandemic in the way it occurred in 2020–2021.

After the 2020 conference was canceled, the 2020–2021 Executive Committee voted to freeze the officer rotation for a year. Our goal was to enable Al Gonzalez to celebrate his presidential year as we hoped at an in-person conference. As time progressed from spring 2020 through the summer, it became increasingly clear that we likely would not be able to meet in person for the 2021 conference. That was my original planning year as first vice president. We should have been together in Cincinnati, but it was not to be that year.

Instead, Tiffany and I brainstormed our options: (1) cancel the annual conference again, (2) hold a truncated virtual conference due to the cost of hosting an online conference, or (3) hold a fully online conference. Between the two of us we developed a proposal to hold a truncated conference, anticipating that we would not likely have support for the cost of a fully online conference. When we presented that proposal to the Executive Committee (EC), we were surprised to find support to host a fully online option. So, we began planning (with the 27 interest group planners) a fully online conference, organized in a similar structure to our in-person conferences. Tiffany researched and found several vendors and presented the options to EC. EC, including our Finance Chair, supported the online vendor.

As a result, CSCA successfully hosted our only fully online conference, the first in our history. I still remember sitting at my desk from the early morning through the end of each conference day, hoping that the platform would not fail. Hoping that the internet services at the vendor, at my home, and at Tiffany’s home would not crash. Hoping that the Executive Committee had communicated as effectively as possible what our members needed to do to participate. Everyone came through with flying colors! While hosting an online conference in a noncrisis time frame is cost prohibitive due to our hotel contractual commitments, it served us well in 2021. We were inspired! Again, I thank every CSCA member, every member of the Executive Committee, every interest group planner, and especially Executive Director
Tiffany Wang, for all the energy, effort, willingness to try something completely different, patience, and optimism that carried us through the 2021 conference.

As the 2021 online conference concluded, we began thinking about what we would be able to do in 2022. We were hoping that we could host the 2022 Madison, Wisconsin, conference in person. As 2021 moved forward and the nation began re-opening, so to speak, it became clear that we would be able to meet in person. Again, we consulted with President Al Gonzalez and the 2021–2022 Executive Committee. The committee agreed that we should host the conference in person. Our goal was to Re-Connect, after so much time apart, in Madison. With many thanks to all CSCA members, the 2021–2022 Executive Committee, every interest group planner, and Tiffany, our first in-person conference following the pandemic crisis was successful. This time I thank Tiffany not only for the work she did to make that happen, I also thank her for her wonderful ability to anticipate conference needs: COVID-19 testing process, online test registration, hand sanitizer, signage, extra masks, and so on. Madison would not have been successful without her talents and effort.

CSCA has emerged successfully from its experiences with the pandemic. Next, I provide an update on an initiative established by Past President Al Gonzalez. CSCA’s demonstrated commitment to equity and inclusion is moving ahead, although there is much work left to do. Initiated by Al, CSCA’s Equity and Inclusion Committee (CSCA-EIC), has been chaired by Roberta Davilla. She and her team drafted CSCA’s Code of Conduct, which was approved by the Executive Committee in March 2023. The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to “underline a code of ethics, equity and inclusion that is sensitive to the diverse needs of the CSCA members and staff; and whose intent is to guide action and implementation in areas such as assessment, praxis, and accountability” (CSCA-EIC, 2023). This is one step in CSCA’s journey to become a more inclusive organization, but we recognize that the road is long and will require many more steps. Thank you to Roberta and the members of the EIC for their work in moving us forward.

As I reflect, I remember that the first time a member of the Nominating Committee reached out to me to run for Second Vice President, I said no. I was changing jobs and moving home to Omaha, Nebraska, after 28 years in Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. The second time a member reached out to me from the Nominating Committee, I agreed. I thought it was a major opportunity to pay CSCA forward for serving as my professional home for so many years. I never in my wildest dreams thought it would be the best learning experience in crisis communication and management that I could have been a part of. While I worked as part of the Executive Committee when I served as member-at-large several years ago, I did not fully appreciate the level of support, insight, and commitment that EC members would demonstrate, especially during the height of the pandemic. Your Executive Committee members, as well as past presidents—and I worked with many over 5 years—are among the most committed, hardworking, creative, and insightful CSCA members I have ever worked with. One member in particular, our current Executive Director, Tiffany Wang, deserves additional recognition to what I have already noted. Neither CSCA nor I would have made it to this point without her work, support, collaboration, and friendship.

In closing, I revisit a theme I have used throughout my newsletter columns as we look to the future: hope takes effort. In that context, I present part of what is known as Bishop Oscar Romero’s prayer, Prophets of a Future Not Our Own (Untener, 1979):

> ... we cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well ... We may never see the end results ... We are prophets of a future not our own.
President Ahmet Atay, First Vice President and Planner Kathy Denker, Second Vice President Jeff Child, and incoming Second Vice President, Kristina Scharp, will lead us into that future. There is much hope for CSCA!

References


