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Having it both ways: learning communication skills in face-to-face and online environments

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In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to transition to online teaching almost overnight. This paper focuses on students' perceptions of communication skills in a practice course in the spring of 2020. The beginning of the course was held face-to-face and conducted online at the end. We sought information regarding students' experiences of online course in a skill-based course. Relying on knowledge about online communication, we selected three areas to focus on in online course. First, feedback is essential in the process of learning communication skills and is included in the course learning objectives. Second involves eliciting conversations in an online environment. The third area is the connection between the audience and the speaker in public speaking. Our goal was to develop the course according to student's perceptions. At the end of the course, 26 students answered open-ended questions about the two forms of implementation. Using thematic analysis, five different themes were constructed: (1) positive perceptions of the course, (2) neutral perceptions of online course, (3) perceptions of the challenges in online course, (4) perceptions of public speaking, and (5) perceptions of feedback. During the course, the students learned much-appreciated computer-mediated communication. They believed that the good learning results were due to careful organization and connection to other students. While uncommon, few students perceived online course as neither good nor bad, just neutral. Nevertheless, online course was not without challenges; students identified several problems concerning, for example, conversations and non-verbal communication. Furthermore, students considered feedback to be successful; however, online public speaking was perceived as different from speaking to a physical audience. The results of this study indicate that in a skill-based course, the online format can be just as effective as the face-to-face format. However, especially because public speaking was regarded as different and participants appreciated practicing communication in the online setting, we suggest that students should have the opportunity to practice communication skills both online and face-to-face. Additionally, although conversations received special attention, it caused the most significant challenges in the online environment; therefore, we propose that solutions to address this problem must be investigated further.

KEYWORDS

skills-based course, skill-based learning, skill-based teaching, online learning, online teaching, online public speaking, higher education, communication skills

1 Introduction

Nowadays, higher education faces many challenges. One of these challenges is that higher education has become a possible and conceivable option for a growing number of young people worldwide (Shah et al., 2015). According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023) Education at a Glance data, the percentage of younger adults aged between 25 and 34 with tertiary degree has been rapidly growing. While in 2002 the percentage was 27.8%, in 2012 it rose to 39.2% and in 2022 it was already 47.4%. This, of course, has a remarkable influence on higher education teaching, as it caters to an ever-growing number of students from diverse populations (Callender et al., 2020). Higher education also tries to satisfy the needs of students who manage work, family, and studies (Wilton and Ross, 2017; Ren and Caudle, 2020; Webber and Dismore, 2021). Technology is seen as an answer for many of these challenges, and the integration of new technologies, such as online learning platforms (e.g., Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard Learn), collaboration platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack) has indeed progressed in higher education teaching, as well as in other aspects of society. Information and communication technologies revolutionize the way we learn and teach, while stakeholders demand more relevant education for the workforce (Tennant et al., 2009). Harrison et al. (2022, p. 80) stated that governments also feel the pressure to “demonstrate that their higher education systems are effective in providing value to the nation in offering educational opportunities and producing skilled workforce for the knowledge economy.” This notion indicates that higher education is in a constant process of development, striving for high-quality teaching and research should serve as the cornerstone of this development. Communication studies are part of this process, and online teaching is a crucial part of teaching development.

After the COVID-19 pandemic permanently altered our perceptions of education, substantial debates and discussions have been raised by our societies regarding teaching and learning at different educational levels. Online courses are not a novel concept—they have been a functional and important part of teaching, albeit typically designed for specific purposes and striving for inclusive education, taking into consideration for example international students (Bennett and Lockyer, 2004) and students with disabilities (Macy et al., 2018). However, due to the pandemic, all courses, even those traditionally conducted face-to-face, were forced to transition online. Under these circumstances, educators have extensively discussed whether high-quality teaching and learning is possible (e.g., Bernardo et al., 2021; Lemay et al., 2021; Allaire and Killham, 2022; Guzzo et al., 2022; Engel et al., 2023; Fütterer et al., 2023). Online education has generated numerous and diverse beliefs, feelings, and experiences concerning its effectiveness, quality, and educational best practices.

After a few years of experiments, online teaching has now become a fundamental part of the educational system. We can never look at higher education in the same light as before. Now that we no longer live in constant fear of spreading a life-threatening virus, we can move on from that period, which has been termed “emergency distance education” (e.g., Toquero, 2020) or

“emergency remote teaching” (e.g., Talidong, 2020), and look back and reflect. We should now determine what has been successful, what remains to be learned, and whether online teaching has succeeded in the field thus far. Answering this question requires a focus on the standards that are used as the basis for evaluation. Students, academic programs, and higher education institutions each have their own goals (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Research-based knowledge from all these areas concerning the outcomes of online teaching and learning under different circumstances should be incorporated. Students’ experiences are only one part of successful teaching, which should be acknowledged when applying evidence to future courses; however, it provides a good starting point for teachers to plan effective courses with positive educational results.

As higher education faces increasing pressure to develop its education online, especially after the pandemic, the number of studies that collect students’ perceptions about online courses has been expanding. However, studies have data from the same course, implemented face-to-face and online (Spencer and Temple, 2021) and usually students have participated in one of these implementations but have not experienced the other (e.g., Saurabh et al., 2021; Yau et al., 2022; Dergham et al., 2023). Studies about perceptions of students who have experienced both implementations in the same course are uncommon, but they could provide highly explicit information when comparing the two. For example, Kemp and Grieve (2014) mixed both modalities within one course. They found that even though the differences in students’ test performance is not considerable, students favor completing face-to-face activities rather than online. The study also found that students feel strongly about conducting class discussions face-to-face because of they felt “a more engaged, and received more immediate feedback, than in online discussion.” In 2014, the technological possibilities were different from those of today, as technology offers more options to implement different teaching strategies. Studying these two implementations within one course could provide different experiences. Research about students’ experiences with face-to-face and online implementations within the same course is rare. Our study also focuses on a skill-based course, traditionally relying on the idea of being physically present and performing different practices with others. In addition, when training in communication skills, physical presence was always taken for granted.

2 Developing skill-based online course

Skill-based teaching approach can also be referred to as practice-based or described as relying on the ideas of experimental learning. Our view about skill-based teaching approach is consistent with that of Magill et al. (2022), who listed methods, such as observed practice, demonstration, and performance assessment and feedback. In skill-based courses, the learning objectives can often be rather specific and, at the same time, can be a bit abstract in more traditional lecture courses. In skill-based courses, pedagogical choices are different; however, they rely on theory and knowledge from respected disciplines. While leaning on the pedagogical thoughts of social learning theory, Cameron

and Whetten (1983) developed a model of skill-based training, containing five activities that describe the structure of skill-based teaching approach.

First, they suggested a preassessment activity to provide an opportunity for students to focus on their current level regarding the skills, to know how well the skills can be performed, and to motivate them to improve. Second, students are provided with conceptual materials based on theories, research, cases, or examples. The third activity focuses on skill analysis, in which students are asked to analyze some cases showing a student's competent and incompetent performance in real-world situations. The fourth activity is practice. In this activity, feedback is important so that the students can correct their behavior and rehearse other alternatives. The fifth activity is the application, which refers to practicing skills in real-world settings while maintaining a monitoring connection with an instructor. Students may, for example, teach the skills of observing and reporting on the actions of others. Some of these activities are easier to transfer to online settings than others and leave teachers wondering about the quality of online skill-based courses.

Experience after the pandemic has indicated that learning objectives can be achieved even in online skill-based courses, and research is starting to support this notion. However, at the same time, researchers remain persistent in developing online courses, and this persistence may have valid reasons. For example, Lowenthal et al. (2015) found that students rate instructors lower in online courses than in face-to-face courses. Furthermore, even if the learning objectives are achieved during the course, in their study of master's level negotiation courses, Callister and Love (2016) found that face-to-face learners earn higher negotiation outcomes than online learners, even when using the same technology. Based on their study, Callister and Love (2016, p. 251) argued that "reduced interactions between students and faculty are important factors to focus on in online teaching."

Despite the challenges or insecurities in shifting skill-based courses online, positive factors can also be considered in developing these courses. First, communication and human interactions occur in online surroundings more than ever before, indicating that future professionals should possess technology-mediated communication skills. This does not only refer to technical skills but also to skills to understand how to achieve your goals and comprehend different aspects of appropriate and effective communication in online settings. Second, the same need for online courses is directed toward skill-based courses as others.

2.1 Communication skills

Shifting a communication skills course online requires defining the concept of communication skills. Communication skills can be defined rather broadly. It can mean anything from writing to visualizing, from media literacy to reading, but in this study, we refer to the skills needed in social interactions. Communication skills are quite commonly seen as innate ability, but it has been acknowledged, that this is not the case and communication skills can be taught (e.g., Maguire, 1990; Hargie, 2006; Van der Molen and Gramsbergen-Hoogland, 2019). The concepts of communication skills and social skills are linked together and

considered identical, because both skills are easily detected from the behavior of others. Yet, as Spitzberg (2003) reminded us, skillful behavior does not appear occasionally, but is intentional and repeatable.

The first known attempts to locate the skills linked to human communication can be traced relatively far in history. The origins of communication research are firmly rooted in ancient Greek and in the admiration for the power of persuasive and eloquent speech. Aristotle et al. (ca. 350 B.C.E./1984), with his idea of rhetoric, introduced the ingredients of persuasive speech: logical reasoning, the understanding of human character and goodness in their various forms, and the understanding of emotions.

From the shift to perceiving social interactions as more than just delivering a message in spoken word, the term social skills emerged. At their basic level, skills were split into verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Hargie, 2006), meaning that a skillful communicator has a reservoir of verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Indeed, according to Burgoon and Bacue (2003, p. 180) with non-verbal behavior, several goals or functions can be accomplished, such as (a) expressive communication, (b) conversational management, (c) relational communication, and (d) image management and influence processes. Together with verbal communication, skillful social behavior is something we either master or fail to exhibit.

However, apprehending social skills as a handy toolbox from which to select different sets of behaviors, did not seem to meet all the requirements placed on social skills. It was equally important to understand the context, and ability to achieve goals (Hargie, 2006). Several communication theories underline the function of achieving goals. For example, Fishbein and Ajzen (2010, p. 20) based their theory on the assumption that "human social behavior follows reasonably and often spontaneously from the information or beliefs people possess about the behavior under consideration," in other words, how we choose to behave depends on our predictions about the outcome. In our social interactions we have expectations for behaviors and goals both for other people and ourselves. As social interactions are driven by goals (Berger, 2002), an important part of communication skills is achieving those goals.

According to Hargie (2006, p. 11) the final feature of the definition is the skill of identifying emotions or intentions to give an appropriate response. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine that someone's behavior would be estimated to be successful without a respectful and necessary reply. Sometimes our reaction would be skillful in one social setting but not in another. An appropriate response requires that in social interactions we listen and understand the other communicator's point of view.

To conclude, "social skills involve a process in which the individual implements a set of goal-directed, interrelated, situationally appropriate social behaviors, which are learned and controlled" (Hargie, 2006, p. 13). The demand for skillful communication seems unreasonable, and Greene (2021) aptly raised the question of the communication skills paradox, where we understand and acknowledge that communication skills matter, but we also seem often to fail in our communication performance. Despite the possibility of failing, with the potential of bettering our lives, practicing communication skills is important especially for communication students who should apply their theoretical knowledge of human communication in practice in a safe environment.

2.2 Feedback

Feedback is essential in the process of learning communication skills. The ability to receive, use, and give feedback is thus included in the learning objectives of the communication skills practice course. Therefore, students should have the opportunity to practice all these areas. First, scholars have noted that students may need to develop their skills to give feedback to their peer students (Baker and Baker, 2023) and peer feedback should be emphasized, because students give and receive feedback from others without any formal authority over each other (Finn and Garner, 2011). This allows students to offer and accept advice from different perspectives.

Second, student should also receive feedback from the teacher. Feedback should offer information about the gap between the current understanding or performance and the desired goal, enabling the receiver to narrow the gap (Sadler, 1989). Adopting this perspective, Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 86) suggested that effective feedback consists of three components: (a) feed up, (b) feed back, and (c) feed forward. Feed up means providing information about the learning goals and answers the question of where the receiver should go. Feed back concerns where the receiver's understanding or performance is going at a particular moment. Feed forward concentrates on the future, answering the question of where the receiver should go next. Overall, the feedback should engage the receiver, lead to the elaboration of the advice, and generate action (Ladyshewsky, 2013).

The teacher's role and communication are important. In particular, the teacher's verbal and non-verbal face-threat mitigation strategies and higher non-verbal immediacy seem to be positive features of influential feedback (Trees et al., 2009; Witt and Kerksen-Griep, 2011). Studies focusing on the effects of providing feedback on communication skills, have shown that the more immediate the feedback is, the more effective it is (King et al., 2000). However, there may be significant differences how immediate feedback can be provided in online or face-to-face environments. Non-verbal communication is crucial to the teacher's mitigation strategies and immediacy, and conveying these features in an online context is different and not always as straightforward as in face-to-face teaching (Clark-Gordon et al., 2018). Therefore, it is interesting to consider how the students in the present study experienced feedback when the course was transferred online.

Despite the source of the feedback, doing tasks, such as participating in communication situations, giving presentations, and having discussions, are not enough when practicing communication skills; we should also analyze the features of the communication process (Valo, 1995). Therefore, feedback enhances practice and guides the learning outcome. Furthermore, feedback is a communication situation—one that always involves a receiver who evaluates and interprets the messages (Ajjawi and Boud, 2017). Recently, for example, the feedback sensitivity of students has been found to play a key role in how feedback will be interpreted (e.g., Smith and King, 2004). Therefore, the outcome of the feedback depends largely on the receivers themselves. The receiver and the provider engaging in discussions can reduce misunderstandings and diverging perceptions of feedback, and the receiver becomes more active (Valo, 1995).

2.3 Maintaining trust and eliciting conversations

Previous research has shown that social interactions that support learning (Muilenburg and Berge, 2005; Malott et al., 2014; O'Doherty et al., 2018) and building trust (Anwar and Greer, 2012; Wang, 2014) challenge online teaching and learning. These concepts are interdependent; the better the level of trust, the better the social interaction. Especially when pedagogical objectives should be achieved through social learning, students must share an understanding of the significance of openness and trust during the course, which enables them to practice their communication skills without fear of failure. This has not always been achieved in online courses and students can become frustrated with online teaching due to a lack of interaction with both their peers and the instructor (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020). Furthermore, just as with other new relationships, engaging with new surroundings and social interactions might induce uncertainty, which can be reduced by self-disclosure (Berger, 1997). When enrolling in an online course, students are in the same position as other people who meet only online. They often worry about what these "distant partners are like: whether they are reliable, hardworking, enjoyable, and if they have a good sense of humor" (Walther, 2008, p. 391). Then again, if students are trusting, they will likely be more willing to share information about themselves and the course topics.

With online learning and teaching, we refer to courses where teacher–student and student–student interactions take place only in online surroundings. In addition, in this study, the teacher–student relationship is regarded as similar to other interpersonal relationships. The importance of student–teacher relationship is acknowledged. In 1992, the relational teaching approach (RTA) was introduced, and it was based on the belief that "teaching involves a process of relational development and requires effective interpersonal communication skills to achieve satisfying outcomes" (Graham et al., 1992, p. 11). This theme continues to generate interest within academia, Hagenauer et al. (2023) recently argued that the establishment of positive teacher–student relationships must be regarded as a significant educational aim. The teacher has an important role in creating atmosphere that enables open discussions and promotes trust.

The question is, however, what skills a teacher must possess to enhance interpersonal relationships with students. It would be possible to conclude that if the teacher–student relationship is identical to every other interpersonal relationship, maintaining trust and eliciting conversations require good interpersonal communication skills from both the teacher and the student. To clarify the role of the teacher, Bainbridge Frymier and Houser (2000) presented a comprehensive review of research identifying teachers' interpersonal variables that are positively related to learning. These are immediacy, communicator style, affinity-seeking, self-disclosure, solidarity, humor, caring, and compliance-gaining. From this list, research on immediacy in instructional communication has attracted particular interest (e.g., Jaasma and Koper, 1999; Baker, 2010; Khoo, 2014; Tonsing, 2018; Vareberg and Westerman, 2023).

The concept of immediacy was introduced by Mehrabian (1969, p. 203) and can be defined as the degree of creating

willingness in others to show closeness in their behavior. When teaching is viewed through a relationship lens, it develops through immediacy according to a certain development scale beginning from the first contact to separation (DeVito, 1986). Closeness can be expressed through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Through verbal communication, the teacher can for example express distance (e.g., here vs. there), duration (e.g., longer contact vs. shorter contact), and participation (e.g., you should vs. some should) and through nonverbal communication, the teacher can express proximity, touch, and/or gaze (Zhang and Witt, 2016).

In human communication it is difficult to give simple advice about correct behavior. Relationships are messy and affected by individual backgrounds, their willingness and capacity to create and interpret messages, and the context, among other things. Immediacy then, is also dependent on these factors. However, teachers working in a pressured atmosphere will benefit from the knowledge about immediacy and efforts to create closer relationships with students.

2.4 Learning public speaking online

Students are aware of the effects of digitalization on different communication situations in a person's work life (Carragher Wolverson and Tanner, 2019). Inevitably, these effects also pertain to public speaking skills. Online presentations and meetings are an important part of future professionals' communication skills. Designing online communication skills or public speaking courses always has shortcomings. As Morreale et al. (2015) discussed in their reflection essay, teaching public speaking online often involves mimicking face-to-face courses, which leads to unsuccessful outcomes. Ward (2016) observed challenges especially regarding context, audience, speaker, and course evaluation.

Understanding the meaning of different contexts is a significant part of communication skills. Furthermore, the issue of the audience becomes a problem, as public speaking education in communication studies emphasizes interaction orientation rather than performance orientation. Public speaking is an interaction with an audience, and the speaker is expected to react to the audience's reactions. For the speaker, the concerns included questions about communication apprehension. As Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2020) found in their study, "students in online teaching felt unprepared to present public speeches in person after only delivering speeches online with no "public" present" (p. 254). The students also considered a significant difference between viewing recorded speeches and speaking live in front of a group. The situation may improve if the audience is virtually present during speech (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020).

Given the course objectives and the areas on which we focused, we sought additional information regarding students' perceptions of the skills they may have learned during the course and whether they perceive the course as successful. Hence, we asked:

RQ1: How did students perceive online implementation in the communication skills in practice course, and what learning objectives do they report as achieved?

In addition, we aimed to further develop the course. To understand what worked and what did not work in both types of instruction, we asked the following research question:

RQ2: What kind of experience was the 2020 course, and what did the students perceive positively and negatively in face-to-face and online implementations?

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Studies course: communication skills in practice

The discipline of communication studies is often regarded as practical (Craig, 2018); however, studies on communication students in university often focus on significantly theoretical, traditional, and teacher-led lecture courses. However, some communication courses can also be practical. Compared to Cameron and Whetten's (1983) design, students enter this course in three steps (a) they have estimated their individual skills, (b) they have been offered a theoretical background, and (c) they have analyzed different communication situations. However, in the beginning of this studies course they engage in self-assessment activities. The pedagogical foundation of the examined skill-based course has traditionally relied on conversation, interaction, feedback, and reflection. Thus, an open atmosphere should also be established during online delivery. At the same time, the course's learning objectives should be achieved, which requires making certain pedagogical choices. The objectives of the course are as follows:

- (1) Improving communication skills by reflecting on communication behavior and using feedback;
- (2) Understanding how communication skills appear in and affect communication situations;
- (3) Participating appropriately in various group communication tasks;
- (4) Learning how to improve the atmosphere and task management of a group, as well as how to set goals for negotiations and enhance the implementation of these goals;
- (5) Learning how to plan one's communication in a goal-oriented way;
- (6) Giving different kinds of public speeches and adapting one's communication to different situations;
- (7) Learning how to assess and analyze different speeches and communication situations, as well as how to give feedback on them; and
- (8) Understanding the relevance of all the above skills to working life.

Among students, the course has long been known to focus on public speaking. Indeed, this aspect has been a major component of the course. At the end of the course, students arrange a public speaking event at which the audience consists of other students and communication studies scholars. At this event, each student

delivers a five-minute speech, which they have had the opportunity to plan and practice in advance.

Inevitably, determining how to incorporate course practices into an online environment is challenging. As we strived to meet our pedagogical objectives, we decided to pay special attention to areas we thought would be the most challenging in online implementation. Relying on previous knowledge of online communication, we chose three main areas to focus on: (a) feedback, (b) maintaining trust and eliciting conversations, and (c) learning public speaking online.

The provision, receipt, and use of feedback; the ability to work in groups; effective negotiation; public speaking; and self-reflection are important skills for this course. In the course in question, students receive a generous amount of feedback—some from the teacher—but they also practice giving feedback to others in different situations. The communication skills in a practice course provide an opportunity to give feedback orally and instantly after practice, immediately in written form, and in a more elaborate fashion in written form based on a prerecorded video. Thus, we were unsure how the students perceived this situation and if the online environment had a negative impact on the feedback sessions. In previous implementations of the course, students had opportunities to practice both quick face-to-face feedback and highly elaborate written feedback, while also reviewing video-recorded performances. For online implementation in 2020, the same opportunities were provided, and it was anticipated that the issue of trust and open discussions would need to be addressed.

To address this problem, a few adjustments were made to the course to provide more space for relational communication. A Zoom meeting was held 15 min before the start of each session to offer students free space for sharing their thoughts. “Friday coffees” were also organized on Zoom, which lasted for an hour and allowed students to ask about the course and assignments or to discuss certain topics further. Information about how students experience different sorts of interactions is central to future course development.

Consistent with the findings concerning public speaking, the students in the course had the opportunity to speak synchronously with the audience, which consisted of their classmates and other people. The classmates were asked to keep their cameras on during these speeches.

3.2 Research design and the data

The research design for this study is based on the interpretive paradigm. Reality is seen as constructed through subjective perceptions and interpretations (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2021). As we were interested in (a) student perceptions, (b) what those perceptions construct, and given the novelty of the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic including the rapid shift to online teaching, qualitative methodology was adopted. Qualitative research emphasizes exploring individual experiences, describing phenomena, and developing theory (Vishnevsky and Beanlands, 2004). According to Cardano (2020), the qualitative research process can be divided into four phases, (1) planning or design, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis, and (4) textualization. We collected textual data and according to Peterson (2017), chose

a common interpretive data analysis process known as thematic analysis as our analysis method. The last phase, textualization refers to the specificity of qualitative research, and its ability to represent both the voices of the researcher and the participant when defending the presented argument (Cardano, 2020). When collecting data, research design is essential, it should be possible to answer the research questions with the collected data.

The 2020 spring term communication skills practice course was conducted with 26 students, who were divided into two groups. Usually, students participate in this course in their second year of communication studies. The students met seven times, for 4 h each time, four times in the classroom and three online. In the studied course, the majority were communication studies major students, but a few students were with other majors. Nevertheless, for this course, students must pass three theoretical courses; thus, the students have quite a similar understanding of communication studies from courses with a strong emphasis on theory and the latest research. The data were collected by asking the students to write a reflection paper that included five open-ended questions about face-to-face and online implementation and the course objectives. All 26 students completed the course and submitted their reflections to the course’s online platform (Moodle), and they all gave their permission to use their answers for this study. Other socio-demographic information was not collected.

Based on the university’s policy; the faculty dean gave permission to conduct this study. Before answering the questions, students were informed about the research and that they had the option not to participate in the research. Consent was written at the end of the reflection. Open-ended questions allowed us to gather accurate information about the student’s experiences. The five questions were as follows:

- (1) What kind of experience was it to practice communication skills as part of online course?
- (2) Compare your experiences with face-to-face and online implementation. What worked well, and what did not in these two formats?
- (3) What new aspects did online course bring to your communication skills?
- (4) What was the feedback like in online course? What similarities and differences did you notice with feedback in face-to-face learning?
- (5) Did online course succeed in developing your communication skills, given the course objectives?

3.3 Analysis

In line with our aim to determine what the students perceived as positive or negative and further develop the course, we were interested in examining what meaningful patterns could be recognized from students’ reflections. Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as the analysis method. Our approach was to highlight the most common data through inductive analysis and determine what was meaningful in terms of our first research question. For the second research question, we followed abductive coding principles (Tracy, 2020) and we coded students’ positive and

negative perceptions. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) defined TA “as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” For this study, this also means the possibility of leaving space for interpretation. Of course, TA is not without limitations and often raises the question about trustworthiness. Extensively accepted criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research were presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). They offer the criteria of (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability to assess quality in qualitative research. Because these criteria are linked together, we will address them when describing the analysis process.

According to Tobin and Begley (2004), dependability can be achieved by showing that the research process has been logical, traceable, and clearly documented. Furthermore, the criterion of transferability refers to the possibility to of transferring findings from one context to another (Cope, 2014) and therefore also highlights the importance of describing the research process in detail. We have addressed the theoretical background, the formation of research questions, and data collection previously in this study and now describe the analysis process. After the results, we will also discuss the limitations of this study.

In our analysis process, we followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps for TA. First, the answers were read multiple times, and notes were taken to gain familiarity with the data. As Nowell et al. (2017) noted, even though the steps are presented as linear, they are a process that develops and moves constantly back and forth between phases. During the first step, the initial ideas about potential codes were written down (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and notes were made about the interesting features of the data.

In the second step, the codes were created for ATLAS.ti. In total 494 quotations presenting interesting observations, were first named as shorter descriptions, thus simplifying the data, and allowing us to focus on specific characteristics (Nowell et al., 2017). At this stage, some of the same quotations could be found under two, or sometimes even three, different codes. At the end of the coding, the quotations under the codes were viewed together to ensure that they constructed a cohesive entity. In addition, if different codes were suggested under other quotations, a decision was made about the most suitable one.

After numerous revisions, 43 codes were constructed. In the third and fourth steps, after a close inspection of the codes and quotations relating to them, themes were generated from the codes. Some code groups were identified, and raw data were reevaluated to see if the generated themes described the data accordingly. For clarification and to show the diversity in answers, we decided to arrange the results into themes, subthemes, and code groups. In this manner, within the same phenomenon, the students could present different views. Finally, the fifth and sixth steps included determining the final theme names and producing a report, respectively.

As complete objectivity is not realistic in qualitative research (Eyler, 2021), confirmability refers to getting as close to objective reality as qualitative research can. Guba and Lincoln (1989) recommend establishing confirmability through credibility, transferability, and dependability. To achieve this, we must clarify researchers’ involvement in the analysis process. The analysis was conducted primarily by the first author and the teacher of this course. This gave a good insight into the collected data. Furthermore, interrater coding was done by the second author,

an experienced professor with extensive experience in qualitative analysis. He went through the data, and the coding process was discussed. He also checked the emerging codes and themes at different stages of the analysis, commented on them, and made suggestions.

When addressing the criteria of credibility, the results should be recognized by coresearchers and readers (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In other words, it should be possible to identify respondents’ views from the results. In the following results, we offer rich quotations from the data to illustrate each theme.

4 Results

The research questions aimed to identify the success of the course and the positive and negative perceptions of students about the two implementations. With this information, we aimed to develop the course. Five different themes were constructed from the data: (1) positive perceptions of the course, (2) neutral perceptions of online course, (3) perceptions of the challenges in online course, (4) perceptions of public speaking, and (5) perceptions of feedback. The first three themes focus on perceptions about the course, and the latter two focus on specific communication situations. In the results, neutral perceptions were placed between positive perceptions and challenges, although references to that theme were rare in the reflections.

4.1 Positive perceptions of the course

The theme that was highlighted the most in the students’ answers was that the course was successful, students learned new things during the course, and they made observations about the positive aspects of online course. More specifically, this theme was based on three subthemes: (1) a unique and successful course, (2) things learned during the course, and (3) advances in online course.

In the first subtheme, a unique and successful course, the students believed that the course’s good learning results were due to careful planning and organization—instructions were found easily, information about changes was reported to students, and no problems occurred with joining Zoom. For many students, it was important that at the beginning of the meeting, the teacher took time to ask everyone individually how they were doing and if there were any problems. The students appreciated that the transition to online classes did not cause any extra work, and the course plan did not change. They also appreciated that everyone cared for the planned deadlines.

The other reason for the success of the course was the feeling of encouragement and the presence of others. Online implementation in Zoom, where cameras were open all the time, was not as lonely as online courses without joint meetings. Students reported their feelings about being heard and how everyone understood the difficulties concerning the course. For example, they did not focus on anything but the meeting in Zoom. The “Friday coffees” were also mentioned. The idea of a space for more casual interaction was perceived positively, and some even thought they were supported more in this course than others. Even if they did not necessarily join, they were happy with the knowledge that it would be possible.

The face-to-face meetings that took place at the beginning of the course helped the students gain trust in each other, and this connection remained during the online period. The students shared their feelings on different platforms, even on social media. Knowing that others were in the same situation was comforting for them. Many of this theme's perceptions were described in the words of respondent 12,

However, despite feelings of fear and uncertainty, the course was not a disappointment at all. On the contrary—I feel that the teacher took us, the students, into account in the beginning by asking how we are doing and by arranging separate moments for discussions in the form of Friday coffees. I can see how each teacher and student were accommodated in a surprising crisis successfully and, above all, in a very flexible and positive attitude. In my opinion, the factors mentioned above had a significant impact on us students because I had an experience about how future communication professionals will have to accommodate the changes in the environment at a complex and rapid frequency.

The students shared their thoughts about successful areas during the course. Even if they were unsure if something was left out or changed, they believed that they had achieved the course's learning objectives and learned in the usual manner. Many felt that the online format could offer the same results as face-to-face course. Moreover, they were also unsure if all the practices would work online, but different communication skills practices were successfully carried out, and they obtained good results with them. Group work proceeded without substantial problems. For some students, this was the first time that group work had been organized largely online; for many of them, it was a pleasant experience. Respondent 11 described,

In our group, in my opinion, working online was even more fluent than in face-to-face communication because we managed to arrange joint schedules and we performed efficiently. Group meetings were not so attached to specific times and places, so the assignments were done, despite where you were. In addition, in my opinion, we used different platforms efficiently, and this enabled everyone to make changes or seek information.

The uniqueness of the situation could also be identified from the students' observations about learning useful skills for the future and having an opportunity to improve themselves. During the course, the students realized that they were in an exceptional situation, but they were in it together and supported each other; this helped them get through the course. Seeing the benefits of the unique situation, they found positive sides to it.

The second subtheme listed the things students reported they had learned during or because of the course. Many reported that they learned how to improve their technological skills. The course was held via Zoom, and the students had to participate with audio and video connections; microphones could be switched off when they were not speaking. Zoom transmitted only one sound connection at a time, and they did not want to talk

over others. Muting a microphone when someone spoke was considered a form of politeness, as this decreased background noise. They learned to analyze their appearance on a screen, and they used other applications, such as Word, Moodle, WhatsApp, and emails. Using different platforms was not as difficult as they had assumed it would be.

The students found that technology can also provide some positive aspects, such as the possibility for people outside their hometown to participate in their speech event. Furthermore, they welcomed the possibility of acquiring technological skills because they felt that the field of communication partly contains a requirement for technical competence. They felt that in recent years, workplace communication has been changing toward technology-mediated communication and that this change had been accelerated by the pandemic. Therefore, now was the time to learn the skills they would need in the future.

Besides technological improvement, students reported that they learned more about communication skills, more specifically about social interaction. For example, some students felt that the video connection created the feeling of being together and allowed them to interpret other students' feelings from non-verbal communication. As respondent 21 explained,

I used to think that online communication was in some way defective compared to face-to-face communication. I think this is based on my experience with online meetings at work, where usually we use only voice connection, not so much video. The format at the end of this course changed my mind. The simultaneous video and audio connection in the student groups worked particularly well for our interactions.

One of the course objectives is "learning how to adapt one's communication to different situations," and the students considered this to be a much-needed skill in the fast-changing world of work. Some of them learned how to accommodate their communication to better suit the online environment and realized how important it is to accommodate different communication situations, especially as communication specialists.

The students also learned listening skills and non-verbal communication skills. They had to wait patiently for others to stop talking before it was appropriate to take the floor. Even with the video connection, however, some non-verbal messages, such as sighs or laughter, were lost, so they could not rely just on a smile or other non-verbal messages; they had to put their feelings into words. They described how important it was to be clear in their non-verbal expressions, articulations, rates, and tones of voice. Group communication skills were also areas in which the students felt they had learned something new. They paid more attention to sharing responsibilities and to the way they indicated their involvement as group members. They gave space to others and shared information.

In addition to technical and social interaction skills, students reported gaining a broader understanding of communication skills. They had an opportunity to perceive skills from a different view than they had anticipated before the course. This extraordinary situation helped them to reflect on their own and on other students' communication skills. In addition, students appreciated flexibility, adaptation, and patience when working online, especially given the

unusual situation. They thought that clear scheduling helped them understand and communicate better with others.

The third subtheme under positive perceptions was the advances of online course, which contained quotations where students expressed what they appreciated about online course. The most prominent advantage was that online course brought a feeling of increased control and flexibility to students' lives. Finally, it was possible to be in two different places at the same time, and no time was wasted traveling. It became easier to adjust studying to other areas of life. Some of the students reported that participating from home encouraged them to act more confidently as their true "selves," whereas others felt more relaxed being in familiar surroundings.

Many of them mentioned the realization of the changing needs of work life, and they appreciated the skills they had an opportunity to practice. In the words of respondent 1,

It is good to recognize that the future working life goes more and more online and uses different technology services. So, it is appropriate that this use and its effects are explored during our studies. I think communication studies should maintain some kind of readiness and knowledge concerning this also after this exceptional situation.

Some students felt that the online format made the course more task oriented, better structured, and equal. They appreciated its mechanical routines and organized structure. They also felt that the teacher talked equally to everyone and that they were in the same position as everyone else. Moreover, it became difficult for individuals to draw attention to themselves during joint discussions. Our adjustments to elicit conversations and offering of additional time for relational communication were interpreted as signs of care. Another such sign was that everyone could express about their feelings at the beginning of each class. Students also appreciated practicing online communication from the perspective of preparing for a future working life.

4.2 Neutral perceptions of online course

While uncommon, these perceptions revealed that few students had been studying online consistently before, and that this experience had been suitable for them. The students did not think that the online implementation of the course had affected their learning. The fact that the course content had not changed relieved the stress of the exceptional situation. Respondent 10 stated,

Online learning itself has not felt particularly challenging. I have done online courses before this, and the current situation has not felt as exceptional as possibly to some others.

Some of the students felt that on Zoom, other participants had reactions similar to those during face-to-face meetings and that the same communication rules applied online—you had to be clear and present and, of course, listen. They did not notice differences in the practices during the course; they were only technology-mediated. Even though only few students had neutral attitude toward online course, the notion about these

students is also important. For some, studying is not dependent from the modality.

4.3 Perceptions of the challenges in online course

Even if the general opinion was that the course was successful, several challenges were also mentioned. From these mentions, five subthemes were formulated. The biggest challenges students faced concerned conversations and social interaction. Second, most of the students recognized their feelings of weariness and separateness. Third, although the joint meetings were usually easy to join and be in, technical problems caused stressful situations. Fourth, especially at the beginning, students felt uncertain about the situation and how they would achieve the goals they had for themselves or the course learning objectives. Finally, the surroundings where they had to work sometimes caused stress. All these factors had an impact on how they felt about completing the course.

The first subtheme concerned challenges in interaction and conversation that the students identified. Most of them appeared during regular interactions, harming the course, and making it difficult to complete. Students emphasized the flow of the conversation and felt pressure in this area, as it was an important part of the course; they were expected to make conversations and create a positive atmosphere. Some problems concerned the familiarity of the application, and then the technical issues brought problems. For example, joining discussions was difficult because it was difficult to follow up on what someone had just said and take turns in the conversation. It was harder to focus on others when you could see yourself on the screen. As one student explained, the others were also looking at themselves and the teacher. Furthermore, the students had to make a clear decision when they wanted to participate, because they had to turn the microphone on to be heard. Respondent 15 stated,

In online implementation, the conversations between students are worse because in a classroom, you often want to share your thoughts. Via Zoom, there was a bigger gap, and when focusing on the lecture already took a lot of energy, you did not even necessarily have the energy to present your own opinions.

The students did not want to talk over others; however, it was difficult to estimate if someone else had something to say. Sometimes, online discussions also took a long time, and a greater risk of misunderstandings might occur. Some preferred face-to-face group work because brainstorming—talking about new ideas—was no longer on the agenda, and the groups seemed to simply execute the task without careful elaboration. The problems often involved instances in which the students assumed that seeing each other or being in the same room would make it easier to comprehend the situation or the task. Asking additional questions about the tasks felt more difficult. Sometimes, the instructions or tasks appeared suddenly, and the instructions were unclear. The teacher was not as available as before, and the students had to work more when they wanted clarification.

Practicing communication skills online was not always easy. The students were glad that some practices, including those

focusing on breathing techniques, the use of voice, and proximity, had been held face-to-face in the first half of the course. Furthermore, the students wanted more instructions about how to communicate online, especially in public speaking and group work.

The students also reflected on problems with non-verbal communication. They found it difficult to express themselves and indicate their presence to others. To have precise interpretations, they wanted to see the body language of others and tried their best to focus better. Given the small delay in online communication, interpretation has become even harder. They missed the reactions of others, such as laughs and signs of confirmation. According to respondent 14,

Also, it is odd that online, there are no mini-reflections between other students: “What should we do, did I get this right.” Not to mention the kind of whispering and non-verbal communication, which is not related to the subject and is important and humane.

Expressing active listening was difficult. The students were afraid that others would interpret their non-verbal messages the wrong way. For example, when they became distracted or caught in their thoughts, it could appear as if they were uninterested in others. Therefore, they had to indicate listening in ways other than what they were used to. For instance, they tried to express their listening by nodding frantically and commenting on the chat, trying to assure the others of their presence and support. For some, the computer screen brought others very close, and they started to pay attention to the micro-expressions; the meaning of different non-verbal messages went through elaborate interpretations. Respondent 25 said,

You had to take more responsibility for your communication and show that you are actively listening and understanding. Active listening and taking others into account so that you do not speak over others or bother with your behavior or sounds were highlighted.

The importance of spontaneous conversations was understood and missed. With spontaneous conversations, students referred to conversations in which face-to-face course usually took place before, during, and after class. In these conversations, the students talked about what they had recently learned (or failed to learn) or confirmed their understanding of the teacher's instructions. Casual conversations were also important to create or maintain relationships, and some thought that this had an impact on getting to know other students. However, being in touch with someone you could not see was difficult; this was especially a problem when students participated using mobile phones. Some were hoping to see the teacher and other students face-to-face, especially when group work should be done. Reduced relational communication affected group formation. Some of the students felt that group work was considerably different online. It was possible to hear only one speaker at a time, and the students became more careful in the discussions. Overall, many students missed being in the same space and felt that in face-to-face, they felt closer to each other.

The second subtheme is feeling weary and detached. Many responses dealt with tiredness and feelings of separation during

the Zoom sessions. The students were surprised by how tired they felt after spending the afternoon on Zoom, aiming all their focus on one spot sometimes felt overwhelming. Online learning was described as “staring at the computer” for a long time, which resulted in exhaustion.

Regarding the explanations given for this tiredness, some students simply stated that being present online was different, whereas others thought that the reason was that, in face-to-face format, they physically moved when practicing. Some thought that the novelty of the situation caused their weariness. Others mentioned possible personal factors, such as attention deficit disorder.

For some of the students, feeling detached appeared in a very concrete manner. The interaction did not feel as intimate as that during face-to-face lessons, and it was easier to lose focus. A temptation to grab their mobile phones and start scrolling through feeds or doing something else could occur. In face-to-face meetings, they would not dare do this. In a way, with online learning, a passive role is easy to take; the social pressure to be active is weaker than during face-to-face instruction.

Some of the students felt quite strongly about this situation. They regretted being separated not only from their courses but also from the entire university, experiencing feelings of loss. Being alone with their thoughts and being bystanders in the interactions felt difficult. Some felt that communication courses were, in some ways, empowering experiences; however, they now felt quite the opposite. Contact with others and the energy that came with it seemed to fade. The sense of connectedness they felt in face-to-face implementation diminished online. Focusing only on one person at a time instead of the whole group disturbed the feeling of community. Some students missed the voices and gestures of others. The words of respondent 9 illustrate these points:

I can't comment on this from any wider perspective right now; I believe the effects will be seen only later. This is probably my last year studying, so I feel disconnected from the university very much. I will miss the last lunches and coffees and other things at university. It is really difficult to see the so-called positive side in all of this.

Some of the students were also worried that online course would provide too narrow a perspective on communication skills. The characteristics of face-to-face communication science teaching—openness, flexibility, spontaneity, and energy—were not experienced in the same way. Comparing the experiences with the two formats, some thought that it was more difficult to stimulate others online; in the long run, therefore, distance learning might make students more passive. For some, distance learning at its best is only a good substitute for face-to-face learning—nothing more.

The third subtheme concerns technical problems and distractions. The profound incorporation of technology into their studies sometimes causes tension and frustration among students. A widespread concern about the sound or video connection breaking up and the stability of the Internet signal occurred. For example, during the public speaking event, the screen occasionally froze, and keeping up with what was happening became difficult. As respondent 2 shared,

Also, a personal problem during the course, I could not solve [problems related to] communication technologies. I do not have equipment suitable for online communication, and I felt this had affected my course performance.

For some students, technical problems arose throughout the course. When they could not participate with their computers, they had to use their mobile phones. Such a small screen made it more difficult to take notes or find information while attending lectures. Some students were unable to update their equipment and felt that this affected their achievement on the course.

One source of distraction was the uncertainty that accompanied the shift online. The students had negative expectations about the possibility of completing the course and learning communication skills online. Some felt that having to show their living quarters to others was somewhat intrusive. As the course continued, however, the students became more positive about online course and the possibilities of technology.

Finally, the students encountered unexpected situations. Sometimes, their surroundings were unsuitable for active participation. Loud background noises, such as renovation works being carried out next door, were an issue. In other cases, other people were present in the students' surroundings, doing their daily lives. Moreover, just being at home could be enough to make it more difficult to focus. It was easy to do something else while attending class. Physically moving to another location was considered helpful in mentally preparing to participate. Some students felt that it took more energy to prepare for the online meeting because they had to tidy up the background and prepare their food before turning on the camera. Furthermore, it was difficult to separate personal life from academic life.

In comparing the two implementations, students did not seem certain about how to carry on fluent discussions without distracting others in the online setting. They also worried about whether they could express themselves clearly enough, especially as a part in a group, when it seemed that everyone was focusing on their own appearance or the teacher in the Zoom meetings. Building a feeling of community or taking part in atmosphere building seemed difficult. The novelty of the online implementation and the stress concerning technology demanded a lot of effort in this skill-based course and feelings of separateness arose. The theme of challenges also brought to the surface a reminder of possible inequalities when some students reported having insufficient equipment.

4.4 Perceptions of public speaking

Perceptions about public speaking were divided into four subthemes: (1) public speaking is different without an audience, (2) perceptions about the speech event, (3) excitement, and (4) I learned virtual public speaking. Most of the perceptions highlighted the fact that online public speaking was different from public speaking in front of a physical audience. The students mentioned the feeling of being far away from the audience, the limited non-verbal communication and use of space when standing in front of a laptop camera, and the absence of a specific target to speak to. Respondent 2 explained:

The difference between online public speaking and appearing in front of an audience was clear. The public speaking event itself was very different compared to a situation where the speaker and the listener are both physically present. As a listener, I felt I was very distant from the speaker, and as a speaker, I felt I didn't have a specific subject to talk to. The latter point is interesting because talking to an audience often involves a crowd that is spread out, while the camera is just one specific object. Probably, it would be more accurate to say that there wasn't an object to interact with. I think it's the same from the listener's perspective. Observing via the camera felt a bit like listening to a conversation at the next table.

The students felt that getting a sense of the audience's energy and reactions was difficult; that is, they did not feel the audience's presence, and they missed it. For some, the audience was too close, as unfamiliar faces were just a few feet away on the screen. A few students felt that they had not received enough information on how to be an efficient speaker in front of a laptop, and that the online format had not covered all aspects that they wanted to practice for public speaking. When reflecting on the course objectives, the students felt that public speaking was one area in which they were not properly trained and did not accomplish the level they wished for.

Despite the impression of having a different experience when giving online speeches, most of the students thought that the online speech event worked out well. Despite the concerns, the overall experience was positive, and for some students, being present online or performing to the camera was an eye-opening experience that revealed their lack of communication skills in an online context.

Technology, after all, made it possible for parents, grandparents, and other loved ones to watch the speeches. Encouraging messages in the chat was also welcomed. They said that a public speech at the event would have been useful for their future, but this was also considered a good practice. Only a few students spoke of losing significant experience when the speech event was transferred online; they had high expectations about the event, and now those expectations were not met.

Feelings of excitement were experienced differently among the students. Some felt it was easier to perform alone in front of a computer, whereas others felt more pressure when speaking publicly via Zoom. For some, this experience offered nothing different, and they felt confident in the online environment.

Some of the students found speaking to a large audience online more exciting than doing so in the same physical space, mentioning the novelty of the situation as a possible reason for this feeling. Others felt that it did not cause as much stress this way. One student stated that speaking to "emptiness" did not make the same impression. Few students reported that they felt the same about speaking online, as they probably would have felt in a face-to-face situation. There were doubts if they could get themselves psyched for the speech—whether it was the same in an online environment. Some disclosed that they were missing the sharing and talking about the excitement with others; they would have wished for supportive communication from their peers or the teacher. The students were also uncertain about whether they had the chance to confront the fear of public speaking, given they had not been

physically in front of the audience. In conclusion, emotions seemed to vary depending on the student, and they reported different reactions to giving their speeches online.

Many students were pleased with the opportunity to experience online practices. For example, speaking to a large audience at a speech event virtually was a new appreciated experience. Some students stated that they had learned online public speaking during the course. Specific things had to be considered when speaking to a camera: looking directly at the camera, moderating the speech to make it interesting to listen to it through the digital medium, and focusing on the visual side of the performance. During the course, they witnessed the development of their abilities and skills, and they felt that they had become more relaxed when speaking to the camera.

To conclude, physical presence is different from virtual presence. Technology is not yet able to transfer feelings in the same way they are felt when people are in the same physical environment. Students reported learning online public speaking and differentiated it from speaking to a live audience in the same space. Learning online public speaking was also seen as an important skill, but some expressed that they would prefer practicing public speaking in more traditional settings.

4.5 Perceptions of feedback

Feedback during the course satisfied its requirements, and the students were pleased with the outcomes. Written feedback based on video recordings was carefully prepared. The students concentrated on the words they used when describing others' behavior, and written feedback challenged them to critically analyze other students' performances. The videos made it possible to focus on details and provide more precise feedback. Seeing how the speech succeeded based on the recording and evaluating its content after receiving feedback was useful. When feedback was received orally right after the practice, the students sometimes forgot what others had said. Still, some students preferred receiving feedback immediately after the performance. However, giving feedback online was sometimes difficult, especially with criticism. Some of the students felt that, without face-to-face communication, synchronous communication could present numerous inaccurate interpretations. The receivers rarely asked for clarification, and the givers were sparing with their feedback.

The students had difficulties with feedback in online course because of the impossibility of interpreting non-verbal communication and having fluent conversations. Written feedback was one-sided and did not allow them to see how the receiver reacted; the tone or words could not be changed. Non-verbal communication cannot be read as easily as during face-to-face situations, which makes the other person feel more distant. A few students mentioned that feedback was more critical in online implementation. Some thought that this was due to the written nature of the feedback, which made criticizing easier, whereas others thought the cause was the online format.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, the various ways in which feedback took place throughout the course were appreciated by the students, who felt that this aspect was important for their learning experience. For the students, it was important to take time

for feedback, and they appreciated the effort other students put into it for them. The following excerpt from respondent 21 highlights this:

Even at the beginning of the course, the aim was to constantly give feedback to other students about their performance. A generous amount of giving and receiving feedback was a good thing and made me discover new sides of my communication behavior, which I hadn't noticed before. The feedback from other students encouraged me and broadened my insight into who I am as a communicator. The feedback sessions after every practice motivated me to listen to and observe the behavior of others differently and more intensively.

Suggestions for better feedback included additional advice from the teacher and immediate and more elaborate feedback after the performance. Overall, the increased amount and diversified channels of feedback were regarded as a significant part of the course and the communication skills' learning process, and students felt the course taught feedback skills in a versatile manner.

5 Discussion

In this study, we wanted to determine (a) if skill-based online courses where students practice communication skills enable them to achieve their learning objectives and (b) the things that should be considered when planning new similar courses. We will first discuss issues arising from the results from a wider perspective, the differences, and similarities between these two formats affecting the achievement of the learning objectives.

As mentioned, even though special attention was paid to them, conversation and social interaction remain the most significant challenges in an online environment. Communication is more than just talking—it is about connecting and building relationships. In an online environment, where pedagogical objectives require building trust, relational communication cannot be ignored. In this case, how well the group got to know each other and whether they built trust during face-to-face classes remain unclear.

Analyzing communication in the new situation helped some students reflect on the knowledge they possessed in a very concrete manner. This allowed them to obtain a broader understanding of communication skills and public speaking. Some of the success of this course may be explained by the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic created a feeling of togetherness that pushed students to be the best version of themselves. Although their reactions to online course differed, the students were active (even proactive) during the course. They had a shared mission: to complete the course successfully despite unexpected difficulties.

According to social information processing theory (Walther, 2008), people can become familiar and have trusting relationships with one another online; the process, however, takes longer than in face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, at the start of 2020, it was common to proceed with the same timeline as that of face-to-face instruction. Creating a "safe space" as a goal has become very familiar to university teachers. We must pay more attention to building communities where students can share their thoughts and receive support. By communities, we do not mean relationships just

between students and a teacher but relationships between students. The university is also a place to build friendships and networks, and this should be possible even in online courses. This is not to say that every online course should offer possibilities to network and connect; rather, we should view courses as entities and ensure that this is possible in most courses. For this, we suggest more discussions with the students. By setting rules, students may be able to participate more easily. In addition, in our study, some students reported feelings of weariness and detachment during online instruction. These feelings are not strange to university teachers. Teachers today balance detachment and flexibility when designing high-quality online courses for more divergent students, and holistic course planning from the perspective of relational communication (e.g., [Ratliff, 2019](#)) and social presence (e.g., [Lowenthal and Snelson, 2017](#)) might be beneficial.

One of the things we were left thinking about was feedback. In this course, feedback was perceived as successful, regardless of the way it was given. The students' responses show that they were pleased with the different ways in which they received feedback. However, the answers do not elucidate much about the process of giving, receiving, and using feedback in an online communication skill course. We were left hoping that we would have asked more precise questions. Many of the courses in communication studies rely on student peer feedback; thus, feedback in online implementation is something that deserves further investigation. It would be interesting to determine how aware students are of the feedback process and how they use the feedback they receive.

5.1 Limitations

When applying these results, a few factors must be considered. First, our sample consisted of only 26 students; thus, we should be careful not to draw any major conclusions from the results. Second, the communication skills in the practice course is not a normal lecture-based course; most of the time, the students worked in groups and practiced communication skills. When the course is delivered face-to-face, students are not usually sitting in the same spot for a long time. Our results, therefore, cannot be applied to lecture-based courses.

Third, these data were collected in the spring of 2020, when the experience of the sudden shift was very new to students. They felt that they were a part of something unique. On the other hand, this makes the data very rare, and in a way a portrait of the uncommon time, and we should remember that students could have answered differently if the data were collected after a longer experience with online course.

5.2 Implications

Results indicated that communication skills can be taught online. This requires that the course is planned and organized well. In this course, in the future communication skills will be practiced both online and in face-to-face settings. A mix of online and face-to-face course will allow for discussing the differences and similarities between the two formats and evaluating what works and what does not. While the course can be conducted entirely online,

this may not be the most effective option. This is especially true of the public speaking component, as the students felt that they had missed out on connecting with the audience. Our study indicates that teaching public speaking online is different from doing so in person, thus supporting [Ward \(2016\)](#).

In addition, a mix of these two formats will introduce special features and different practices related to computer-mediated communication. Given the ever-changing nature of information and communication technologies and their use at work, understanding, and applying computer-mediated communication are key areas of expertise for communication students. The theoretical background should be from previous compulsory courses. Also, technical knowledge must be introduced in the course; for example, the role of cameras, how to make an illusion of eye contact, listening, nonverbal communication, adaptation, and clarity should be focused on.

Some students are not just missing the spaces; they need them. Sometimes, technological, and environmental problems disadvantage some students. These issues cannot be overlooked, especially when it comes to the evaluation process. By providing a space for learning, the university has provided at least some similar possibilities to learn, and this is no longer the case during online teaching. On the other hand, modern technology provides opportunities, for example, in terms of sustainability. Teachers in the future must balance the opportunities modern online technologies bring with the fact that no one has the same level of equipment or the same availability of study spaces.

Furthermore, in their responses, the students recognized the importance of adjusting to different types of communication situations. Changes happen all the time, and this is something they thought was important for the work lives of future specialists. They do not necessarily need new communication skills; however, they should accommodate their communication in different situations. Thus, the important aspect of these situations is crucial to observe. Communication studies should teach future professionals to understand the role of every participant in a communication situation. The students knew how they were supposed to act face-to-face but were unsure of how they should act online. In future courses, we will discuss the importance of adaptation and how to avoid misunderstandings, especially when nonverbal communication is limited. In addition, more discussions, such as a shared understanding of tasks, practices, presence, nonverbal communication, etiquette, positive atmosphere, and team spirit, can help build an environment that does not cause unnecessary stress for students.

6 Conclusion

Our results yield a few conclusions. First, when practicing communication skills online, students are practicing online communication. This was especially true regarding public speaking. Second, both face-to-face and online communication should be practiced as both will be part of students' personal and working lives. Third, although special attention was paid to relational communication and immediacy in online surroundings, problems with conversations and social interactions were reported. This

implies that there is still a lot to learn about effective teaching in the online environment.

The development of online courses continues to be an important part of higher education. By understanding students' perceptions of these courses and incorporating them into the development process, we can create courses that meet students' expectations better. With this knowledge, effective online courses can be achieved. However, student experiences are not the only aspect that should be considered when developing online courses. Other perspectives, such as those of teachers, academic programs, and higher education institutions, should also be considered.

Furthermore, online teaching has its challenges, which must be investigated further. Our results indicate that students experience both online and face-to-face teaching in different ways. As shown by previous evidence, positive and negative views vary. No solution is received in the same way by everyone. A course according to the personal preferences of every student is impossible to establish. The choice of the most suitable format must be made according to the pedagogical goals.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate

in this study was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

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