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Pandemic pedagogy challenges and opportunities: instruction communication in remote, *HyFlex*, and *BlendFlex* courses

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Although a third of college students take at least one course online today (Lederman, 2018), surveys report that as many as 29% of college instructors do not accept online learning as an effective course-delivery mode (Online Learning Consortium, 2015). The spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic triggered a crisis in education as all instructors were suddenly required to modify face-to-face courses for remote delivery (i.e., synchronous and/or asynchronous) within a matter of days. Many instructors accomplished this transition using video-conferencing software platforms that would essentially replicate face-to-face pedagogy in virtual online classrooms (Lang, 2020).

Research suggests benefits of synchronous online “virtual classrooms” to, for example, reduce the perception of “distance” via increased social presence and to facilitate student engagement, but this delivery format represents a departure from the asynchronous delivery of most online courses to date (e.g., McBrien et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2017). In response to the need to move suddenly online, reliable video-conferencing software that had been unavailable in the past was made available to both faculty and students. What is not clear, however, is how effective the teaching and learning experience was in this “trial by fire” synchronous online course delivery mode compared with in-person or even asynchronous online formats (Lu et al., 2013).

Moreover, as the world awaits (as of this writing) the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, universities were faced with the challenge of determining how to deliver classes in the upcoming fall semester. New formats were proposed to address the dilemma about whether to bring students back to campus full time or to continue to deliver instruction remotely. One such format is *HyFlex* (hybrid + flexible) in which instruction consists of blending online student attendance and face-to-face student attendance in a single course. Beatty (2019) clarifies key principles of *HyFlex* courses as: (a) providing students a choice regarding how they will attend a given session, (b) offering equivalent learning activities in all modes, (c) using the same learning objects for all students, (d) ensuring that students are equipped with the technologies and skills to participate in all modes, and (e) employing authentic assessments. According to its proponents, the *HyFlex* model is more learner-centered and flexible than standard mixed mode classes, because students can make their own choices about fitting their learning needs to their course experience (Liu & Rodriguez, 2019). Another format—*BlendFlex* (blended + flexible)—differs slightly in that instructors preassign student

face-to-face attendance on certain days and students may choose how to participate on other days (e.g., attend remotely, watch a recorded session, complete online module) (Quinn & Lee, 2016).

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. In the wake of the current global megacrisis, and as sophisticated video-conferencing platforms become increasingly accessible, instructional research is uniquely positioned to be a leader in research and practice.

For example, researchers should conduct replication studies to examine how communication functions related to previously studied communication-related concerns (e.g., classroom climate, clarity, communication apprehension, student motivation, student engagement, diversity, immediacy and credibility) and affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning outcomes. Although research informs pedagogy in traditional classrooms, similar data are needed to inform pedagogy in these new environments. In the process, scholars will both refine and extend existing theories and, perhaps, develop new ones. We should also conduct comparative studies to examine similarities and differences among these and other instructional communication factors as they occur in fully asynchronous online, fully synchronous online, HyFlex, BlendFlex, mixed modes, and fully face-to-face classrooms. Doing so may lead to implications for modifying pedagogical practices in traditional classroom settings, as well. Ultimately, results from these empirical studies will provide a foundation for a set of best practices for instructional communication in a variety of online delivery modes.

The COVID-19 global pandemic created a multitude of secondary crises, one of them occurring in higher education. Crises, by their very nature, threaten health and safety, come as a surprise, and demand a short response time. In Weick's (1993) terms, crises represent a cosmology episode as people's sense of the universe disrupts into momentary chaos. In other words, COVID-19 resulted in people experiencing "vu jàdé" (the opposite of déjà vu), which is the feeling of "I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me" (p. 52). It disrupted teaching and learning as usual and demanded a quick response to restore order. Whether or not these new delivery modes are here to stay can be—and ought to be—informed by what instructional communication research can teach us about them.

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