



# Interpersonal Communication Instruction During COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

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## INTRODUCTION

The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 have disrupted higher education worldwide. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. In Canada, the declaration expedited the introduction of preventive measures by governments at different levels to curb the spread of the virus, including the closure of universities. Consequently, in-person courses were frantically switched to “emergency remote teaching” (ERT). At the time of writing (January 2021), countries across the northern hemisphere are undergoing the second wave of climbing COVID-19 cases. Accordingly, ERT is expected to continue at many postsecondary institutions over the next few months.

With ERT becoming the new norm of higher education, there are growing concerns among educators about its impacts on instructors and students. On Facebook, for instance, relevant conversations have taken place in groups like “pandemic pedagogy.” As summarized by Schwartzman (2020), the “pandemic pedagogy” group’s founder and lead moderator, such conversations shed light on several challenges novice online instructors have encountered, notably the erosion of autonomous time and space, the relative merits of synchronous and asynchronous content, and the balance between rigor and accommodation. Echoing the educator concerns expressed on Facebook, recently published case studies on education during COVID-19 have explicated the limits of ERT. For example, Barton (2020) survey of 117 U.S. postsecondary instructors whose courses including field activities found that the abrupt shift to ERT has presented unique challenges for achieving learning outcomes typically associated with face-to-face field activities. For disciplines such as ecology, environmental studies, and geography, instructors were forced to either substantially reduce field-related learning outcomes or substitute them with instructor-centered remote activities.

Although communication education differs from the above disciplines in not requiring field settings, it is equally to reflect on the challenges ERT brings to communication classrooms. For this purpose, this opinion piece reflects on how the frantic switch to emergency remote teaching amid COVID-19 in late March 2020 disrupted the instructional practice of one upper-division interpersonal communication (hereafter as “IPC”) course taught at Ryerson, a Canadian metropolitan university. I make the case that a particular challenge brought by ERT to interaction-driven courses is the erosion of a sense of community among students. To overcome this challenge, an inclusive virtual classroom needs to be built via both supportive instructional communication and combating preexisting educational and social inequities.

## PREVIOUS SCHOLARLY CONVERSATIONS ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

Before discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic altered the classroom culture of my IPC course, let us briefly review previous scholarly conversations on IPC pedagogy. IPC is a popular course offered by communication programs, especially those in the United States. In Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) survey of communication curricula at a random sample of 148 U.S. four-year colleges and universities, IPC turned out to be the most popular course subject, appearing in 143 (96.6%) of the sample curricula. In parallel with the rising popularity of IPC courses, academic publishers have released a plethora of relevant textbooks targeting students at both junior and senior levels. On Vital Source (a major provider of e-textbooks), for instance, a search of “interpersonal communication” would find more than 100 titles.

With so many available textbooks, the issue of potential theoretical bias in them becomes a subject of debate among IPC instructors. In response to this pedagogical concern, Webb and Thompson-Hayes (2002) conducted a content analysis of five popular IPC textbooks. Their analysis revealed a notable dilution of theories: although the sample textbooks well represented foundational IPC theories, none of them were theoretically-centred since their presentations of theories—perhaps in consideration of readability—were simplistic and even occasionally inaccurate. This finding raises an intriguing cause-effect question: Does some IPC courses’ insufficient theoretical emphasis derives from textbooks’ underemphasis of them, or vice versa? Regardless of the answer, prioritizing the development of students’ interpersonal competence when setting IPC course objectives has been a common practice among communication curricular.

Accordingly, designing skills-focused assignments has been the primary focus of IPC pedagogy research. For example, Hatfield (2018) reported on the benefits of utilizing weekly podcasts to engage students in narrative learning. Specifically, her IPC course assigned weekly readings along with episodes from “This American Life”, thereby explicating key concepts such as attribution theory and relational dialectics for students via real-life examples. Other innovative IPC assignments include asking students to complete random acts of kindness and then present their critical reflections (Tolman, 2009), engaging students in library research for learning and improving interpersonal skills (Graham and Mazer, 2011), among others.

The above innovations in IPC pedagogy, however, are born out of face-to-face seminar or workshop settings. Their effectiveness depends largely on classroom connectedness, assimilation, and peer relationships. Even before the shift to ERT, large class sizes have already presented a notable obstacle impeding the implementation of innovative IPC assignments. Ideally, students’ mastery of IPC should be assessed during peer and student-instructor interactions. For courses with enrolments above 50, however, it would be time consuming to assess students in this way. Then, how to effectively teach IPC in a large lecture setting? This was the first question came to my mind in Fall 2019

when I learnt that the total enrollment of my IPC course in the coming semester would increase to 90 students. Little did I know that the challenge would soon be dwarfed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## PROBING EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING

In response to the class size increase, I made several revisions to my IPC syllabus, putting more emphasis on teaching IPC theories and assessing students via written assignments and peer learning activities. Although I encountered several minor challenges, such as students’ unfamiliarity with the interactive presentation software I used and the difficulty of retaining a large class’ attention for at least 2 hours, the overall classroom atmosphere during the first few weeks of 2020 was positive, engaging, and theory-centred. Yet, a sense of uncertainty began to emerge in mid-February. As someone originally came from Mainland China, I followed the early news regarding COVID-19 and was fully aware of how its spread had essentially put the daily lives of my friends and family members on halt. Nonetheless, I held an erroneous belief that the pandemic’ impacts outside China would be limited. When the news broke out on March 12 that most teaching activities at my home institution would be imminently moved online in response to climbing COVID-19 cases in Toronto, I felt relieved that Canada finally took the pandemic seriously. Yet the sense of relief was quickly overtaken by anxiety: how to effectively deliver the remaining content of my IPC course? My initial response was to adapt my expectations of my students and make amendments to assignments. I knew intuitively that the semester would not be completed as planned.

Under the pressure of making a seamless transition to ERT, the first week following campus closure was occupied by increased stress, depression, and fatigue felt by both instructors and students. In particular, I noted that the relatively engaging classroom culture that established via weeks of peer learning activities began to crumble slowly. Several students were absent due to caregiving, childcare, or other life-related challenges, which not only hurt their own learning motivations but also their partners during group assignments. Likewise, the sudden change of everyday life made some students too stressed to study. A few international students emailed me with regret of not being able to study because they were either traveling their home countries or worry about not being able to do so. Digital inequality also became notable. There were a dozen students dropped out during the course’s first zoom session due to poor Internet conditions.

While many other courses may have experienced similar challenges in declining attendance, this problem is especially acute for IPC instruction since this course subject’s theoretical ideas are often illustrated via student interactions. Following the challenging first zoom session, I attempted to make a lecture recording following tips offered by my institution’s teaching and learning center. Yet, after several attempts, I found that without class-activities functioning as necessary breaks, the hour-long content I created ended up being a boring theoretical monologue,

which was rather ironic since I had repeatedly talked about the importance of dyadic communications in personal relationship management. Similar to Huber and McRae (2020), my initial experience with ERT was fluctuating, frenetic, and fragmented, feeling myself as an involuntary participant trapped in a crisis-driven social experiment.

Over the remaining weeks of the semester, I experimented with different strategies to deliver the course content while accommodating the various difficulties my students reported. Three notable changes in classroom culture have emerged during this trial-and-error process. To begin with, the disappearance of physical classrooms entails revisions in group activities so that inevitable disruptions could be managed. On Zoom, activities aiming at improving students' interpersonal skills are mainly conducted via breakout rooms. Compared with face-to-face group discussions, the semi-occluded nature of these virtual rooms means that students allocated to them are experiencing non-supervised learning for most of the time. Such a situation, in combination with the emotional burdens (e.g., anxiety and uncertainty) brought by the pandemic, makes classroom disruptions more frequent than before. In a physical classroom setting, an instructor can manage distraction by gently reminding absent-minded groups via non-verbal means. By contrast, Zoom's ineffectiveness of communicating social cues requires more deliberate interventions. In numerous occasions during the final weeks of my IPC course, I felt a sense of teaching failure when I had to interrupt some students' engaging conversations on course irrelevant subjects.

In addition, ERT transformed the home into a contested space for education (Huber and McRae, 2020). Although it has been common for many of us to get work done at home during off-campus hours, ETR further blurs the boundaries separating personal and professional spaces. As Schwartzman (2020) argues, "if one no longer goes to work or class conducted in distinct, temporally bounded locales, then [...] the work-life balance recalibrates as a unity: worklife, with working at home blending into living at work" (p. 506). For students in my course, the erosion of private sphere led to a drastic drop in virtual presence. In fear of being peeped by unfamiliar classmates, many of them felt uncomfortable to turn on webcams during Zoom sessions. Whilst such concerns for privacy were understandable, they noticeably affected classroom dynamics, with the voice-only mode being unable to deliver facial expressions and other vital nonverbal cues embedded in dyadic and small-group communications. From the instructor perspective, the lack of students' nonverbal feedback added difficulty to reflective teaching practice.

Lastly but most importantly, teaching IPC during the pandemic highlights the inconvenient truth that existing IPC pedagogy for cultivating collaborative classroom culture is ill-prepared for unforeseen crises. In retrospect, most of the theoretical ideas taught during my course implicitly hinges upon a smoothly functioning society. As Boylorn (2020) points out, however, many of our societal members have been living within a constant state of emergency even without the pandemic. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exposes and feeds

on other structural problems of contemporary society (Kenny, 2020), many of which current instructional practices are unable to address. When students approached me to ask about how gender, racial, and class inequalities impact interpersonal relationships, I found myself struggling to draw on IPC theories to facilitate meaningful and educational conversations on these issues. As Shin and Hickey (2020) suggest, these issues "highlight the importance of addressing and combating the inequities, creating and maintaining a sense of community, and most significantly providing socio-emotional support" (p. 1) — this is the most important lesson I have learnt from my students' concerns about their surroundings.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

As the COVID-19 pandemic remains an unsolved crisis, it is difficult for the current piece to offer firm conclusions on the long-term impacts of ongoing ERT. Without doubt, my experience of teaching IPC virtually has left many questions unanswered: Should the learning outcomes of IPC courses be revised given the continuation of ERT? What virtual activities are suitable for substituting traditional face-to-face group discussions? What teaching strategies implemented now can be built upon to enhance educational institutions' resilience in the future? ... The list can go on and on. Regardless of the answers, it is important for us to keep in mind that the primary goal of pandemic pedagogy is to support the development of our students in accordance with their wellbeing and flourishing (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Shin and Hickey, 2020).

I therefore conclude this opinion piece with two tentative thoughts currently occupying my mind as I am planning for teaching IPC again in the upcoming Winter 2021 semester. First, after months of lock-down, students' learning motivation and ability to maintain sustained attention have probably ebbed away. This situation puts higher demands on creative asynchronous solutions that allow students to study at their own pace. Second, our lived experiences during the pandemic have highlighted the critical roles friendship and community in shielding us from negative emotions. Moving forward, the teaching of IPC need to prioritizing connecting students with like-minded peers and building a strong sense of community.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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