

Understanding Communication, Social Presence, and Dialectical Tensions of Pandemic Learning

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Understanding the importance of social presence in the learning process during the pandemic is especially important. Instructors and students had to modify normal classroom interactions and behaviors. This paper discusses the challenges that two professors faced at two different institutions during the pandemic and how classroom dialectical tensions (Prentice & Kramer, 2006) help explain stress and motivation challenges of students during pandemic learning. These tensions are participation vs. remaining silent during class discussions, predictable vs. novel classroom activities, and managing personal time vs. class time. Understanding these dialectical tensions is an important step towards creating effective instructional communication and positive impacts toward student learning.

Keywords: dialectical tensions, pandemic pedagogy, online learning

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic impacted educational systems around the world, which led to changes in the delivery of academic content. Instructors were forced to shift the way they teach and students needed to adapt to different learning environments. Educators realized that many of the solutions for teaching online needed greater engagement. As the virus spread, instructors utilized several learning platforms including apps, websites, and broadcasts to relay content. Online learning is not a new phenomenon, nevertheless, modern education is changing due to technology (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Although many felt restricted and overwhelmed by “going online,” the experience created “a project of pedagogical *poiesis*” (Schwartzman, 2020, p. 514). We can approach challenges as opportunities for new perspectives on the learning experience. In this essay, we examine the challenge of pandemic learning with this approach: a new perspective on dialectical challenges with learning. We provide personal reflections to explicate the dialectical tensions of pandemic learning.

The stress of the pandemic negatively impacted student learning and psychological well-being (Quintiliani et al., 2021). Brunner et al. (2021) explained pandemic-related stress also greatly increased the emotional labor demands on teachers. These demands lead to a conflict between how teachers felt and the surface acting they felt necessary to create effective learning experiences for students. This conflict resulted in feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Feeney and Fitzgerald (2022) noted that the pandemic caused perceived stress concerning possible health concerns and financial losses. They further argued that these stressors impact how people cope and result in overwhelming feelings.

Teaching online during the high-stress experience of the pandemic requires careful management of communication dialectical tensions. Students in online courses may feel that assignments are busy work but at the same time feel overwhelmed with learning that engages critical thinking skills. Online engagement is different from a face-to-face classroom. Hence, how can instructional communication researchers examine the new ways in which the learning experience is changing and how communication can be most effective for teachers and students? Most importantly, how can educators communicate so students feel connected and engaged while managing dialectical tensions of online learning during the pandemic?

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Dialectical Tensions in the Online Experience

Relationships experience the push and pull of competing personal goals. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) proposed dialectical tensions to explain the challenges romantic partners experience. For example, the struggle of wanting to be connected while, at the same time, wanting to maintain some level of autonomy. Dialectical tensions are navigated through communication and received considerable research in several contexts (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Prentice and Kramer (2006) explored three dialectical tensions that students experience in college classrooms: participation vs. remaining silent during class discussions; predictable vs. novel classroom activities; and managing personal time and class time. Today, these tensions are particularly salient during pandemic learning in online environments.

Online education has been around for decades, yet, the pandemic taught us that many instructors were not familiar with technology and effectively engaging online learning. No one was well versed at teaching during the universal, very high-stress experience of a pandemic. It is common for students to experience high stress, but not collectively. This collective stress and the challenges of online learning likely exacerbates dialectical tensions associated with learning. Specifically, participation vs. remaining silent during class discussions is relevant and observable in students' decisions to have their camera on or off during Zoom lectures.

What meaning does the instructor assign to this choice? When understanding how feedback instructors receive in the classroom is impacted by Zoom Blum (2020) explained that “communicative signs that embodied humans rely on are thinned, flattened, made more effortful or entirely impossible. Yet we interpret them anyway” (para. 11). Blum also stated potential interpretations instructors assign to students turning cameras off including, “to give themselves a rest from scrutiny or to mask their multitasking or even absence” (para. 15). Even when the video is on we are under an illusion that we are looking at each other but we really are not. The situation is complicated by a variety of reasons why students may not be comfortable turning their cameras on during class sessions. Trust (2020) created an infographic that was widely circulated in the summer of 2020 and made available on the National Communication Association's website. It provides a rationale of student privacy, safety, equity, and personal reasons for not sharing their video during class.

Faculty attempted to manage the tension of predictable vs. novel classroom activities by incorporating additional online learning tools such as Flipgrid and EdPuzzle to enhance student learning (Prentice & Kramer, 2006). This was challenging because, on one hand, online Zoom style instruction can seem boring but there is a learning curve to online tools that can result in frustration.

Finally, the tension of managing personal time and class time became increasingly difficult as the online learning environment was often experienced in students' living spaces (Prentice & Kramer, 2006). The physical classroom experience was gone for most students and replaced with dorm rooms, homes, apartments, and coffee shops. Thus, personal space was no longer exclusive to personal time but was now part of class time. This resulted in behaviors that would normally be reserved for personal time being experienced during class time including laying in bed, watching television, and cooking.

Social Presence Theory

Short et al. (1976) proposed social presence theory to explain the extent to which communicators believe receivers are salient during interactions. Social presence has documented impacts on learning. The lesson learned: social presence in the learning process can impact students' cognitive learning, affective learning, and motivation (Rodríguez et al., 1996). The social presence experienced in the in-person classroom is far different when teaching online.

When the pandemic hit, students were challenged to remain engaged with the transition to an online platform. Faculty were forced to adapt quickly to both the challenges associated with achieving the course learning goals as well as students' emotional stress. Engaging student learning in this stressful environment was a major challenge. Teacher presence in online environments is one solution to learning engagement issues. Communication experts could be particularly mindful of social presence to achieve

emotional engagement in learning. Weidlich and Bastiaens (2019) found, when compared to a control group, students who experienced social presence enhancements integrated into their online learning environment had more satisfying learning. Niemi (2020) stated, “when physical distancing is deemed necessary, social and emotional connectedness is even more critical” (p. 1). Hence, it is important to determine how to communicate effectively with students struggling with online learning; especially when students are missing elements related to a face-to-face classroom, such as discussions with other peers and access to instructors.

Reflection

We are research partners from two very different educational environments: a liberal arts university and a R1 university. The following are our reflections on the dialectical tensions and social presence experiences of students’ learning on a Zoom platform during the pandemic.

Online Social Presence at an R1

For 20 years, I have taught interpersonal communication in a large lecture face-to-face format with 120-200 students. The pandemic increased the three dialectical learning tensions. First, the tension of whether to participate in class discussions or remain silent (Prentice & Krammer, 2006) was heightened with synchronous online learning because of location challenges. Several students who lived in residence halls or shared living spaces felt restrained, creating challenges to communicate online, especially if they were sharing these spaces with roommates taking classes online. Some students experienced synchronous online learning in locations with noise restrictions including hallways, libraries, and common areas which limited the amount of interaction and the types of discussion for personal reflection. Students weren’t always willing to disclose or discuss content because they did express anxiety regarding who might hear their disclosures and what others around them might think, not being privy to the entire conversation.

Second, to help create diverse learning experiences and manage the tension between predictable and novel class activities (Prentice & Krammer, 2006), I used applications such as *Flipgrid*, *Screencastify*, *Remind*, and *Kahoot*. Flipgrid allows students to video record their answers and comment on classmates’ projects. This app is ideal for virtual debates and allows for discussion. Screencastify is a tool that can help students present their work by adding animation and narration to their PowerPoint slides. Remind is an app that allows teachers to send text messages to the class. Kahoot makes learning fun by adding questions into a trivia-type game platform, where students can compete against each other or in teams. These applications received mixed reviews because they are effective when technology works but can be very frustrating during connection issues or program malfunctions. These applications provide ways for students to interact with the content and with each other. Students reported enjoying using the apps to help them learn. Most importantly, it gave them a voice to express their learning concerns, thereby helping me become a better instructor. Again, these applications were not without challenges. Some students reported frustrations with the expectations to learn several new applications.

Third, challenges emerged during the pandemic for the dialectical tension of students managing personal time and class time (Prentice & Kramer, 2006). While in a Zoom class session, I observed students sleeping, watching television, making meals, and doing household chores. Students noted that they were busy balancing their personal, work, school, and social life. They reported feeling overwhelmed and very stressed with all the responsibilities and inconveniences that occurred due to the pandemic. Students also mentioned that some instructors assigned additional work because of the online format. The workload exceeded their expectations. Students said that they felt disconnected from their instructors and peers in the online format. As an instructor, I can’t force students to focus on the class online given so many other distractions. However, I felt I needed to find ways to be more engaging and inclusive online by using these online applications and give them more opportunities to have a voice in our classroom.

Online Social Presence at a Liberal Arts University

During the pandemic, a hybrid format was necessary due to social distancing requirements. Prentice and Kramer's (2006) classroom dialectical tensions help explain challenges brought on by pandemic learning. First, participation vs. remaining silent during class discussions is particularly challenging given the divide in hybrid contexts and the lack of social presence in online learning. In-person classes provide far more social presence and, thus, a learner can discern turn-taking cues more easily during discussion. Students rotated online and in-person learning. Many challenges occurred from hybrid formats, including trying to sustain discussion with students in both formats simultaneously (McMurtrie, 2020). Student engagement fell into two groups: those who participated and those who would not. Approximately half of all students began to attend every class in-person and the other half were online only with cameras turned off. This behavior was incongruent with course requirements, but consistent with the rest of campus. E-mailed explanations for absences included, "I just have a lot going on" and "this is a stressful semester." Others preferred to learn in person. For example, during the fifth week of the semester, a sophomore asked, "Could I please come to class 3 days a week? I can't stand Zoom and find it much harder to pay attention." Conversely, some students decided not to follow the rotation and to remain exclusively online and with their cameras off. For example, a Senior wrote an email to explain his lack of engagement. He wrote,

This class is my only one that's hybrid, the rest are completely online, so the reason I stay online mostly for this class is because it's tough to go to campus after having an online class at home right before. Senioritis is hitting hard, but I'm grinding harder.

Hybrid and online learning may seem more limiting in terms of enhancing the tension of predictable vs. novel classroom activities. Also, students may feel forced into group learning experiences online when auto-assigned to groups and lack the same degree of instructor guidance in the face-to-face experience.

Finally, the tension of managing personal time and class time was especially strained because of the pandemic and current cultural climate. Students repeatedly expressed difficulty getting and staying motivated "with everything that has been going on" and "the stress of Covid." Several students could not attend classes because of engagement with a social movement and an on-campus protest. Also, students expressed difficulty dealing with stress, and this too has increased the propensity to struggle with managing the divide between class and personal time. I noticed students engaging in behaviors during class never previously observed from the same student including frequent texting, lying in bed, and watching tv. It is likely that, due to pandemic stressors, students were struggling between class and personal time, even during class. Furthermore, the increased rate of students missing assignment deadlines may reflect this tension. The increased collective stress of the pandemic may lead to increased dialectical tensions between competing responsibilities.

Conclusion

The ability for students to focus was compromised during the high stress of the pandemic. The learning solution was not to put more responsibility on students as independent asynchronous learners, but, rather, for instructors to engage learners directly to facilitate communication with their peers and instructor. It is critical to create educational environments that are effective at delivering content as well as create community so students feel connected and motivated to learn together. Student-instructor communication predicts student course satisfaction better than modality (Cole, 2016). Understanding tensions impacting student motivation, and subsequently social presence, is critical to developing effective messaging to improve student learning. Instructors need to discern reasons for the lack of engagement.

The pandemic stress and Zoom classroom challenges uncovered a new tension: zeal vs. dejection. This tension expresses students' eagerness to escape stress and immerse themselves in learning while

being so overwhelmed that they could not focus and commit to the learning process. This tension was demonstrated when students in the Zoom class were multitasking. Students explained that they were thankful to have class as an outlet to escape the pandemic but, at the same time, struggled to stay focused on a Zoom class. Students said they wanted to learn but had trouble focusing. This tension was likely enhanced during the pandemic due to the increases in Prentice and Kramer's (2006) tension of managing personal time and class time.

Future research should directly explore zeal vs. dejection by utilizing the interview process Prentice and Kramer (2006) employed. Furthermore, communication education scholars should continue to explore immediacy behaviors in online and hybrid environments, especially during times students are experiencing high stress. Immediacy behaviors will likely enhance social presence (Dixson et al., 2017) and, therefore, the connectedness students feel with teachers. Research needs to test the degree to which various forms of immediacy and subsequently social presence directly influence students' cognitive and affective learning. In these investigations, learning should be the dependent variable, as measured through exam scores, performance-based assessments, and student reflection. Based on previous research on student learning and our reflections, it is likely that social presence is critical to successful learning experiences during higher-stress environments.

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