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“Wait, I can’t do that anymore!”: pandemic teacher immediacy in college communication classes

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Introduction: The stress and strain due to various aspects of the pandemic affected teaching and learning. Relating between instructors and students, and between students, may never be the same. Adjustments to teaching and learning may still need to be made due to the lingering effects of the pandemic, especially as zoom classrooms continue to be used within communication and other disciplines.

Methods: In this study, the researchers interviewed 15 communication instructors, using indepth semi-structured zoom interviews, about their experiences in the pandemic classroom and how they attempted to build relationships and connections with students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: The researchers found specific immediacy strategies used by instructors, with participants indicating they attempted to use the more traditional teacher nonverbal immediacy behaviors such as eye contact, facial expressions, physical distance, and touch, but were hampered by the wearing of masks, practicing social distancing, and moving to online teaching modalities where student engagement was limited at best. Instructors also adapted verbal immediacy behaviors, as they used various strategies for inviting participation, providing feedback, and being real to develop connections with students, as well as building in specific teaching structures into their pandemic classrooms. In addition, participants indicated they used a variety of additional immediacy-related strategies and behaviors to build relationships once moving to blended HyFlex or online teaching. These strategies were used consistently, as instructors seamlessly moved between the online synchronous classroom, the blended classroom, and the face-to-face classroom with masking and physical distancing required.

Discussion: Our research revealed that there were unique ways relationships were built, typically using different types of media to enact teacher immediacy in nuanced ways. We argue that looking at such teaching using both media multiplexity and embodied pedagogy perspectives can enhance the teacher immediacy literature by demonstrating how teacher immediacy was changed during the pandemic, as media richness increased the likelihood of developing relationships between teachers and students through an embodied pedagogy of caring using technological tools.

KEYWORDS

pandemic, teacher immediacy, embodied pedagogy, media multiplexity, communication

1. Introduction

Online learning has a history that began with mini-courses, and a complete undergraduate online course in 1984, in which [Harasim \(2000\)](#) reported “students would not participate, and long virtual silences ensued” (p. 45). When the World Wide Web was launched in 1992, it provided a broader reach and expanded opportunities for online learning ([Picciano, 1998](#)) and eventually opened up higher education to populations who might not have access to higher education ([Baum and McPherson, 2019](#)).

The most recent demand for online learning was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson et al., 2020). Whether or not instructors were experienced in online teaching, the pandemic required them to rapidly adapt to teaching in different modalities, challenging the normal ways of building connections in the classroom (Tackie, 2022), and consider new modalities such as blended hybrid flexible (HyFlex) classroom, where students and instructors are crossing between the online and synchronous and/or face-to-face environments, for the same class (Beatty, 2019; Imran et al., 2023).

It is important to understand pandemic pedagogy from the perspective of best practices of instructional communication (Beebe and Mottet, 2009; Chatham-Carpenter, 2017; Morreale et al., 2021), especially as we work to increase access in ethical ways to our classrooms in a post-pandemic society (Rudick and Dannels, 2020; Fassett and Atay, 2022) by examining the challenges faced by instructors as they migrated to online delivery modalities. Looking at this from the perspective of instructor competence considered earlier by scholars such as Beebe and Mottet (2009) is important. The purpose of this study is to explore how communication instructors employed one of these practices – teacher immediacy behaviors and strategies – across various modalities, when they transitioned from traditional face-to-face classrooms during the pandemic to alternative modalities.

1.1. Pandemic pedagogy

Scholars report on the difficulties caused by the sudden pivot in education to online environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with opportunities for growth found for post-pandemic education (Bidwell et al., 2020; Blume, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020; Westwick and Morreale, 2021; Kordrostami and Seitz, 2022). Even though the rapid transfer to the online environment was far from ideal, positive outcomes for instructors, and higher education in general, included being better prepared in the future for moving education to a virtual platform when needed, and understanding how we can build learning environments that are inclusive for all learners (Fassett and Atay, 2022), such as HyFlex and blended classrooms (Beatty, 2019; Imran et al., 2023).

Positive outcomes related to student motivation and learning have been found in studies of remote learning during the pandemic. For example, in a study conducted weeks after the transition to remote learning due to the COVID-19 virus, Unger and Meiran (2020) sent out surveys to undergraduate students in an animal behavior psychology course, and asked those students to forward the survey to those they knew. Of the 82 responses from students, Unger and Meiran reported that there were 59.8% who believed that going online “would negatively affect their learning, grades, and also be very different than in-class learning” (p. 260). After 3 weeks, a follow-up survey was sent out, which 74 of 82 students completed, finding that 51.4% felt less anxious about online classes (Unger and Meiran, 2020, p. 279). Rahiem (2021) also found that through the change in learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, university students in Indonesia continued to be motivated. Alqurshi (2020) noted after having moved from a brick and mortar environment to an online platform due to the pandemic, that the lack of interactions between students and teachers affected the ability to learn, yet “analysis of student grades, during the lockdown, ... revealed a significant increase (in grades) when compared to the past 2 years” (Alqurshi, 2020, p. 1081).

Some researchers suggest that students taking online classes due to an emergency have different preferences and needs than students who typically enroll in online classes (Brophy et al., 2021). Regardless of student type, students need to experience an atmosphere of caring and support in the online environment (Tang et al., 2022) and be offered opportunities for engaging with others in the content (Gopinathan et al., 2022; Kordrostami and Seitz, 2022). Beattie et al. (2021) conducted a study of 22 graduate students’ experiences as they transitioned to the online environment, noting the importance of recognizing the challenges in adapting to differing teaching and learning environments, and the importance of providing support structures for them. Similarly, Speiser et al. (2022) collected feedback from students who took a social science course that was online due to a pandemic, and noted the “importance of socio-emotional support and genuine connection among our students and with our students” (p. 11). They also explained how important it is to know aspects of a student’s situation to choose the best ways to assist them in remote learning. A study conducted by Ramkissoon et al. (2020) examined learning platforms at three different institutions of higher education in Mauritius during the pandemic, finding that of the 433 who completed the surveys, 68.4% students preferred platforms such as Whatsapp, for reasons including being able to easily communicate and interact with others, as well as privacy. In a study of 142 undergraduate and graduate students from Malaysia, Gopinathan et al. (2022) found that students who used digital collaboration tools used in their online classrooms, such as padlet, whiteboards, and Kahoot, were more engaged and motivated to learn. It is becoming clear that the environment that students found themselves in during the pandemic, and the resources provided to them to learn during that time, were key to keeping students engaged in their learning.

Pandemic pedagogy modalities, and the rapid transitions required, raised questions about if and how connections with students were being made in these classrooms (Sobaih et al., 2020; Westwick and Morreale, 2021; Gimpel, 2022; Parsloe and Smith, 2022; Clughen, 2023; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023; Salarvand et al., 2023). Tecce DeCarlo et al. (2022) found that overall faculty and students were able to adapt, and that through the use of technology, connections, engagement, effective teaching and learning was possible. Schwartzman (2020) explained, in his autoethnographic reflection on the Facebook group Pandemic Pedagogy, that during the first year of the pandemic, several themes emerged, including questions and concerns about students learning from “home,” the benefits of synchronous and asynchronous online education, and concerns about “access, equity and inclusion” (p. 508).

Experiences of faculty moving into and around the pandemic pedagogy space has been more limited, with research focusing on more autoethnographic, ethnographic, and interpretive perspectives (e.g., El-Soussi, 2022; Parsloe and Smith, 2022; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023; Wiant Cummins, 2023), and little research on how instructional communication practices were adapted to create high-presence classrooms during a time when transitions had to happen quickly. Some are now studying how faculty are modifying their teaching practices as they move back into on-campus classrooms (e.g., Reyes-Velázquez and Pacheco-Sepúlveda, 2022), and others are advocating for a more critical lens in looking at “business as usual” in classrooms (e.g., Fassett and Atay, 2022), lest we continue to privilege the “higher quality” of in-person learning” (Wright, 2022, p. 161) and forget to “build meaningful bonds with students having diverse

experiences living and learning during the pandemics” (Wright, 2022, p. 161).

This critical lens is consistent with the notion of “embodied pedagogy,” which scholars have used to make a renewed commitment to creating inclusive and engaged spaces in classrooms for all students in a post-pandemic world (McElroy and Jackson, 2021; Clughen, 2023; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023), similar to Hooks (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, which requires teachers and students be “wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (p. 21). During the pandemic, Wiant Cummins (2023) noted that “Teaching through a computer screen necessarily changed how I interact and engage with students, how our bodies can enact wholeness together” (p. 1), which was true of all instructors who worked on bringing their whole selves to their pandemic classrooms.

Consistent with “embodied pedagogy,” researchers have looked at the importance of building a community of care in the pandemic classroom (Clemens and Robinson, 2021; Tang et al., 2022; Carte, 2023), focusing on how teachers demonstrated care to students as they transitioned into different modalities. Clemens and Robinson (2021) provided four best practices to create such an environment during the pandemic, including employing “supportive communication practices” (p. 136), practicing “collective sensemaking” (p. 137), fostering “inclusive pedagogical practices” (p. 138), and engaging in mindfulness. They advocated that these practices continue in the post-pandemic classroom environment. However, it is less clear how instructors did this in the pandemic environment, which is one of the goals of this study.

1.2. Social presence and teacher immediacy

Due to the increased prevalence of online learning and the likelihood of it continuing as one of the new normals of teaching in a post-pandemic higher education space, instructors must focus on innovating these spaces to reach all students within the college population. One of the ways to do this is by increasing the likelihood that students experience the presence of both faculty members and students, a concept often called “social presence” (Weidlich and Bastiaens, 2017). Dixon et al. (2017) assert that “learning occurs best when students are involved with the content, other students, and the instructor” (p. 37). Employing strategies which lead to this type of engagement, during the remote learning required by a pandemic, became especially important in a time of physical distancing, when social isolation became threatening to students’ mental health (Bono et al., 2020; Borkoski and Roos, 2020).

Multiple scholars have explored the role of social presence for the online classroom, determining that it is an important “sub-presence” of teacher presence (Kreijns et al., 2014; Swan and Richardson, 2017; Rapanta et al., 2020), and includes the “social communication channels” used by teachers to “maintain and possibly enhance the lost spontaneous student–student and student–teacher interaction” (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 938). As noted by Dixon et al. (2017), this aspect of teacher presence is similar to the practice of teacher immediacy (Morreale et al., 2021), which has been studied in the past by instructional communication scholars, as well as the concept of teacher rapport studied by other researchers (cf. Glazier, 2021).

The concept of immediacy was originally conceptualized by Mehabian (1971), with a focus on both physical and verbal behaviors which could be used to reduce distance between people. This was expanded by researchers interested in how it played out in instructional settings, with the definition of immediacy becoming understood as “nonverbal and verbal behaviors which reduce physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and their students” (Christophel and Gorham, 1995, p. 292). Others noted that the perception of such closeness enhanced the quality of interactions in the classroom (Beebe and Mottet, 2009; Morreale, 2015). When combined with interaction opportunities, Gimpel (2022) considers immediacy – whether verbal or nonverbal – to be “an antecedent of social presence” (Gimpel, 2022, p. 34), in which a person feels connected within an online environment to others both socially and emotionally (Dixon et al., 2017).

Immediacy between students and instructors has been researched from multiple perspectives, with the effects of teacher immediacy found to increase learning, as well as a willingness to communicate in class (Fallah, 2014; Sheybani, 2019; Amirian et al., 2021; Foutz et al., 2021; Liu, 2021; Tormey, 2021; Zheng, 2021; DeraBethshan et al., 2022). Zheng (2021) advised that “teachers can establish an approachable classroom rapport that stimulates academic success, alters behavior of students, and provides a conducive learning environment” (p. 6) by using teacher immediacy behaviors. So what are these behaviors?

Nonverbal immediacy includes communication behaviors such as eye contact, decreased physical distance, smiling, touching, vocal expressiveness, and relaxed body positions, which tend to signal liking and positive affect (Richmond and McCroskey, 2000; Frymier et al., 2019), while verbal immediacy is created by “verbal messages that show empathy, openness, kindness, praise, feelings of inclusiveness, and willingness to engage students in communication” (Ballester, 2015, p.10). Examples of verbal immediacy behaviors are the use of humor, praise, informal dialogue, self-disclosure, asking questions, and providing feedback (Gorham, 1988), all which help decrease psychological distance between the teacher and student. Some scholars have recognized that it is easier to control verbal immediacy behaviors than nonverbal ones in the online classroom context (Baker, 2010). However, Gimpel (2022) notes that with the use of interactive technology tools in a “media rich” environment, even online environments can provide a context rich for this type of interaction with both nonverbal and verbal communication.

Dixon et al. (2017) looked at past research from a traditional classroom setting, which studied interaction “as involving four factors: skills engagement, emotional engagement, participation/interaction engagement and performance engagement” (p. 39). They found that online immediacy strategies, such as social media, were being used by instructors, but more traditional forms of teacher immediacy were not used. It is unclear whether this is true of other online teaching environments, such as synchronous online classes used during the pandemic. More research needs to be done to understand how the pandemic impacted instructor immediacy choices, as they adapted to new learning environments using technology.

The theory of media multiplexity has been used to examine how the greater use of various forms of media can create closeness. The concept emerged through research pairing online interactions with human connections. Haythornthwaite (2001) observed the need for researching technical and social interaction and how

exchanges through computer media could create ties with students in a distance learning class, concluding that “the more restricted but stronger ties associated with teamwork support more sustained, task-focused, and product-oriented ... interactions” (p. 223). This study led to other studies conducted by [Haythornthwaite \(2005\)](#), leading to the “media multiplexity” term being created, which looks at both strong and weak ties between people, depending on the available media used within the relationship to sustain the relationship. The overall findings demonstrated that “organizationally established means of communication can lay the groundwork for latent and weak tie connectivity, and a base on which strong ties can grow” ([Haythornthwaite, 2005](#), p. 142).

More recently, research was conducted using the media multiplexity theory to understand how students and instructors interact out-of-class. [Clark-Gordon \(2019\)](#) explored the way undergraduate students and graduate students interacted with their professors using various types of media. [Clark-Gordon \(2019\)](#) found that “the number of media used to communicate with one’s instructor indirectly impacted their communication satisfaction, affective and cognitive learning, and motivation, through their feelings of closeness with their instructor” (p. ii), with stronger results for those undergraduate students who liked online communication. More research is needed on how media was used during the pandemic by instructors to create both strong and weak ties with their students, in a time where in-person face-to-face channels of communication were limited by pandemic restrictions.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a gap in literature has been found regarding how instructors adapted face-to-face pedagogy tools, which they had used in the past but were difficult to translate to a virtual classroom, as well as how the pandemic challenged them in building relationships with their students and the accompanying strategies and behaviors they used to reduce the physical and psychological distance between them and their students in a virtual classroom. Based on this need, our research sought to address the following research question: “How did college instructors adapt their use of teacher immediacy to create connections with students in their communication classes during a pandemic?”

2. Methods

Using indepth semi-structured interviews, the researchers interviewed college and university communication instructors who taught during the pandemic. Participants were recruited, using an approved IRB protocol recruitment strategy, from across the United States. The 15 faculty members (11 female, 4 male), ranged in age from 25 to 63. Eleven of the interviewees had PhD degrees ($n = 11$), three were pursuing their PhD degree after their MA degree, and one participant had only a MA degree. Ten of them taught at the undergraduate level, while five taught both undergraduate and graduate-level courses. All but one of the participants were Caucasian, and the other one was Asian. Most of the faculty members taught in interpersonal, organizational, and critical communication areas, with three of them teaching public relations and media-related classes. All of the faculty taught over zoom during the pandemic, as well as asynchronously, and some taught their classes in a hybrid or HyFlex format, when allowed.

Each of the participants participated in a 30–60 min recorded zoom-based interview, in which they were asked questions related to (a) aspects of their face-to-face pedagogy used in the past that were difficult to translate to a virtual classroom, (b) how the pandemic challenged them in building relationships with their students, and (c) communication strategies they used to reduce the physical and psychological distance between them and their students in a virtual classroom.

The transcripts were initially analyzed by coding for specific teacher immediacy behaviors and strategies, and then analyzed inductively, looking for frequently mentioned items to create additional coding categories, following abductive coding principles ([Tracy, 2020](#)). To do this, we followed several steps for our data analysis. First, we read through the interview transcripts holistically to gain familiarity with the data. Second, we created an initial codebook of themes or codes pertaining to teacher immediacy, based on literature reviewed. We then used the initial codebook to code two of the 15 interviews to validate initial codes, comparing our codes to determine if our initial codes needed amending.

Additional codes emerged during this process, which did not fit into previous teacher immediacy categories. Using [Glaser’s \(1965\)](#) constant-comparison method, we then compared emerging codes to those in the initial codebook, reaching convergence on amended codes. Using the amended codebook, we then individually coded the remaining interview transcripts of the data by splitting the rest of the transcripts in half with each researcher coding half of the remaining transcripts. When additional new codes emerged, we held data conferences ([Braithwaite et al., 2017](#)) to discuss the need for additional codes to be added to the codebook.

We noted theoretical saturation had been achieved when no new codes emerged. After finishing our coding, we discussed findings and identified the most frequently identified immediacy behaviors and overall strategies used by the instructors to decrease distance with students. We then selected exemplars of each of the themes, exploring potential implications for teacher immediacy for multiple teaching modalities.

3. Results

In this section, we first look at the challenges the participants faced while teaching during a pandemic. We then explore the instructors’ use of specific strategies to decrease the psychological and physical distance in their classrooms, as they attempted to create a community of care for their students during a pandemic. As seen in [Table 1](#), these strategies did not just include the more traditional nonverbal and verbal immediacy behaviors, but were part of a larger toolbox the instructors used to create immediacy in their classrooms; thus, we use the term strategies to refer to the multitude of behaviors they employed to increase immediacy within their classrooms.

3.1. Pandemic pedagogy challenges

The pandemic provided unique challenges for the instructors in this study, as they worked to build connections in various ways in classrooms that were anything but normal. To begin with, in spring 2020, some professors either did not have a spring break, or had to use

TABLE 1 Instructor immediacy strategies.

Nonverbal immediacy strategies	Verbal immediacy strategies	Care strategies	Technology strategies
<i>Maintaining eye contact</i> (e.g., cameras on/off; masks required)	<i>Inviting participation</i> (i.e., informal dialogue, calling students by names, asking & answering of questions, class sharing of jokes)	<i>Being accessible</i> (i.e., being approachable and available outside of class).	<i>Building on teaching platform capabilities</i> (e.g., polls, chat, breakout rooms, spotlighting)
<i>Adapting to lack of physical distance and touch</i> (i.e., social distance requirements; words vs. touch)	<i>Employing feedback mechanisms</i> (e.g., peer reviews; midterm surveys; intentional use of praise)	<i>Being adaptable</i> (e.g., changing policies such as having flexible deadlines and “offering grace”)	<i>Using google tech options</i> (e.g., google docs, forms, & jamboards)
<i>Being more nonverbally expressive</i> (i.e., gestures, facial expressions)	<i>Being real</i> (i.e., vulnerability & self-disclosure; having a sense of humor about mistakes)	<i>Showing empathy & care</i> (e.g., focusing on their students’ well being, making sure the students knew they would help them succeed)	<i>Employing external applications</i> (e.g., annotate, eli review, & hypotheses.is)
<i>Using other participation cues</i> (e.g., hand-raise & chat functions)	<i>Providing additional teaching resources</i> (e.g., video announcements, explicit instructions, reminders)		<i>Playing music</i> (e.g., using students’ favorites to connect with students)
<i>Enacting embodied performances differently</i> (e.g., dress; people in background; body challenges)			<i>Providing alternate ways to get in touch</i> (e.g., google phone numbers, discord, slack, instant messenger)

their spring break to work on transferring their face-to-face classes to online modalities. From the start of the pandemic, this caused anxiety and a new type of stress. As the semester continued, instructors were faced with challenges of learning new online platforms, having to create and manage activities using new tools with their students, as well as attempting to create connections with their students in environments where they had to adapt their nonverbal and verbal communication. For instructors tasked with teaching communication concepts, including nonverbal and verbal communication, this was especially taxing. Communication concepts are often taught by various demonstrations in a room filled with energy, which is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in an online classroom. The need to be online also affected social opportunities to connect outside class in person.

The instructors in this study mentioned trying to set up their classroom structures in such a way that students potentially had more opportunities to engage with them and each other, using techniques such as flipped classrooms and hybrid course modalities. In some cases, the class would meet in person 1 day, and over zoom the next day. Or to maintain physical distancing, half of the students would come 1 day and the other half the next day. Some instructors offered their classes in a HyFlex manner, with some students attending class online synchronously and some in-person at the same time.

Although the available classroom structural changes allowed instructors to still teach during a pandemic, as will be seen in subsequent sections, such changes in the modality of the class brought unintended consequences related to the building of relationships and teacher immediacy. When allowed to interact with smaller groups of students, the instructors were able to get to know some of their students better, but the experience of the online students was not the same as those who were face-to-face, nor did either group get to experience the full range of activities typically done in a face-to-face classroom. In addition, the wearing of masks when face-to-face cut off certain channels of communication, hurting the immediacy between students and the instructor, as well as between students. If it was a

HyFlex class, where the instructor still had to wear a mask, this cut out even more of the possible immediacy for instructors with their students who were in the zoom environment. At other times, most of the students preferred attending the synchronous online class, but did not keep their cameras on, while only a few showed up in class.

Some instructors mentioned that their departments allowed them to cap enrollments in their zoom classrooms, to allow for more personal interactions. Once coming back to campus for classes, when there were still physical distancing and masking requirements, some of these caps remained in place, in order to allow for physical distancing between students. In presentation-based classes, there were creative ways incorporated to get students to present by presenting in small groups on certain days, presenting virtually, finding their own audiences, etc.

Managing adaptations to courses, due to the need to rapidly move to online environments, was challenging for many instructors, yet most were able to embrace adaptability or “pivoting.” Sarah (pseudonyms used throughout) mentioned that the transition “definitely took a toll on me and... I think it... made me much more willing to challenge the norms and be comfortable stepping outside of the box.” When asked about the transition, Rosa stated, “I think I’ve learned a lot about myself... I’m capable of these things, like, should I need to be able to pivot? I can. (With)... that ability to pivot, I think I learned a lot.” Rosa initially had questioned, “how can I try to figure out how to do it the best I possibly can?” She answered her own question, pointing out how she learned that “this does not need to be an exact... replication of my face-to-face classroom... So how can I make this online classroom space the best it can be without in some ways pining for what I’m not going to have?”

Not only did instructors struggle with teaching concepts and connecting, there were also challenges personally as they navigated anxiety due to topics regarding life situations the pandemic caused, such as being in quarantine, worrying about getting or spreading COVID-19, and managing new living situations as children and spouses were all using the internet at home and needing care and

attention while the instructors were teaching or working with students. As they were acknowledging and navigating these extra concerns, instructors realized that their students were also having to figure out how to balance similar concerns, with some dealing with the death of a loved one due to COVID-19, losing jobs, and/or putting extra time into jobs. These issues directly and indirectly affected the learning environment, requiring instructors to adapt their pandemic pedagogy strategies in non-traditional ways, as seen in the next sections.

3.2. Nonverbal immediacy strategies

In particular, nonverbal behaviors had to be adapted because of the loss of available channels due to having to practice social distancing, being in quarantine, or moving to a synchronous online classroom. As seen in [Table 1](#), instructors changed the typical nonverbal immediacy behaviors of eye contact, physical distance, touch, gestures, and facial expressions. In doing so, they built in alternative participation cues and embodied pedagogical strategies for their pandemic classrooms.

Eye contact in a synchronous class was different from being face-to-face, and advice on how to create it through a camera varied. Many suggested looking straight at the camera, while other advice was to look at the box that represented a person. Putting extra effort and energy into attempting to look alert and energized through eye contact, as well as through expressions and gestures through a camera were mentioned. Eye contact was lost if the cameras were off or if the class was asynchronous. If the cameras were on during a class, there were reports of students cleaning, lying in bed, driving, etc., which put a different spin on what was being communicated nonverbally. Facial expressions were also spoken about as being challenging when classes were face-to-face with masks required. Eyes had to be extra expressive, and even then, using non-verbal facial communication was hard to translate.

The need to keep a distance from students, and to keep students at a distance from each other when classes transitioned back to face-to-face, due to pandemic restrictions, created challenges regarding activities and group discussions. Instructors who had previously walked up to students in a class were keeping their distance. Also, one instructor, Jen, who had a practice of hugging, had to find other ways of communicating care, commenting that she started saying, “I love your faces and then blowing kisses,” due to the need to social distance by keeping six feet away or holding classes online.

Some instructors mentioned how in a face-to-face class they used gestures and spoke with their hands, which they adapted in various ways, including being overly animated in front of the camera in hopes of recreating energy like there was in a face-to-face class. And yet this was not always possible, as Hannah mentioned: “I wasn’t able to use as many gestures online since I was a small little square.” For students, who often had their cameras off, gesturing in the synchronous online class was adjusted by students using “hand raise” features, or by entering comments in the chat.

Other participation cues had to be adapted in the online class, since nonverbal information was difficult to gain. For example, when the breakout room tool was used, a professor was not able to simply walk near the group to hear how the discussion was going, as they would in the face-to-face classroom. Instead, the instructor could

“pop” into the room, which was not as subtle as walking near the group would have been. It was also hard to know if a student was “ghosting” or had left their square “on” as if they were participating, but may not be available or interacting at all. In a face-to-face classroom, an instructor could look and see if a student was engaged and tracking with the class, but in the online classroom, especially if a student’s camera was off, the instructor could not tell if a student was paying attention or confused about something. In order to know what was going on with a student, the student would need to be asked, and either speak about how they were, or share their response in the chat.

Instructors also talked about the power of the virtual environment for both them and their students, as their pedagogy became embodied in different ways during the pandemic. Jorge commented that he thought “the challenge (was) to see people as whole people, because we only see like a window, and if, especially if students rarely turn on their cameras, it’s just challenging... (to) just see people as whole people in general.” However, students who might not have normally spoken up now had new ways to communicate in class using chat features and non-face-to-face ways of communicating. Even with cameras off, they were able to participate.

When cameras were on, students sometimes were enacting their performances in ways they normally would not have, with family members popping in and out of videos, students showing up in their pajamas or half-dressed, and sometimes even doing things like using drugs in the background. When giving virtual presentations, they might read their speeches off of the screen in front of them, “faking” eye contact with their virtual audience.

These body performances also affected instructors, with a different type of “embodied pedagogy,” as instructors tried to make connections with their students. The instructors recognized this, as Haley noted that teaching became “a bigger performance behind the screen” and felt somewhat manufactured in its engagement with students. Haley went on to state that she was always “thinking about how do we engage” and “how do we be more present,” as she tried to “model behavior for students who have to do this, knowing their jobs.”

While the online modality was often mentioned to be strange and not always comfortable, Madeline shared how she was grateful her large body was not the focus any more for her students. Being in the virtual space was freeing and allowed her to be innovative. “They look at me differently. ... It’s been glorious.” As she has been allowed to continue teaching over zoom, she explained: “I do not have to be cognizant of how I move through the space, and I get to be more authentically me, and students seem authentic.” This is similar to the potential freedom for someone who has a visible disability, when that disability does not become so obvious to others.

It was clear from our interviews that instructors experienced the online environment, and its accompanying nonverbal context, differently than they did the face-to-face classroom, and adaptations had to be made around the presentation of self in these environments, which affected the enacting of teacher immediacy. Sometimes that was more freeing, and at other times it created challenges. Whatever the instructors did, as Jorge stated, they tried to “make the students feel like they are still in person.” Nonverbal immediacy strategies helped the instructors do that, but the use of nonverbal immediacy had to be broadened beyond traditional nonverbal immediacy behaviors to include other types of participation cues and embodied pedagogical strategies for the pandemic teaching context.

3.3. Verbal immediacy strategies

Instructors often enacted teacher immediacy by incorporating more typical verbal immediacy behaviors used in the face-to-face setting, such as calling students by name, self-disclosing, using humor, asking questions, and encouraging class participation. However, these behaviors looked differently in the pandemic classroom, as instructors used various strategies to invite participation, provide feedback, and be real, as well as incorporating specific teaching resources, as seen in [Table 1](#).

3.3.1. Inviting participation

To invite participation from students, instructors encouraged informal dialogue, called students by names, and created a student-centered classroom culture in which the asking and answering of questions became the norm. They also employed the use of humor to invite more students to participate. These behaviors were each adapted in ways that were unique to the pandemic classroom, as noted below.

Instructors used many strategies to engage in informal dialogue with students. These informal conversations were sometimes intentional, such as when zoom classes were opened early and instructors stayed on afterwards to answer students' questions, or when they brought in specific "questions of the day" to get students to open up about how they were doing or used a Google form as a check-in on students' well-being. Such questions might have to do with the class topic for the day, but more often than not, instructors mentioned asking check-in questions such as "where are you on the roller coaster of this week," "what good things are happening right now," "what have you done for yourself this week," "what are your wins this week," "how are you feeling in this moment," and "tell me what today is – thumbs up, in the middle, or thumbs down." By asking such questions, Madeline explained that they were "making an argument to take care of yourself so you could be a communicator." Several instructors also told students they could email them if they did not feel comfortable conversing about such things in that type of public space, and some students took advantage of that. Sometimes students would come early to the online class because they knew they could have conversations with the instructor about such things, but that was the exception rather than the rule for the instructors in this study. Such opportunities allowed instructors to gauge what the needs were of their students during this time, providing resources as needed.

Instructors recognized the importance of calling students by names in the process of inviting participation, noting the advantage of having students' names on zoom "squares," but also shared the difficulty in learning students' names with cameras being off in zoom-based classrooms, or when masking in the face-to-face classroom. However, something as simple as calling students by name was one way instructors could, as Jorge commented, "create ... immediacy from a distance."

Many instructors mentioned that they broke up the classroom time into chunks, moving between information giving, discussion, and applications intentionally, to invite student participation in class sessions. Haley noted, for example: "Since I am relational in my approach, we do stuff in class. I might lecture a little bit, but my lectures are always question-oriented, so it's always involving students." Other instructors mentioned they employed such things as "guided discussions," "talking in small groups about their answers," "think-pair-share," and "creating a conversation with students, not just with

me as the instructor." However, even with such tools used, some instructors noted that even with that "conversation-based learning," students were still "missing out on valuable conversations with classmates" in the pandemic classroom, as well as the more traditional "classroom engagement level," with it "not feeling like it was a community."

Whether check-in questions or questions related to the class topic, instructors built in unique mechanisms for participation in the pandemic classroom, using zoom chats, breakout rooms, polls, jamboards, and writing with people on shared documents to encourage students to both ask and answer questions in ways that engaged them and decreased the distance between the instructors and students. When using zoom chats, some of the instructors noted the advantage of the zoom environment, as explained by Gloria: "I like the fact that people can ask questions at any time and put that into the chat – kind of interrupting a class where you could not really do that in a face-to-face class."

In addition, some instructors mentioned they used humor and jokes to encourage student participation. For example, Gloria shared how jokes were not only welcomed, but became a ritual in one of her courses, with one student always checking in with a joke, and others putting jokes or riddles into the chat, as a response to that student sharing. She also used this strategy to break up the monotony of the zoom classroom environment, as a sort of "pressure relief valve" for students, when it was clear that a break was needed.

Regardless of what they chose to do, the instructors in this study adapted the usual verbal immediacy behaviors to invite participation, in their attempts to build relationships and create rapport with students. In short, as Beth noted, "It's really centering the learning space and environment as an area where we are exchanging thoughts, ideas and questions" and creating a collaborative student-centered learning environment.

3.3.2. Providing feedback mechanisms

Instructors noted that they used feedback strategically during the pandemic when providing input to students on their assignments and ideas, and seeking to improve the class during a pandemic. Instructors used multiple mechanisms for getting feedback on how the class was going, in order to make changes which could impact student learning and engagement during the course of a class, as they worked with students to co-create a classroom environment that was open and engaging during the pandemic. This was another way that instructors built connections with their students with verbal immediacy.

Instructors noted that they built in opportunities for students to provide each other feedback through various means during the pandemic. Whatever tools were chosen, these opportunities allowed students to experience each other as actual individuals during a time when they were not able to get to know each other in person as readily as they would in a face-to-face class. For example, instructors used the chat to provide feedback to students, and encouraged their students to do likewise. Jen noted that "I tried to get them to use "like" reactions ... in hopes to get more kind of nonverbal feedback happening" during class. Paying attention to the chat while class was going on was another thing the instructor had to keep track of during the class but was seen as important, as Rosa stated: "I just tried to be a part of that conversation, in addition to what was happening verbally in the classroom space." Not all of the instructors agreed on the efficacy of more common tools, such as discussion

boards typically used in online classes, with some noting, for example, that they quit using discussion boards in the virtual COVID-19 space, opting for other strategies, because of the overuse of such tools during the pandemic.

Some instructors talked about the “labor” it took to make sure that the feedback they gave in writing was encouraging, often finding ways to praise students, so as not to create even more distance. Madeline noted: “I’m constantly trying to reduce negative feelings that would create distance” and to “engage with people who might be disengaged.” Beth also talked about the importance of giving good feedback and the time it took during the pandemic to get it right.

I always prided myself on giving good feedback and a lot of feedback ... but I multiplied that by what it felt like a billion and spent so much more time with students’ writing, giving them tons and tons of comments. ... I kind of just wanted to sit with them for some time and just to make them feel like I’m there, that I’m not just there with them in the classroom, but I’m sitting here with their work.

Mary noted that she reached out differently to students who were doing well on assignments than those who were not, being more “intrusive” with those who were not doing assignments, because she “refused to be ghosted,” as she sometimes felt she was in the virtual class sessions.

An additional feedback practice that many of the instructors built in during the pandemic to engage their students and decrease distance between them and their students was some version of a “start, stop, keep” feedback cycle, in which they asked students what could be improved during the semester, to help them learn and be more engaged, with Madeline explaining, for example, that “I want to know what they think, and I’m willing to shift if we need to shift” and let them “feel like they have been heard.” The instructors in this study saw such strategies as especially important during a time when you could not get to know your students in the same way as you do when your classes are face-to-face. Leigh noted that this allowed the students to see the instructor as “a facilitator of the class, in which everyone can contribute something to the class.”

In short, paying attention to feedback opportunities and listening to students was another way that teachers used verbal immediacy to decrease the psychological and physical distance with their students in a pandemic classroom. The types of feedback included encouraging students to provide feedback to each other in multiple ways and spending more time building in intentional feedback for students’ work to make up for the lack of face-to-face contact.

3.3.3. Being real

In our interviews, instructors talked about how they more intentionally incorporated vulnerability, self-effacing humor, and disclosure to build relationships during the pandemic. They built upon what they were already comfortable doing, but enhanced that by becoming more “real” in order to create more intentional connections during a pandemic.

Instructors talked about the need to be vulnerable in front of their students, and not worrying about whether students would see them as weak for doing so. Doing so allowed them to make connections in

a time when everyone was struggling. Madeline noted that “I think they see me as a very real person. I tell them I make mistakes.” In turn, Madeline believes that this kind of vulnerability means that students can “trust that they can tell me things and they’ll be safe.” In addition, Mary noted that this kind of vulnerability helps to “create a sense of a human being on the other side of the screen.”

All of the instructors mentioned the need to adapt their classroom strategies, and how having a sense of humility and humor helped with this. For example, Haley mentioned that having a sense of humor and being willing to laugh at “trying new things on the fly,” especially when you realize “this activity is insane,” meant that you can “just own that in the middle of the class,” with everyone laughing about it together. Beth agreed, noting that recognizing that students could just “laugh along with me” made it easier for everyone to get through the difficult time of adjusting to a new normal in the college classroom, and provided a model for students to recognize that it is okay to fail.

Other instructors would tell their classes about their own experiences, to allow the students to see them as both a resource and a teacher. In doing so, it was important to acknowledge when you were also struggling, as Sarah noted:

Just so they knew, like we are all just bumping along, and you know what, sometimes bumping along is as good as it’s going to get, and we’re going to call that a win. I forced myself to be a little bit more open with them, to be a little bit more transparent, because I think that also opened the door for them to feel like it was okay to not be super okay.

Some even talked about their experiences with having COVID-19 and what that was like in their families as members of the class, with one professor noting that students reached out to her personally when she had COVID-19 to make sure she was okay.

Several instructors talked about asking questions that were not related to the class content, since they saw “teaching as relationship,” such as what their favorite restaurants were, the name of a musical artist they are embarrassed to listen to, and what their favorite weird animal was. Other instructors used the opportunity to bring in their home environment to make themselves seem more real, with examples including having their cat be the class mascot, taking a walk, and letting the students see their backyard or garden.

Multiple instructors mentioned building in opportunities for students to introduce themselves and self-disclose with each other. Mary noted this helped students “make each other three dimensional and not just names.” Some of the quieter students would post things in the zoom chat, responding to each other, rather than speaking up in class. When teachers drew attention to that in the class, Rosa explained that “it helped the students at least feel like they were making some kind of connection during the pandemic,” being “a little less alone for 1 hour or 3 hours a week.”

In short, another way instructors in this study demonstrated verbal immediacy was by being real with their students through the use of self-disclosure and vulnerability, as well as self-effacing humor. All of these actions illustrate that the instructors in this study went beyond just the use of typical verbal immediacy behaviors to create connections with students in the challenging time of the pandemic.

3.3.4. Providing additional teaching resources

The final verbal immediacy strategy instructors in this study used was to provide students with additional teaching resources, which supported the students' learning in the absence of meeting face-to-face. These are included under verbal immediacy strategies since they involved interactive teaching strategies the instructors used to decrease the distance in their classrooms, consistent with the United States Department of Education's "regular and substantive interaction" (34 CFR § 600.2) guidelines for distance education (National Archives, 2023). Along with the other "substantive contact" strategies mentioned in the results, the instructors in this study created clear lesson plans, incorporated announcements in various forms, and involved students in developing course content and building community.

Over time, the instructors in this study recognized that "spontaneous online teaching does not tend to be effective" and that "you have to be very intentional about what you are going to do if you want it to be effective." They talked about this in terms of lesson planning and thinking ahead about how long activities and breakout rooms will take in a particular class session, as an example. This intentionality also involved building in necessary activities and assignments to help students work towards their final projects or assignments over the course of a semester. These same types of strategies are seen as best practices in asynchronous classrooms (*cf.* Glazier, 2021), but many of the instructors interviewed in this study had not taught in that format previously so had to adjust their more spontaneous teaching style for something more structured, without a lot of instruction on how to do so.

Additionally, several instructors talked about the importance of providing reminders to students at the beginning of each week and/or at the beginning of each class. These included information about upcoming assignment due dates, with time provided in class for questions about such assignments. Sometimes those announcements, if done at the beginning of the week, were video announcements, "to create more of a connection and to make the students feel like they are actually part of a class." Similarly, instructors often provided overviews of what was happening that week, along with going over a specific day's agenda at the beginning of class. All of these extra teaching resources took time to create and implement in the pandemic pedagogy classroom.

As classes quickly transitioned to online platforms, other ways to connect were found. Many instructors recognized that they needed students to provide the pop culture and personal references to be analyzed in the classes and that by doing so the students were "collaborators." Mary noted that "instead of me having to find everything, they find it, and bring it to class and talk about it." She added: "They love that, because they get to find things, songs and comments and things that mean something to them that they care about, instead of me trying to figure out what they care about." For example, Haley mentioned how she invited her class to share a video clip of anything: "news, movies, TV shows, everything...commercials." She added that it "gave us...genres to explore" and that specifically "music...is great at engaging people." She would play the clip and then they would "talk about how that applies to the course content." At other times, they would send out emails when they saw a random article or happening that related to the class, to let the students know they were thinking of them.

Additionally, some instructors intentionally structured their courses to build community. For example, Mary shared how she told students they were responsible for each other, and provided recommendations for how to build teams with a goal of creating communities. She mentioned that her "classes are effective...when my students become friends in class." Jorge assigned his students to groups "to foster community among them (and) also ... elevate ... classroom discussions, because they get to know each other."

In short, the instructors in this study adapted multiple verbal immediacy strategies and behaviors, such as inviting participation, incorporating feedback, and being real to decrease the physical and psychological distance between them and their students, and to build rapport and connections with their students. They also brought in additional teaching resources to help students feel connected. These behaviors were adapted to the pandemic classroom in creative ways, as instructors found a way around the limitations inherent in the pandemic classrooms to engage their students in learning. Instructors built on what they were already familiar with and used to, enhancing the use of verbal behaviors to make up for loss of relationships and connections caused by not being in-person in traditional ways. All of these teaching structures and resources, used by the instructors to decrease physical and psychological distance in pandemic classrooms, demonstrate the importance of expanding verbal immediacy beyond the typical verbal behaviors used in a face-to-face classroom.

3.4. Care strategies

In addition, the instructors in this study also attempted to create additional virtual opportunities to make up for the missed opportunities in person. As seen in Table 1, they did this by being accessible to students outside the class, being adaptable with policies to provide grace when needed, and working to show more empathy and caring than normal.

For these instructors, being accessible meant being approachable and available outside of class for individual and group meetings. This included offering virtual office hours during the day and at night, as well as employing various platforms for communication (e.g., discord; slack; instant messenger; Google phone numbers). Sometimes they would keep the zoom class open when they were not meeting, in order to encourage students to "stop by" and ask questions. Some instructors required students to meet with them one-on-one virtually early on in the semester to get to know each other better.

Mary explained that these types of connections were done to provide a "sense of connecting us," and "this sense of immediacy created the connection that students were craving." In some of the cases, Madeline noted that "meetings have gotten better with students because they are online," noting that "students select and really dedicate that time, and nobody has to trudge to a weird place and try and find the office." Students tended to turn their cameras on in those one-on-one meetings, which Rosa said "allowed me to see them and make a connection."

Being available to students at hours they would not have normally been at the office also created a sense of relationship. Rosa explained: "If I have 5 minutes, and I'm in a space where I can hop on teams, then that is a huge success between me and my students, building that relationship because I'm available real quick." Doing so means that an

instructor had to be intentional about building relationships, as Sarah noted, “because if you are not going to make an intentional effort, there was not going to be a relationship.”

In addition, there were multiple examples of the instructors working to make sure they had adaptable policies, to help the students be successful and feel taken care of during the global pandemic. It came down to “honoring them as people,” Madeline stated. The instructors’ interviews were filled with words like “grace” and “flexibility,” as they worked to meet students’ needs. Even the desire to have students keep their cameras on in the virtual classroom, in order to create immediacy, was eventually not required by most of the instructors, because of respect for students’ privacy and a desire to maintain a level playing field between students who might not have the same access to technology and reliable internet.

Many of the instructors would often give extended deadlines for students to complete assignments, knowing that many of the students were “essential workers” and working longer hours to help take care of their loved ones. They also recognized that their students might be “competing for the internet with family members” when they were home, even if they had internet access at home. At the same time the instructors were making these types of accommodations, they did recognize that they could not meet the needs of all of their students, as Karrie stated, “it’s hard to accommodate everything, to support every possible situation that could be a result of the pandemic.” Instructors also recognized the importance of “encouraging professionalism” and that students would need to be open with them about what they needed in a timely manner.

As they gave grace to students, some instructors began to question the “norms” they were used to in teaching, and began to redesign their classroom expectations in ways that made more sense in terms of student learning, as Sarah stated.

This made me really think about a lot of the practices and norms and question why they are norms. For example, my students have proven to me countless times that they know what I want them to know and that they’ve met the course objectives, so why am I going to give them a final exam when they’ve already proven it to me, and I’m just going to add more stress to an already very stressed out population.

Hannah also questioned typical norms, when deciding to not take off points for late assignments: “I’ve definitely been more understanding and empathetic, and realizing it’s not worth it in the grand scheme of things, ... as long as they do the assignment and they are learning,” recognizing the need for them to be “getting the support that they need at a time of need.” Other instructors looked at their attendance policies and thought about changing those, as Jorge said he did with his. After he did so, he was surprised to find that he still had good attendance, which he attributed to the interactivity he was building into the classroom, encouraging conversations between classmates through the use of technology tools.

It was clear that the instructors in this study demonstrated their caring and empathy towards their students by the choices they made to be intentionally accessible and adaptable with them, showing the students were “cared about not only as students, but also as people.” As they focused on their students’ “emotional and mental health and well-being,” they worked to make sure the students knew they wanted

them to succeed and were going to help them during a difficult time. In doing so, as Sarah explained, “we were not just feeding them academically, but we were also feeding them as individuals, and giving them coping skills and reminding them that we are all in this together.”

This did create challenges for the instructors as they worked to take care of themselves and their families during a global pandemic, with several of the instructors in this study talking about the immense “emotional labor” being spent as they worked to embody their pedagogy in ways that showed they truly cared about their students, in an atmosphere that Beth called “a space of empathy and care rooted in critical theories about power.” This “making space” for students showed that the instructors cared for their students, breaking down barriers towards the immediacy that was dislocated because of the pandemic.

3.5. Technology strategies

To show this type of care, the instructors in this study employed multiple technology tools to decrease distance between themselves and their students, as well as to encourage the building of relationships during the pandemic. Most of these were used to enhance their pandemic pedagogy, such as the use of polls, chat, and breakout room features of online synchronous teaching platforms, as well as doing fishbowl exercises and panel discussions using virtual teaching capabilities like spotlighting the people who were speaking. Other technologies used included collaborating in Google docs, and using Google forms and Google jamboards. Some instructors brought in external applications such as (a) annotate and hypothes.is, two separate document annotation platforms, (b) eli review, a peer review platform, and (c) Kaltura interactive lectures, where you can embed questions into recorded lectures for them to answer. In addition, several instructors mentioned using music to set the tone in their classroom and providing a Google phone number which students could use to text/message them. Richard noted that teaching synchronously online “can actually be even more interactive involving of everyone in real-time” by using such tools.

Reasons for bringing in such technologies were primarily to make the classes interactive and to build relationships between the students, as well as increasing teacher immediacy. For example, Jen stated that using collaborative documents allowed the instructors to “figure out how to have everyone working on these things together” in a non-face-to-face setting, and in some cases, instructors stated they could bring in tools such as a Google jamboard in their face-to-face classes once returning to campus.

Rosa noted that using the chat feature brought out the quieter students and became a “really great way to engage,” whether it was through using something like a “waterfall chat,” where students would wait to submit their answers in chat until the instructor told them to, or whether they were responding with reactions in real-time to other students’ comments, allowing there to be “more interaction across the class.” Rosa explained: “I had people who, when they would come on camera, would be kind of a little more timid or closed off, but in the chat would just be all about what was happening.”

Breakout rooms were another commonly used feature in the pandemic synchronous classroom. It was a way to increase

participation. Some faculty even chose to host their classes in a hybrid way, meeting sometimes over zoom and other times face-to-face. When doing so over zoom, Sarah noted she used the breakout rooms, because “I wanted them to be able to feel a little bit more closely connected to their peers, as opposed to yelling at each other from across the room with your mask on and nobody can hear you.” Sometimes she would have them produce something creative to illustrate the group’s work as a result of being in the breakout rooms, beyond just working on a collaborative document.

Other tools, such as videos and music, were used to break down the barriers and create immediacy in the classroom, with some instructors creating YouTube playlists of students’ favorite songs to “create a culture of shared music” and “to have a natural conversation atmosphere going.” Beth noted that the choice to do this “completely changed the atmosphere in my classes.” Building in video as a way to meet and interact with each other was also used by some to break down the barriers of not being in the same physical space.

It was clear from our interviews that instructors used technology to build relationships with and between students, not relying just on traditional nonverbal and verbal immediacy behaviors of a face-to-face setting to do so. Such tools allowed them to create interactive classroom environments, in which students’ learning and relationships could be enhanced during the difficult times of a global pandemic, as instructors learned to treat the classroom as a space where they could still get to know students and build connections with them.

4. Discussion

As instructors were attempting to recreate immediacy due to pivoting their pedagogy because of the pandemic, they faced multiple challenges. Many spoke of frustrations with the limitations imposed, as they adapted to the synchronous online modality in various ways, including eye contact through camera use, recreating energy with facial expressions and body movement, and using different forms of connecting outside of zoom. The online space also provided freedom for an embodied pedagogy that was innovative.

Participation cues had to be created in different ways, as instructors worked to build community in their classes. Instructors used a variety of ways to invite participation verbally, such as calling students by name, asking questions and having informal dialogues, implementing feedback mechanisms, and crowd-sourcing examples from students, to try and make their classes interactive. They brought in technology tools such as chat, breakout rooms, and Google jamboards to invite more active participation. In addition, they made extra efforts to be accessible and empathetic to students outside of the class sessions, again using technology to do so. They used that technology to demonstrate care for their students and decrease distance and encourage relationship building.

4.1. Implications

In order to build relationships in the pandemic classroom, the instructors in this study recognized that such relationships can be built beyond the face-to-face atmosphere through the use of intentional pedagogical tools, consistent with a community of care framework

advocated by other scholars (Clemens and Robinson, 2021; Tang et al., 2022). These strategies and behaviors were not different in type from earlier conceptions of teacher immediacy by Gorham (1988) and others (e.g., Richmond and McCroskey, 2000; Beebe and Mottet, 2009; Dixon, 2010), but they did differ in how they were embodied and enacted in the synchronous online and pandemic-restricted face-to-face or HyFlex environments, being more similar in nature to the work done on “social presence” and rapport in the asynchronous online classroom (cf. Baker, 2010; Dixon et al., 2017; Glazier, 2021). “Our challenge as educators is to cultivate a pedagogical space that welcomes multiple forms of participation and presence, including presence via absence” (Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023, p. 614). To do so, we need explanations that are expanded for the synchronous online environment (cf. Katz and Kedem-Yemini, 2021; Gimpel, 2022), with embodied pedagogy and media multiplexity approaches, which come alongside the teacher immediacy literature (Ishii et al., 2019; Parsloe and Smith, 2022; Clughen, 2023).

Broadening views of how technology can be used to help build and sustain relationships is consistent with media multiplexity perspectives (Ishii et al., 2019; Bernhold and Rice, 2020; Katz and Kedem-Yemini, 2021; Kramer et al., 2021), which consider the use of multiple media channels in building strong ties between people. When media multiplexity theories were originally proposed, they were seen as potentially one way of explaining how close instructional relationships can be formed through using multiple channels to increase how we communicate with each other without relying on only face-to-face modalities for the relationship (Haythornthwaite, 2001, 2005).

As the instructors in this study were forced into using alternative ways to communicate during the pandemic, they found if they made a concerted effort, they could build relationships with their students, in ways that were high-presence, supportive, and immediate (Amirian et al., 2021; Brophy et al., 2021; Glazier, 2021; Gimpel, 2022), albeit differently than in the traditional face-to-face classroom. They did this by using “many forms of presence” (Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023, p. 619), which included multiple technologies and communication channels. The instructors in this study embodied strategies and behaviors others have called for, such as valuing opportunities for shared vulnerability (McElroy and Jackson, 2021), focusing on the wellbeing of their students (Clughen, 2023; Wiant Cummins, 2023), creating interactive classrooms with opportunities for support (Clughen, 2023; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023), using digital collaboration tools (Gopinathan et al., 2022), and incorporating empathy and holistic care in policies and interactions (Clemens and Robinson, 2021; Tang et al., 2022). In doing so, they reconceptualized teacher immediacy for the pandemic classroom as embodied pedagogy (Nguyen and Larson, 2015), with the acknowledgement that we bring our bodies into virtual interactions by using a variety of technological tools to build relationships and decrease the physical and psychological distance between teachers and students.

As the instructors in this study used these various technologies, they began to embody their pedagogies in different ways across various teaching modalities. These instructors had to “transgress” the typical online environment to disrupt the atmosphere occurring during a pandemic (Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023). They learned to “inhabit and co-create atmospheres in a creative and affirmative manner” (Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023, p. 600), and embrace the

unknowns in which bodies and teaching practices were “dislocated” from each other (Parsloe and Smith, 2022; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023). In doing so, as Wiant Cummins (2023) did during the pandemic, they were figuring out how their bodies could “enact wholeness together” (p. 1) and “how to engage students in the material in embodied ways” (p. 2).

As we move into the new post-pandemic normal, adjustments to teaching and learning may still need to be made due to the lingering effects of the pandemic, especially as online and HyFlex classrooms continue to be used within communication and other disciplines (Beatty, 2019; Katz and Kedem-Yemini, 2021; Morreale et al., 2021; Westwick and Morreale, 2021; Wong et al., 2022). These instructors showed us that it is possible to pivot and embody pedagogical practices in unique and critical ways, using technology, and in doing so, to build relationships with students with a high degree of caring.

4.2. Limitations and future research

Although there were multiple strategies found that help to expand the conceptualization of teacher immediacy for the online environment in this study, we only interviewed 15 instructors, all of which were from the communication discipline. Plus, the instructors interviewed were not a very diverse group demographically. Future research should expand into looking at how instructors from other disciplines adapted their pedagogy during the pandemic, in order to better understand the nature of teacher immediacy in disciplines which may be less “embodied” in their curriculum than the communication discipline. In addition, since “embodied pedagogy” comes with a rich history from the field of critical and emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 2000, 2018; Hooks, 1994), it is important that future research also include instructors from various cultural backgrounds, to see what their experiences were during the pandemic in embodying pedagogy in ways that brought freedom to themselves and their students (Wright, 2022). This could also be explored from the perspective of teacher identity (El-Soussi, 2022).

Future research should also look at how instructors took what they learned during the pandemic to change their face-to-face classrooms as they transitioned back into those classrooms, as the threat of the pandemic and restrictions on physical presence with others became lessened (Imran et al., 2023). Did instructors choose to continue bringing in some of the advanced technological tools they used during the pandemic into their post-pandemic classrooms, and if so, how did that change the relationships and immediacy in those classrooms?

Future research also needs to look at the experience of students as they made their way into and around the pandemic classroom, working to embody themselves in an environment which inherently disembodied portions of how they typically communicated. Hearing their perspectives, and learning more about the role teacher immediacy played in their engagement and experience of “presence” in the classroom, could provide a fuller picture of how teacher immediacy needs to be reconceptualized moving forward for the asynchronous and synchronous online teaching environments.

Looking at pandemic pedagogy from media multiplexity and embodied pedagogy perspectives can enhance the teacher immediacy literature by helping instructors become familiar with and skilled in using multiple forms of technology for interactions to increase immediacy in an online class, such as chat, breakout rooms,

Google jamboard, and Google docs, as well as using synchronous platforms such as Zoom. It can also help instructors adapt their concept of using their body in a face-to-face environment to the online modality, as they embrace an embodied pedagogy of caring in online classrooms.

4.3. Conclusion

The communication discipline is inherently a discipline which has historically relied on embodied curriculum (Nguyen and Larson, 2015; Dixon et al., 2017), with its past including elocution and public speaking, and its present emphasizing the building of relationships using communication across various dimensions (Dixon et al., 2017; Hudak et al., 2019; Brophy et al., 2021; Clemens and Robinson, 2021; Foutz et al., 2021; Morreale et al., 2021). The communication instructors in this study worked “to create the classroom as a location of possibility,” thus “recentering engaged pedagogy” (Wiant Cummins, 2023, p. 2) during the pandemic. They did this by creating a technologically-rich environment in which they built relationships with their students over multiple media channels and platforms. In doing so, they found freedom to innovate as they experimented with embodying their pedagogies across various modalities. Taking such an approach provides an expansive view of teacher immediacy strategies and behaviors, which can be used to decrease physical and psychological distance between students and instructors, even in the synchronous online classroom.

When we began this study, we did not know what to expect in terms of how communication instructors adapted their teacher immediacy behaviors and strategies for the pandemic classroom. We each had our own experiences as teachers and students, but were not aware of the realm of embodied caring that took place during the pandemic by teachers who worked “towards co-creating atmospheres that foster wellbeing and growth for everyone involved” (Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023, p. 600). These types of communication-based studies are important because they accomplish multiple goals, including providing online pedagogical best practices from the perspective of instructional communication literature and research. Such an approach to scholarship demonstrates the value of studying instructional communication for other disciplines and extends the benefits of the communication discipline to other academic domains across the educational enterprise.

Expanding views of teacher immediacy to better meet the needs of all instructional modalities allows us as scholars and practitioners to “redefine engagement” in ways that resonate for multiple types of learners (Fassett and Atay, 2022, p. 147), and to better “leverage the tools ... that can support their learning” (Fassett and Atay, 2022, p. 147). This is especially important as we work to understand “who enters these spaces and for what reasons” (Fassett and Atay, 2022, p. 147) in our post-pandemic reality. As instructional communication scholars, we need to be taking the lead in the conversations related to this reality.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because no permission was given by the participants for anyone to

have the raw data except the principal investigators. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to axchathamca@ualr.edu.

Ethics statement

This study involving humans was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AC-C: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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