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Adapting to Connection and Disconnection through Mediated Communication in a Higher Education Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

When the COVID-19 virus entered the United States and began to spread across the country, it was unclear how it would change daily work and life. One could not anticipate nor fully prepare for the changes that were to come and the critical role technology would play in maintaining and building connections. In higher education, technology would take an even stronger presence in teaching and learning, moving from email communication and regular use of a learning management system to being the only communication option for delivering class content, interacting with students, advising, and meeting with colleagues. Less modern technology, such as the telephone, even became crucial for developing and maintaining relationships – personally and professionally. As I grapple with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of a communicator and educator, I have reflected upon how mediated communication played a role in both providing a sense of connection and a sense of disconnection in my classrooms during this time.

I consider my individual experiences through the theoretical framework of Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) (Walther, 1992). I have worked to advance the understanding of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (also referred to as mediated communication throughout this article to include mobile technologies), and its role in relationship development and connection/disconnection in the fully online remote educational context. SIPT includes hyperpersonal communication; according to Walther et al. (2011), “hyperpersonal communication provides a framework that helps explain dynamic transformations of relational communication and participants’ characters through online interactions” (p. 2). Further, “the model explains how CMC users are able to present themselves selectively, and how these controlled self-presentations become the matter by which online partners come to know one another” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 2). Other scholars, such as Ramirez and Zhang (2007), build upon CMC research. They offer support for further application of SIPT stating, “although SIPT does not explicitly address modality switching, the results indicate it clearly has implications for understanding such shifts” (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007, p. 303). Therefore, this model will be used to consider how my students and I

connected and disconnected through the modality shift to the remote educational experience.

SIPT and the hyperpersonal communication model (Walther, 1992; Walther et al., 2005; & Walther et al., 2011) have served as a filter to view and interpret how mediated channels, such as video conference calls using platforms, such as Zoom, served to navigate this new territory. I considered the following question: How have mediated interactions shaped the experiences of higher education as faculty and students moved to online and remote teaching and learning?

Background

In the initial days and weeks following the stay-at-home orders in my state, the transition away from the traditional classroom was not seamless, but I felt well prepared to continue classes through online and remote instruction. As an educator, teaching both in-person and online in a typical semester, I have been acutely aware of the differences in a mediated versus a non-mediated learning environment. My online classes have typically followed a near identical schedule to my on-campus classes, so when the pivot occurred, drawing from and adapting content for the remaining weeks of the semester was not difficult to envision. My teaching load has typically been half fully asynchronous online with the other half in a traditional classroom setting.

My university's campus is small; I know my students by name and see them frequently as I move from my office to classrooms to meeting spaces. Face-to-face interactions are frequent; this connection is part of the campus culture. However, with the pivot to strictly online and remote instruction, my teaching and all professional work moved to alternative modalities to conclude spring semester. My work has continued in this way through the 2020-2021 academic year.

Mediated Communication Framework

The use of mediated communication is not new; it was frequent, familiar, and prevalent before the COVID-19 pivot. According to Dugan et al. (2015), various forms of social media and new media have been used by over half of the population. In prior studies, the primary platforms for mediated interaction were in the asynchronous realm with blogs, social media (before video chat features were available), chatrooms, and other such tools were prevalent. Using the criteria of face-to-screen, additional new media have emerged moving from primarily asynchronous tools to multiple synchronous options. Current new media have

included tools like Zoom, video chat through social media, and other comparable options. It has been important to note two distinctions of synchronous communication tools: First, the mediating presence of the screen. Second, the lag. The lag may go unnoticed, during synchronous interactions, as data travels across cellular or internet connections. At times the lag has been evident when the visual and verbal do not align, creating communication challenges. The lag and screen together have been important mediating factors causing this synchronous communication to differ from face-to-face interactions, as face-to-face interactions during the pandemic have frequently included windows as a protective barrier to prevent the transmission of the virus. Sometimes face-to-face interactions have also required mediated communication in order to be successful – a phone call with a loved one on the other side of a pane of glass so conversations can be heard and nonverbal responses seen. The desire for human connection and social interaction are evident through the creative approaches used, particularly during periods of time when tighter COVID related restrictions have been in place.

The prevalent use of mediated channels have served as a bridge to form connections without time and geographic constraints (Sanford, 2010). De Zuniga et al. (2013), found interaction through mediated channels to include interpersonal interactions. Change has been prominent as technology has advanced through various platforms. Mediated communication has frequently included “new media” as defined by Duhe (2015) as “the advancing presence of communication technology in everyday life” (p. 153). New media have continued to evolve as Duhe (2015) goes on to point out; when looking from a historical perspective, “these new media range from the first Internet-enabled PCs in the workplace to tweets and status updates across a 34-year timeframe” (p. 153). In Spring 2020, this change was evident through synchronous mediated communication tools, like Zoom, gaining wide popularity, for social, educational, and professional purposes. With ever-changing platforms, functions, and interactive features, new media played and have continued to play a significant role in creating and maintaining connections during the COVID-19 period.

A pioneer in the study of face-to-screen interaction, Walther (1992) studied the formation of relationships through mediated channels as he developed SIPT. Another study from Walther et al. (2005) addressed concerns regarding the absence of nonverbal cues in mediated communication. Face-to-face interactions have been considered rich and multifaceted means of communication. Often, face-to-screen has been lean, sometimes only using written communication for interaction. The asynchronous nature typical of mediated communication in face-to-screen interactions affords users an opportunity to refine responses and present the best

version of their communication and in turn themselves. However, in synchronous remote interactions, which also occur face-to-screen, the channel for communication has been rich with information transmitted through speaking, writing, nonverbal responses (when interactive video streaming is used), or reactions through emojis within Zoom or other similar tools.

From research on mediated communication, terms like hyperpersonal communication have emerged (Walther et al., 2011). There are four components in the hyperpersonal model defined by Walther et al. (2011) as follows: The first component is selective self-presentation, which means “CMC users are able to present themselves in selective and self-serving ways” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 4). The next component, idealization, has been defined as a participant in CMC who can “fill in the blanks in the development of impressions . . . drawing on characteristics of group identities, personality stereotypes, or other projections” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 4). The third component, channel management, was defined as “using media at times that allow relatively greater engagement with others, and to groom message construction very deliberately using the editing features of the medium” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 4). The final component, feedback, has been explained as an occurrence “among communicators engaging these affordances of CMC is expected to reinforce, further promote, and intensify the effects of self-presentation, idealization, and channel exploitation, potentially shaping communicator characteristics to the point of affecting the participants’ own attitudes and perceptions” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 5). This terminology has been essential to illuminating the lived experiences discussed in the following sections.

As the four components apply in the context of the pandemic, CMC has previously been considered in a traditional sense – face-to-screen and primarily written communication (Walther, 1992). However, it has relevance in new media uses, such as shifting across modalities. The pandemic has caused classes to move from synchronous to asynchronous, face-to-face to face-to-screen. This aligns with Ramirez and Zhang’s (2007) assertion that SIPT has “implications for understanding such shifts” (p. 303). This reflection through the lens of SIPT and the hyperpersonal components has included exploration beyond the strictest boundaries of SIPT and the components to be applied of the hyperpersonal model; however, this framework provided an applicable model to this new mediated communication reality in an attempt to interpret what has transpired over the last year.

Losing Connection: Initial Transition

As the pivot to remote and online instruction began, students no longer asked quick questions as we passed in the hallways or when they dropped by my office. Interactions with colleagues were no longer impromptu conversations; now they required scheduling and coordination and were often more formal. Non-mediated communication now occurred with only a handful of people – those deemed part of my COVID pod and none of whom were students or colleagues. At the time of writing, I had not been in my campus office or interacted with a student face-to-face in just over one year, and it is unlikely I will do so for another five months, when fall semester classes begin. Through the framework of SIPT, I have interpreted what I encountered in this new context necessitated by the pandemic, transitioning modalities from connecting face-to-face in the classroom and on campus to primarily mediated channels that caused a sense of disconnection from others.

One of the significant challenges during the initial transition was adapting to the constant mediated communication interaction through Zoom. A quick meeting with a student or colleague became multiple email exchanges requiring additional steps to create the online meeting space. I quickly realized that seeing myself on camera and participating in this unnatural feedback loop were taking a toll due to the frequency and duration of participation; perhaps this fatigue was also due to efforts to adapt to this mediated form of feedback and controlling my self-presentation (Walther et al., 2011). The term Zoom fatigue – the exhaustion from heavy use of this video conferencing tool – became known, and I found it easy to relate to the numerous and varied articles and social media content that flooded my own feeds regarding this topic.

I worked to understand this experience of modality shifting, both from a personal and professional perspective. I frequently thought about what my students may need in this uncharted territory and how best to check in and provide resources as needed. The need to accommodate (Walther et al., 2011) in this online, mediated environment has been significant for me as a faculty member working to support students during this transition. If I was feeling fatigued from these factors, I wondered how much the student experience differed.

For me, the semester ended, generally, successfully. The pivot was not without challenges, but mediated channels of communication mitigated many of the initial concerns through the transitional period. The face-to-screen tools were rich enough to augment the previously formed student-professor relationships from earlier weeks of the semester, and the foundation for learning and class

expectations were already well established. The pre-existing sense of connection from the face-to-face classroom carried through the remote end of the semester. The feedback component in the context of the hyperpersonal communication model (Walther et al., 2011) was likely at play for both me and my students, particularly those who elected to turn on their cameras during remote sessions.

When the semester came to an end, my colleagues and I created a virtual graduation celebration for students in our program. It was not the large-scale event commencement would have been, but the face-to-screen interaction created an opportunity for connection of relationships formed in both traditional classes and in online, asynchronous classes. The mediated communication channel provided an opportunity to meet face-to-screen for the first time, with what Walther et al. (2011) would label idealization coming into effect. The relationships for many in attendance had been formed only through mediated channels, those more typical of SIPT (Walther, 1992) for those who completed their classes asynchronously (even pre-COVID). It is possible aspects of the hyperpersonal model applied with an increased perception of knowing one another in this context (Walther et al., 2011). The virtual graduation celebration felt like a small victory in the midst of mourning the loss of tradition that is part of commencement exercises.

Seeking Connection: Preparing for a New Academic Year

By mid-summer, it became clear I would not return to campus in the fall; instead, my teaching and related work would be online and remote for the foreseeable future. Particularly as I considered the role of mediated communication in remote classrooms and my experiences from spring semester, I sought opportunities to increase engagement and improve my channel management (Walther et al., 2011). I participated in professional development, learned new online teaching techniques, adjusted content for remote instruction, and redefined class projects as required by COVID-19 guidelines. As I prepared for a fall semester like none other, I considered the teaching strategies changed by remote instruction; I pondered how to best modify my content for an entire semester using this new modality. I considered what had worked well in my traditional classrooms and if and how it translated to the remote environment.

In a traditional face-to-face classroom, an element of the rich communication environment has been the chatter of students coming into the physical space as part of developing a connection between students and faculty. It was one of the most noticeable disconnections to adapt to in the remote, face-to-screen environment; I noticed the void almost immediately as students engaged in selective self-presentation and channel management entering with cameras off and

microphones muted (Walther et al., 2011). The technology used to connect and interact also disconnected us in this regard. Now, students were joining the class in varied ways – some turned on their cameras, others remained only name in a black box on my screen. The feedback visible onscreen, at times, has been misaligned with what occurred in the remote classroom; I went back to idealization (Walther et al., 2011) once again. As an instructor and communicator, this did not feel natural; in the mediated communication context, the absence of feedback was palpable for me (Walther et al., 2011). In this environment, my ability to sense the mood of the class and adapt for that energy was significantly reduced – a disconnection between students and faculty in this mode of teaching and learning.

In an environment with one or more black boxes representing students in attendance, there was no information available. Ramirez and Zhang (2007) state that with SIPT, it “assumes communicators use whatever social information is available and adjust messages accordingly in order to acquire and provide information needed to develop impressions and relationships” (p. 291). As the semester continued and cameras remained off more frequently, I felt the strain of adapting for the lack of feedback of any kind to guide the delivery of my class (Walther et al., 2011). Communicators and educators have adapted their messages and delivery for the students – looks of confusion or engagement often have served as a guide. I was grateful for the students who chose to turn on their cameras unprompted. However, at times, the only person I viewed on my screen was a live video of me. I was not used to watching myself teach. Once again, there was a sense of disconnection from the students I so deeply wanted to engage through this mediated interaction.

Now, instead of responding to the feedback of my students, my listeners and audience, I have been adapting my delivery as a form of impression management, seeing myself how my students have been seeing me. Ramirez and Zhang (2005) have found “senders engage in ‘strategic self-presentation’ by highlighting positive characteristics and diverting attention from negative ones” (p. 292). As previously noted, Walther et al. (2011) referred to this concept as “selective self-presentation” (p. 4). While Ramirez and Zhang’s (2007) work addressed written communication, this same behavior has occurred as I teach in the richer mediated environment with livestreaming video. The hyper-self-awareness has been disconcerting. I simultaneously and intentionally worked to manage my selective self-presentation and channel management (Walther et al., 2011). I wish I too could have my camera off; instead, I forged ahead, adapted my delivery to include questions to engage my students, to gain the feedback that has been absent and to fight against the feeling of disconnection. I engaged in

idealization (Walther et al., 2011) as a coping strategy, mentally filling in the blanks where student interaction has been with what I imagined it could be during the ideal face-to-face class. I imagined that behind each black box in my remote session was a student who was incredibly engaged, riveted by the class content and delivery; I was fully aware this was unlikely in reality, but it has helped me to teach as if it were indeed true.

Still seeking connection, I have adapted to using the tools of afforded by the technology. I engaged in channel management (Walther et al., 2011) seeking interaction that came as reactions through emojis, chat responses, or unmuting microphones to speak – I have been grateful for any form of interaction to gain the feedback that has been otherwise absent. Since students have been using the visual reactions voluntarily and when asked, it was evident this was method of interaction they enjoyed. I have considered how I can take such benefits back to the face-to-face classroom when I resume the traditional form of instruction in the future.

In spite of the limitations of mediated communication, there has been an opportunity to form connection even in the midst of disconnection. The features in Zoom (and likely other tools I have not used) have allowed for chat to occur one-on-one or with the whole class and for the use of emoji-style reactions. Channel management has again entered this mediated communication exchange for both me and my students (Walther et al., 2011). The students' cameras have frequently remained off, but I have found a way to connect by seeking feedback and engaging the students in different ways.

Chat has not replaced the connection that has been lost in this mediated communication encounter; however, it has helped to minimize the disconnection and the weight of some of the loss caused by the pandemic. Ramirez and Zhang (2007) explain that written communication has allowed for refinement and increasing one's ability to express themselves in a more refined manner, reducing communication risks. Walther et al. (2011) refers to the "reciprocal interaction" and the performance aspect that may magnify the affect when compared with face-to-face or offline communication (p. 2). For those who have participated in discussion more willingly through chat, the hyperpersonal model could apply. At times, this new method has allowed me to hear from students who may not speak during a traditional classroom experience. Along with an increase in sharing from some students, I experienced challenges of channel management (Walther et al., 2011) and adapted to this atypical form of teaching. In this remote class environment, I have engaged in a more complex structure of monitoring chat, reading what students are contributing, and responding orally to this input during

what would have been a face-to-face class; I have welcomed such participation encouraged to see the students engaging and providing feedback.

The interaction and increased sense of connection with students has been fortifying for me as I have continued to navigate the current teaching and learning modality. I have recognized the potential for magnified affect as Walther et al. (2011) suggests. I have wondered if this will change how I teach and interact when I return to the same physical classroom as my students. If findings from Walther et al. (2011) can be applied in this unique context, which it seems they can, the results of the pivot and modification of my presenting self may have lasting outcomes. This is also supported by Ramirez and Zhang's (2007) research. Yet again, I have considered what this potential change has meant for students and their presenting selves, particularly for those who opted to be fully remote and online, rather than returning to a campus in its COVID-19 modified form.

In the remote learning environment, I have had to adapt to new forms of nonverbal and verbal communication. If I engaged a student in conversation prior to class, it was broadcast to the class. The conversation would take center stage, rather than existing as a quiet side conversation occurring as students entered the physical classroom. Once again, I was hyper-aware of balancing such conversations across the class to build the connection that has come more naturally in a traditional classroom. Throughout the semesters, I felt the strain of monitoring requests to be admitted to the virtual classroom, viewing nonverbal behaviors from students who have their cameras on, watching for students who may have posted in the chat, and balancing conversations with different individuals to engage and connect with all students, rather than only visiting with those more outgoing in this remote environment. This concern has contradicted SIPT as it has been considered here. The traditional written communication, typical of SIPT (Walther, 1992), has not intersected with such challenges. As I teach, I have oscillated between connected and disconnected by the mediated communication modality.

In addition to the external monitoring, I also experienced internal monitoring, engaging in selective self-presentation (Walther et al., 2011) caused by the remote teaching environment. I have been viewing my own nonverbal behaviors as they have fed back to me on my computer screen; I wondered if I should adjust my camera for a more flattering angle as I think of my "strategic self-presentation" (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007, p. 292) and managing my faculty personae in this virtual space. In one way, users of this technology have an option to monitor visual presence and have been able to refine them on the spot. Individuals have (almost) immediately seen their own nonverbal responses and have the option to adapt. Self-monitoring and refinement in real-time became an option, as has the

use of a filter to refine one's appearance during remote video interactions. Even with the emerging technology, there have been challenges. In the back of my mind, I wondered how students have been managing many of the same things and how has this affected what they were learning in my classes. It was not surprising I experienced deep exhaustion after days of remote teaching and remote meetings. I simultaneously have been longing for a return to *normal* – whatever that may mean – and grateful I have been able to work remotely.

In the remote environment, particularly where live video conferencing became the norm almost overnight, live, synchronous interaction was valued, as it became a substitution for traditional classroom instruction. The asynchronous nature of mediated channels has allowed one to present the best version of themselves, revising and refining for polish (Walther et al., 2011). Communication channel management (Walther et al., 2011) challenges have been rampant during remote instruction – from slow internet connections, to pets entering spaces, participants reacting to sounds in one environment not heard in another, remembering to unmute a microphone to speak, microphones that do not work, screen sharing or projecting content, and managing all the features and security requirements in this environment.

There have been some obvious pandemic-related benefits of working and learning remote – such as reduced opportunities for exposure to COVID-19, access to classes for students who may have needed to quarantine after exposure, or preparing content for a single modality of teaching. There have been limitations as well, particularly for those with limited internet access and those who have been managing the complexities of various work-from-home situations. The limitations of remote teaching and learning should be acknowledged as an important consideration for what has occurred during the pandemic. The discussion that follows has been limited to instances where internet access has not been a primary barrier.

Benefits were found from rethinking content and delivery in the online asynchronous environment, where I expected things to remain much the same. As an example, in one of my classes, students, typically, plan and facilitate an event. With COVID-19 restrictions varying across the country, it was necessary to modify the requirements for this assignment. During a semester where students expressed that they felt disconnected, I found the reverse to be true in my fully online sections where I added the requirement of a group project: a synchronous meeting with peers in an asynchronous class. Reflection was required at the end of the project. Apprehension and anxiety were often identified as concerns at the outset of the group work.

In the student reflections, those who expressed the most significant reservations also expressed the most positive results. Going back to the theoretical framework of SIPT (Walther, 1992) mentioned previously, I have wondered about the role of hyperpersonal communication in this online group work experience. While the communication channel was typically rich with audio and video, some interactions were leaner and only included text-based communication (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). There may also have been an over-attribution of similarity (Walther, 1992) in the online environment. Students may have felt closer more quickly because they felt a deeper sense of similarity as a team of online students working together. The formation of a connection among group members, however, was evident with the use of mediated communication, both rich and lean.

In the reflections collected at the end of the project, reluctance was replaced with a positive group experience through the opportunity to connect with other classmates. An additional benefit was that I was able to join the events as an observer, providing an opportunity for instructor-student connection. It was evident the students valued this connection based upon their feedback. Through the project, students were connecting; the face-to-screen interaction was fulfilling a void, possibly one created by COVID-19, and facilitating connection. This positive learning experience can be brought forward to inform my teaching post COVID-19. The lesson from the students in the asynchronous course showed signs of benefits from the adaptations that occurred. The implementation of richer mediated communication channels brought forth from the pandemic, it seems, strengthened the engagement for fully-online-learners.

Throughout the weeks of my first semester teaching remote, I was reminded of a popular TED talk by Sherry Turkle (2012), *Connected but Alone?*. In her talk with over 6 million views, she points out how technology can divide us in physical spaces; the device in hand separating us from those we engage with face-to-face. Now, the technology that has been connecting us as a class is the same technology that disconnects us. The desired connections for students and faculty alike have been restricted through this mediated channel. From office hours, to classes, to conversations as we passed in the hallways, we have incurred these significant losses, being disconnected from face-to-face interaction, as we have worked through this COVID-19 time.

Conclusion

As prior research on mediated communication has suggested, face-to-screen interactions have created alternative means of connecting with varying degrees of richness/leanness. I have continued to work on my ability to manage the rich

communication channel of interactive live video streaming for teaching. I build upon what has gone well and adapt as I am faced with new media that emerges. As an educator who teaches in both synchronous, face-to-face and asynchronous, face-to-screen contexts, I have continually adapted to the ever-changing mediated communication tools, seeking richer engagement with learners.

There is uncertainty how what has been learned through the current crisis of COVID-19 can be useful when it subsides. I have wondered what good, if any, has come from this experience and if the potentially lasting changes in the presenting-self are helpful or harmful. Since I can only go forward, I bring the following with me: An existence with mediated communication as the only means of connecting with students and colleagues, a greater appreciation and value should be placed on the face-to-face interaction when it becomes widely available once again. Instead of turning faces to screens, I hope we will see the significance of the connection and richness only face-to-face communication can provide. For cases where mediated communication remains the best or only option, I hope what has been learned about increasing engagement, and ultimately connection, will be used to augment the learner mediated channels as they were used prior to the pandemic. I hope these things can be applied in the classroom and beyond.

So how have mediated interactions shaped the experiences of higher education as faculty and students moved to online and remote teaching and learning? Mediated communication in the COVID-19 context served as both the tool for connection and disconnection. As an educator, I applied selective self-presentation, idealization, channel management, and feedback (Walther et al., 2011) as I strove, along with my students, to meet the challenges of living in a pandemic and shifting teaching and learning to an alternative modality.

From a faculty perspective, I found, much like traditional CMC, the technology allowed for interactivity to manage online presence in many ways. For educators, it may have been to manage the faculty personae, to overcome the reduction or absence of feedback in the classroom, to provide additional opportunities for interaction, and ultimately to connect.

For me, as a faculty member in higher education, I will value aspects of the traditional classroom that were previously taken for granted: The chatter of students entering the classroom, the looks of confusion or excitement as we work through a class session, conversations as we pass in the hallway, a student or colleague stopping by my office for an informal conversation. I hope others will value these things too. I hope that instead of increasing our use of technology we will, instead, set boundaries where technology is not used, where we truly connect

face-to-face without the distraction of computers or other devices. In the context of teaching and learning, I hope we will use technology to augment online learning by using the richer communication available as result of the pandemic. In traditional classrooms, I hope we will value the connection even more than before the pandemic as we engage with our students face-to-face and remember what it was like during its absence.

Mediated communication does not replace face-to-face communication and interaction, but when it is the only option because of a global pandemic, we can use it to interact. We can use it to develop relationships. We can use it to educate. We can use it to connect.

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