The (Post-)Pandemic Academic: Re-Forming Communication Studies

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced rapid transformation of educational practices on an unprecedented scale. Most notably, online course delivery became the default and persists as a key component of education throughout the course of the pandemic. This reflective analysis provides insights regarding effective design and implementation of online courses. Beyond the courses themselves, communication scholars and practitioners must consider systemic barriers to fully realizing the potential of online education. These concerns generate potential research and activist agendas that can encompass all the manifold dimensions of communication studies.

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Article:

This volume of Carolinas Communication Annual reaches fruition amidst pandemic purgatory. Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drove educational institutions at all levels throughout the United States to pivot quickly toward emergency remote teaching (and other operations) via online delivery. The prolonged course of the pandemic has generated an ongoing evolution from emergency remote mode to more deliberately designed online instruction. The prospect of long-term integration of robust online presence throughout academic life carries monumental implications for the communication studies field. The following reflections on how the pandemic disrupts customary academic practices may initiate productive debates, reconceptualizations, and practical reforms in teaching, learning, researching, and serving throughout the communication discipline.

Background

On 11 March 2020, the day after my university first announced its conversion to fully online teaching during the early stages of the pandemic, I established a Facebook group so

teachers at various levels (K-12 through higher education) and various disciplines, course designers, technology specialists, and students could learn from each other and perhaps gather to boost morale. To my amazement, the group christened as *Pandemic Pedagogy* quickly went viral. Pandemic Pedagogy now serves as a worldwide hub for online education during the pandemic, with 32,500 members from 99 countries who have contributed well over one million content items. Administering this group provides a bird's eye view of key concerns, priorities, needs, and innovations associated with online education during the pandemic—and how the educational landscape may change afterwards.

Pandemic Pedagogical Practices

I have been designing and teaching fully online college-level courses since 2001, including fully online fundamentals of communication courses that include public speaking, group problem-solving, interviewing, and interpersonal dynamics. My early entry into online education also stimulated a robust line of research, given the demand for scholarship on this relatively novel mode of course delivery. Two decades of course design, teaching, and researching online education thoroughly grounded me technologically and in the principles of effective practice. Given that so many educators confronted a conversion to online teaching on such a short timetable (one week at my university), I distilled some of my key findings from extensive trials, frequent errors, and long-term familiarity with some of the key research. If we think of an online course as a communication ecosystem, the following practical recommendations can prove useful for educators. These apothegms, addressed to teachers, have been modified from versions I originally posted on Pandemic Pedagogy.

Online Apothegm 1: Embrace Redundancy

- Provide students with multiple ways to access important content (e.g., post as an announcement and link to the content in multiple locations).
- Post an important message as an announcement and email the content of the announcement to all students via the learning management system.

Online Apothegm 2: Love Your Librarians

Most university libraries already have wonderful online guides and tutorials on research- and citation-related matters. My department's liaison librarian created a wide array of useful video tutorials on how to locate and evaluate communication research, for example. Often, they are delighted to do "spec work" for individual courses, especially with large enrollments. It helps health and safety by reducing the crowded in-person workshops, and students can keep referring to these resources by revisiting them online, thereby building their skills.

Online Apothegm 3: Outsource

You may not need to create as much content from scratch as you thought. Hyperlinks can be your best friends. Link out to helpful sites, videos, images, etc. Not only does this quickly enable you to build a lot of content, but it also:

- capitalizes on student familiarity with investigating hyperlinked content (instead of reading screen after screen)
- (very important) avoids copyright and other potential legal problems associated with posting content directly within your course. Your university's legal office will thank you.

Online Apothegm 4: Multimodal Matters

Remember that screen content is visually scanned more than it is read word for word. Also, consider visual/aural/kinesthetic learning modes. Cover content with a brief video + some text (outlines, bulleted points, etc. facilitate screen-centered processing) + graphics offer a more inclusive—and immersive—learning environment. You don't have to (and shouldn't) write a textbook chapter for each unit. Recent research confirms that a more fully embodied, multisensory version of content provides students with a more immersive experience so they relate more closely to the content (Gallagher, Renner, & Glover-Rijkse, 2020).

Online Apothegm 5: Mind Your Ecosystem

An important aspect of online course (re)design relates to the online ecosystem. Try to minimize the number of different systems students have to learn and navigate. As much as possible, keep key content within the learning management system students already know, or at least use it as the central portal for accessing other resources. Each new login and password, each unfamiliar tool and system students must learn can increase their anxiety and reduce time they spend learning the course content. Think "time on task" here.

Online Apothegm 6: Go Retro

Some unglamorous, presumably stale technologies such as text chats can prove very useful for directly connecting with students (Schwartzman, 2013). There is basically no learning curve, and their familiarity and ease of use can build some confidence amid intimidating new technological interfaces. The cobweb-encrusted text-based chat still survives as an oft-forgotten feature dwelling in the bowels of almost every learning management system. Although it may be old AOL-era technology clad in a leisure suit, chat mimics the frequent texting that students already do. Text chats also circumvent bandwidth problems students may encounter with high-tech gadgetry. Text chats furnish a minimally invasive way to have one-on-one or group interactions with students. Plain text chats can work well for some virtual office hours, too.

Online Apothegm 7: Enable Learning

The rapid timetable for online conversions has an ominous implication. It remains likely that much course content may not be universally accessible to people with disabilities—at least not in time to meet the immediate instructional need. Build in whatever accessibility you can on the front end. Try not to rely too heavily on only one sensory medium (e.g., videos), as students with limitations in that sensory realm will experience chronic challenges. To save time, use video tools that can automatically generate close-captioning (for example, YouTube can do this quickly), and then correct the errors. Include subtitles/callouts on videos. A forthcoming study finds that 90 percent of students who self-disclosed medically certified disabilities had not

registered with their campus accessibility office (Schwartzman & Ferraro, 2020). A lot of students probably need various ways to access content, and you may not even know it. Accessible content needs to become the default by design rather than the afterthought.

Online Apothegm 8: Students as Online Course Mechanics

Worried the links to wonderful external content in your new online course might suddenly go dead? Yes, "link rot" is real—and really inconvenient. I like to enlist students in "Link Patrol" duty. The first student to notify me of a dead link—and recommend a working alternative that covers similar content—earns a little extra credit. Suddenly students carefully start monitoring course content and investigate every link, day in and day out. Implement this system and you now have links that are always functional, content regularly gets refreshed, your students celebrate their added points, and it reduces your labor. I also give positive reinforcement by posting lists congratulating students who apprehended a "missing link" in their Link Patrol duties.

Students love this sort of quest, and it can seriously improve the quality of an online course. Consider another option. Enlist students as "Exemplars": they post additional examples of key concepts so your examples/illustrations are always fresh and relevant. This kind of activity enacts healthy gamification: everyone works together to build a better course (Barata, Gama, Jorge, & Gonçalves, 2013).

Online Apothegm 9: Mission = Satisfice

A basic information technology principle should govern online course construction efforts, particularly in a crisis situation and within a short time frame: Use the simplest technology that will get the job done.

Lots of academics hold themselves to high standards, and many may qualify as perfectionists (looking in the mirror as I write this). But now is the time to distinguish between what you want (that Oscar-winning Pixar-level pinnacle of pedagogical infotainment) from what you—and your students—need: practical ways to share content (build knowledge) and connect with each other (build relationships). Find a few tools you use best and focus on those. Just because the techno-buffet has tons of tempting treats does not mean you must gorge on all of them.

This recommendation offers no excuse for sloppy pedagogy, but rather a call for doing what you as an instructor does best in ways that you and your students can manage. Satisficing refers to satisfaction with what suffices to accomplish a task without tormenting one's self that it might be done better (Schwartz, 2004). "It's good enough" allows for meeting high standards without the agony of constantly striving for perfection. After constructing your course, you can work your magic later and convert your online course to a more polished version that you keep improving.

Online Apothegm 10: Peer Review, Cyber Version

Peer review is a familiar staple of scholarly life, and it can help with online course development. If you are relatively new to online teaching, temporarily "enroll" a colleague who's an experienced online instructor as a student or observer in your course. Your colleague

can offer feedback on your course's flow, structure, etc. as you build it. You catch many potential setbacks before they happen, plus your colleague can offer tips and answer questions specific to your course. Bonus dividend: After constructing your course, you could enlist your colleague to complete a peer observation of your online teaching (also documenting the labor you invested) that you could include in your annual review. To test the user-friendliness of a course, enroll a student as a beta tester who can navigate through the course and sample the content. The student can give you feedback about how well the course works for its intended audience.

The collegial peer review system lies at the heart of the Quality Matters system (https://www.qualitymatters.org) of online course assessment works, complete with extensively tested evaluation rubrics. Formal external review such as Quality Matters or simply getting input from an experienced online instructor (not necessarily even in the same field) can yield usable feedback that will reduce missteps after the course launches.

Online Apothegm 11: Engaging with Grief and Loss

Teachers along with students likely are experiencing feelings of loss akin to grief at the sudden, indefinitely ongoing separation from personal contact in this crisis. A few communicative practices can help.

1. Acknowledge these feelings in ourselves and our students. This separation from personal contact and dearly valued shared spaces induces ongoing trauma, so mourning the loss and sharing the pain feels natural. We should provide outlets to express those feelings. However…
2. Students take emotional/attitudinal cues from their teachers, even online. If educators only adopt a loss frame, then we set ourselves and our students up for this cyber-exodus to be a predominantly negative experience foregrounding absence, failure, and restrictions. Treating an online course mainly as an inferior substitute for the physical classroom might taint student perception of all online education. These attitudes could negatively impact student retention.
3. While recognizing the loss, it may be productive to approach this experience through a change/opportunity frame. This reframing constitutes more than a glib "Don't worry, be happy" approach. Rather, it focuses on communicating positively about what students and teachers can do together. Amid all the uncertainty, we definitely know things will be different. So, we can embrace this pedagogical experience in ways that invite students to do what their instructors do: experiment, create. Consider ways to build the courage to embrace change, to provide support and encouragement to persist.

Online Apothegm 12: Promote Time and Uncertainty Management

To help our students plan their workloads, add estimated or exact time on task for as many course components as possible. Some examples illustrate this technique.

- List the time each video lasts. Simply adding it to the title or description can work, e.g.: "Roy Accepts Nobel Peace Prize (3:35)."
- Estimate the amount of time you expect students to spend on tasks, e.g.: "You probably will spend about 30 minutes in this week's mandatory cat grooming session."

Posting expected time on tasks also gives you a quick indication of how you as an instructor are distributing workload throughout the term.

Many web sites now use this technique, listing the estimated time to read a blog entry or news item. Naturally individual adjustments would be made for students needing accommodations.

These seemingly small details can improve performance by enabling students to schedule their time wisely and fit the course content into their multiple other commitments. This is especially helpful for students with additional family care responsibilities due to school and daycare closures. As a bonus, considerations like this just might help students stick with the course and thereby aid retention—one of the most valued metrics throughout the pandemic.

Conquering Digital Divides and Pedagogies of Privilege

The pandemic-prompted shift toward greater reliance on online education laid bare the presumptions of privilege built into many pedagogical practices. Educational technologies never operate as passive, neutral delivery mechanisms for content, detached from the material conditions that they operate within (Dowd, 2016). For more than a decade, I had contended that the limitations of online courses can be mitigated with sufficiently imaginative course design and execution (Schwartzman, 2007). The pandemic forced me to reconsider. My position fell prey to what I call the ceteris paribus fallacy: focusing on the online course itself as a resource independent of surrounding systemic conditions that affect usage of educational resources. The confidence I expressed in online course construction failed to account sufficiently for the structural factors that skew how and whether students can take full advantage of whatever online wizardry the instructor conjures.

Much has been written already regarding digital divides that limit access to hardware, adequate Internet service, or sufficient bandwidth for robust online learning. The quantity and quality of equipment could play a role in determining the grade the student receives. As long as these resources remain classified as profit-making opportunities instead of basic public resources, these divisions between haves and have-nots will persist. Although Generation Z (today's traditional college-age population) also bears the moniker iGen as the first generation of digital natives from childhood (Twenge, 2017), such skills mean little without sufficient tools to exercise them.

Probing the Pandemic

Education amid and beyond the pandemic calls forth all the traditions of theory that collectively constitute communication studies (Craig, 1999). Each tradition can shed light on some of the issues enumerated here, but more importantly, the investigations and actions that each tradition stimulates can inform and inspire the other traditions. The following suggestions should offer some preliminary ideas for engagement.

Critical communication scholars incur the obligation to interrogate and remediate the mechanics of power embedded in both online instruction and in how educational institutions communicate their priorities and relationships with stakeholders. Who becomes more prioritized or marginalized in the ways that online education gets implemented? What structures enable some students to succeed while leaving others behind?

Phenomenologists can highlight the need to acknowledge and listen to the firsthand

experiences of those undergoing educational disruptions wrought by the pandemic— including recognizing how they are attempting to process or cope with drastic instructional alterations. Phenomenological approaches can reveal the nuances of various perspectives, getting beyond simplistic dichotomies of faculty versus administrators or face-to-face versus online instruction. Crucially, phenomenology offers a way to reach beneath the spreadsheets of cost-benefit calculations and mine the lived experiences of the stakeholders—especially those who shoulder a disproportionate burden during the pandemic, such as low-income families, single parents, caregivers, and BIPOC. For example, what do students actually confront when they return home from school, especially when they have been rejected or scorned by their families?

Semiotically, what symbolic significance attaches to the physical dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic: protective face coverings (reminiscent of the religiously-grounded self-concealment criticized by Islamophobes?), physical distancing, participant backgrounds visible in teleconferences? How does the invisibility and mystery of the virus affect the available symbolic resources that can be brought to bear in discussing or combatting it?

Even venerable cybernetics can reanimate from the dustbins of Bell Labs. The centrality of media technologies revives focus on message fidelity. What measures, beyond simple amplification, can reduce message distortion while wearing protective equipment? How can videoconference platforms better accommodate nonverbal nuances or conversational dynamics (e.g., turn-taking)? The answers to such questions call for more than gadgetry, since how communicators experience feedback and verify understanding change significantly with alterations in the communication medium.

Socio-cultural work can complement the critical focus by highlighting the differential impact of the virus on various demographics. These explorations can also bring to light innovative ways that under-served communities provide mutual care during the pandemic, such as tending to the needs of quarantined or isolated community members.

Socio-psychological efforts can provide insights on the personal traumas and coping mechanisms induced by the pandemic. Such investigation may furnish vital empirical data that can inform strategies of crisis management. Findings gleaned from socio-psychological studies can form the basis for recovery programs that rebuild the human capacity for resilience, enabling trauma to provide greater self-awareness and strength to individuals and communities.

Conclusion

The pandemic-instigated push toward prioritizing online education enlists the kinds of knowledge and skills that communication studies can provide. At the micro-level of developing and refining online courses, implementing effective communication techniques in course design can generate deeper engagement and promote a more positive online course experience. At the meta-level, all seven major traditions that inform the focus areas of the field can contribute to understanding, coping with, and emerging successfully from fundamental disruptions to conventional educational practices and assumptions. The horizons of opportunities to teach, learn, think, and act innovatively extend invitingly before us, awaiting exploration.

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