



A Professing Parent’s Reflection on the COVID Classroom and Research Illustrates the Full Utility of Communication Pedagogy

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Abstract: This essay uses an ethnonarrative method to illustrate why and how to communicate compassion in the K–12, college, and workplace classroom during a pandemic. Reflecting on my experiences as a parent and professor, my students’ journal entries March–May 2020, and field research notes, I conclude that the feeling of powerlessness in the classroom and compassion within the organization creates an innovative ethnonarrative research opportunity for the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* reader. Ultimately, my reflection as a parent and professor emphasized the value of communication pedagogy. Ultimately, I argue that practitioners in traditional classrooms, as well as the workplace, can advance communication pedagogy through multifaceted ethnonarrative approaches that are uniquely suited to meet the complex challenges exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student journal entry (March 17, 2020)—“*I think this will blow over in a few short weeks.*”

A week makes a huge difference.

Next journal entry (March 24, 2020)—“*Well, this is getting more serious than I initially thought.*”

Yes, it did not blow over. In fact, it blew up. My extroverted first grader sobbed, “I don’t get to go to P.E. anymore, and I didn’t even get to hug my friends goodbye.” Her introverted brother responded, “I could

get used to this online school.” COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of our lives with a pronounced bearing on pedagogy. Teaching in the school of communication, observing my own children, and acknowledging the changing nature of organizational communication in my research afforded me a valuable opportunity to conduct a layered exploration of the role communication pedagogy plays in our lived experiences.

In this reflective essay, I discuss challenges and opportunities related to the COVID-19 pandemic from my perspective as a professor, parent, and organizational communication researcher by focusing on student journal entries, research field notes, and my own lived experience from March 16, 2020–mid-Fall 2021. I discuss, briefly, the convergence of pedagogical and practical challenges within my research context. More specifically, my reflection on parenting, teaching, and researching uncovered a vulnerability of students, instructors, children, parents, and professionals that expands communication pedagogy in the primary, secondary, and workplace learning contexts. Ultimately, I focus on opportunities to renegotiate power and communicate compassion in a pandemic, as well as expand methodological practices for conducting research on the dynamic interaction among them.

Pedagogy Context

I began my teaching career at the high school level in the summer of 2000. Thus, by the time I began graduate school in the fall of 2003, I realized how much the field of “instructional communication” could have helped my teaching over the past 3 years. I had an “oh, that’s why that happened”; “that’s why I felt that way”; or a “well, I should have done that” reaction to everything I was reading and learning. Through my master’s program, I became a better teacher. I also realized that an instructional lens could enhance organizational development and learning research. Later, I found that instructional communication research helped me understand my children and their teachers regardless of the grade level. Now, as I reflect on 2020 and move forward into 2021 and beyond, I bring that same sense of awareness to my current professional and personal experiences. In addition to my experiences and instructional knowledge, my parenting lens adds a degree to my understanding and to my compassion that will be explored further in this essay. My parenting lens also highlights the contextual piece within communication pedagogy. A field that historically has examined communication within a quantitative paradigm is in need of a paradigm shift to fully grasp the communication and contextual challenges now facing us in the future.

The majority of this essay reflects on the initial stage (March–May 2020) of a crisis that would persist for months to come. Within a year, five million working mothers had to quit their jobs to manage competing responsibilities brought on from the pandemic (Gilbert et al., 2020). As I reflect on my own experiences, I am not surprised as I also struggled with childcare and decisions that revolved around my family. I realize that I am part of a two-parent household, which lessened my stress because we could share the burdens. Single parents, single-person wage earners, and those with different support structures bore the entire burden. I listened on Zoom and Teams, and I saw comments on social media about the parent struggles, particularly the mothers in my bubble, when they did not have the support they needed. In addition, I witnessed the working mother struggles in my research. Finally, my children are primarily taught by working mothers, and some of my students are working mothers or primary caregivers. Though all of these relationships have power dynamics and need to communicate compassion, the lived experiences shape what this tension looks and sounds like. Nevertheless, my experiences highlighted what communication pedagogy research has to offer teachers in K–12, higher education, and workplace settings as we navigate a pandemic now and a new normal going forward.

The unique partnership of instructional and organizational communication is not a new concept (Kearney, 2008). This revelation was not born of mine or others' COVID-19 communication challenges. However, my reflection provides direction on how communication pedagogy can respond. In my research, I have explored communication within the organizational training classroom (Mathis, 2020). In addition, since May 2020, I have analyzed communication adjustments of a state district court in adapting to technology within the formal legal system. I saw a few women, maybe spouses and mothers, appearing in court professionally dressed and prepared to present their case. Interesting note, most of the participants outside of the court reporter were middle-aged to senior men. Outside of my research context, in my usual day-to-day, I see an instructional/organizational partnership as a communication professor within the norms of the university organization. However, during the pandemic, I saw all organizational members, administration, faculty, staff, and students forced to maneuver the dialectical struggle with communication and technology in a completely different way.

The silver lining of a crisis is the opportunity to learn and build on what we know. Dannels (2015b) suggested questions teachers should ask. I structured my reflection and thoughts on pandemic professor/parent experience and during my pandemic professor/parent experience to advance communication pedagogy on one of her questions—**How can I make a difference?**—moving students and organizational stakeholders from worry to trust *during the rapid transition to remote learning*. As we move through to the end (hopefully) of the pandemic, there are a number of lessons learned to establish trust among teachers, students, and the workforce in what is already being called a new normal.

After the social and health climate of 2020, it stands without much debate that communicating concern, dealing with communication anxiety, engaging students, managing perceptions, negotiating perceptions, and overcoming cultural differences are extremely relevant today. Training in education and in organizations must prepare stakeholders to communicate concern within the boundaries, limitations, and challenges of today—easier said than done. Where do we begin? Reflection on conversations, journal narratives, and research notes centered around these questions converge professor/student, parent/child, colleague/colleague experiences to highlight needs and potential answers to new interpersonal and organizational learning challenges.

The classroom and workplace are filled with war stories of the struggles of those that paved the way before us, but how do we conduct research, teach, and train in a time when we no longer have a historical point of reference? We will become the reference. The pandemic of 2020–2021 will shift communication pedagogy for the classroom and the workplace. March 2020 gave us an experience very few parents or teachers could reflect on with familiarity and know how to encourage, motivate, or redirect their student. We have shared emotions impacting engagement in the past; however, for the first time in over a century, everyone in the institution and organization found themselves vulnerable in an entirely new way. We are impacted by the same multidimensional and multimodal world Dannels (2015a) described in 2015; yet, with a shared sense of compassion and concern. Through this shared anxiety, worry, and fear came a shared sense of powerlessness among teachers, professors, parents, and organizational stakeholders. I do think there was a shared powerlessness among the educator and the educated, as well as the supervisor and the supervised that initiated a power/powerless conversation.

Power and Pedagogy

I have written about communicating power in an organizational context (Mathis, 2020). Particularly, I argued for the extension of Relational Power and Instructional Influence (Mottet et al., 2006). We know

that power in the classroom is a negotiated process. Others have used multidisciplinary organizational theory such as Leader-Member Exchange to examine perceived justice in the classroom (Horan et al., 2013). However, the COVID-19 context brought to the forefront a new need to communicate power and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) constructs (respect, trust, loyalty). Perceptions of justice and power are embedded in the macro levels of multilayered organizations where our trust is foundational. The intricate power levels of our workplaces added another degree of complexity.

As we wrestled with anxiety, uncertainty, and technology, instructional communication provided a lens to understand what was happening in my classroom, my children's educational experience, and the workplace. However, they also highlighted a need. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened stress for all of us based on uncertainty regarding our health, employment, and families as they hit rapidly and at the same time. As an educator and parent, I found established literature in instructional communication a lighthouse in a moment of educator ineptness and desperation. It was my experience that instructor clarity and compassion was even more critical to student success within the pandemic context. Yet, communicating mutual respect and trust had shifted. It was imperative to communicate clarity about the context with compassion.

Compassionate communication within both traditional nontraditional classrooms such as the workplace pointed me to organizational communication. Miller (2007) conceptualized compassionate communication at work into three main categories: noticing, connecting, and responding. First, you notice a need for compassion about the details of others' lives. I mentioned that not only did my reflections inform my teaching and parenting, but it also highlighted communication pedagogy's impact on the workplace through my research. As a professing parent, I determined responding and connecting to students, colleagues, administrators, lawyers, clients, defendants, judges, court reporters, and family members vitally complicated. For me, experiencing the pandemic through a teaching, parenting, and researching lens accentuated that the organizational and interpersonal mutual influence is a complex and multilayered context that only communication pedagogy can work to improve. In the process of connecting, we communicate empathy and perspective-taking. Then, within the boundaries of our context, we respond.

Over a decade ago, a shift in our economy that impacted workplace communication prompted Miller (2007) to research compassionate communication. Though the economy has continued on the path that Miller introduced (i.e., less manufacturing and more service), we have a new shift in many areas including organizational demographics, political climate, perceived social justice, and a pandemic. My children attend a private school, and I teach at a public state institution; both are consumer-driven. With it comes a desire to please the parent and/or student in a way that is consumer- rather than learner-focused. All of these macro influences create a new take on "emotional work." Miller (2007) wrote, "emotional work springs from the job, not from relationships with coworkers or roles outside the organization" (p. 225). Yet, there is little to no training doing emotional work. Burnout is less likely to occur when there is high empathic concern and low emotional contagion. It is then that the organizational member, teacher, parent, or administrator can communicatively respond to the need.

Teaching under normal circumstances is emotional work. Communication anxiety was managed when "our professor has put together what I call an action plan of moving forward which has helped a lot with stress" (student's quote). Professors' level of engagement was noticed by students, "One responded well, while the other hardly responded at all." Life is a constant struggle of moving from worry to trust.

Students worry about class, worry about graduation, worry about finding employment, and others worry about staying employed. One student stated,

I'm honestly a little overwhelmed with school right now . . . my teachers have exceeded my expectations on how they would be during online school . . . I would say all of my teachers have done a great job . . . I always get an answer back from my teachers when I have questions.

This statement from a student's journal indicates concern, compassion, and clarity. Empathic concern is feeling for the student, and emotional contagion is feeling with them (Miller, 2007). Understanding effective communication pedagogical choices in the midst of a global pandemic requires innovation. Exploring communication pedagogy through a traditional lens to bring understanding to a nontraditional experience is inadequate.

Research published in the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* illustrates it is open to broadening the scope in ways that include innovative methodologies that meet a changing and challenging time in the traditional and nontraditional area of communication pedagogy (Arnett, 2020). A new exploration of power in the classroom during a pandemic (or social change) command a methodological revolution and an extension of Arnett's autoethnographic insight.

I found myself fully immersed in the organizational and instructional communication spheres of health care, government, institutions, and classrooms. Research in communication pedagogy will serve our educational institutions; moreover, the organizations that now find themselves needing training to accommodate the learning curve of a heightened political and pandemic time period. We have the perfect blend of instructional and organizational communication scholarship and innovation necessary to teach how to communicate compassion and concern in myriad contexts.

I am not suggesting one lens is superior to another. Every paradigm has informed my own research epistemology. I am arguing that I have virtually zero influence to determine if my government works together, if businesses are functioning, and little more when it comes to my institution; however, we as scholars can work collaboratively to gather a rich understanding of the powerful and powerless in a pandemic/post-pandemic classroom and organization. Therefore, we create scholarship and best practices for the classroom, virtual classroom, and organizational training. One paradigm will not address all challenges discussed on this issue. Institutions of learning are fluid; therefore, a method developed to study a system that mirrors the cardiovascular system is insufficient (Daft, 1983). It is a rich and creative methodology that allows communication pedagogy to bloom outside the classroom. What methodology can tease out the experiences of all the stakeholders within a complex culture?

Pandemic and Pedagogy Is a Phenomenon

Phenomenology is a methodology that has historically allowed organizational social scientists to dissect the essence of an experience by making the implicit, explicit (Sanders, 1982, p. 354). If we want to know more about how to communicate compassionate concern in an evolving vulnerable context, phenomenology may be a logical place to begin. However, I argue that phenomenology alone isn't enough and that ethnonarrative, which includes discourse and context analysis, enhances its utility (Hansen, 2006). In ethnonarrative, researchers examine both the students' and/or educators' expressed narratives and the ethnographical context of organization because "words are only half the story"

(Hansen, 2006, p. 1072) when attempting to solve multilayered instructional challenges. I see dialectical challenges in my experiences during the pandemic. To unpack this phenomenon's tensions, the ethnonarrative takes into account the organizational/professional cultural assumptions of the research. Particular tensions adding to the phenomenon are technology and COVID-19.

To clarify, Brummans (2014) argues that nonhuman actors play a key role in interpretation. COVID-19 has created a vulnerable state where meaning is co-constructed by the organizational members, teachers, students, administration, macro-administration, employees, clients, and non-human actors (COVID-19 and ZOOM). Qualitative research is uniquely suited to embrace the unexpected. The ethnonarrative of the COVID-19 phenomenon examined through an interpretivist lens allows the act of researching to be communicative, thus, seeing the world in which we work and teach to inform our way of teaching and organizing.

If we want to know why people do what they do or what they are thinking, then we have to know the narrative construction (Hansen, 2006, 2011). "Where discourse studies would interrogate an organizational script, ethnonarrative seeks to see the play" (Hansen, 2006, p. 1063). When I read the mission and vision of *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*, I was compelled to write this essay clarifying why and how JCP could be an ideal outlet for furthering communication pedagogy by using this innovative approach to examine the lived experiences of the educators and the educated. Many fields use qualitative methods to solve organizational problems (e.g., public relations, religious leaders, investigators, insurance adjusters, attorneys, and the military) (Gailliard & Davis, 2017). There is a prime place for doing so in instructional communication research, as well.

Conclusion

On April 4, 2020, a student wrote, "my professors are also trying to kill me this week" and a few days later (April 8, 2020) claimed, "[m]y professors must have heard all my tears and boo-hoos because a few of my due dates were extended for projects." While the student may be correct, as a professing parent myself, I believe it is more likely that the professors were weak and weary from their own exhausted "boo-hoos" and extended the deadline. The student did not fully comprehend that power had shifted and teachers were also feeling vulnerable in a way we had never felt before. Stories do not discriminate as they identify organizational goals, heroes, and shared messages (Kent, 2015). The stories also clearly reveal the exposure of classroom and organizational power. Russell's (2018) storytelling approach addresses a classroom need she observed regarding various social problems. I argue the same observation can be applied to our research needs. I challenge us to innovatively and compassionately research in order to tackle the concern of communicating vulnerability. In sum, this reflection bares a compassionate ethnonarrative approach that will produce rich findings from all the stakeholders. Furthermore, emotional work requires communicating empathy with concern. The appropriateness of this message looks different in first grade, sixth grade, 12th grade, college, health care, and the courtroom warranting a contextually bounded method. When power shifts as illustrated here, an emotional contagion is on the brink. If we do not fine-tune the power dynamics and appropriate empathy/concern, mental health challenges and burnout are possible. Thus, this professing parent closes with the argument that this approach will complete the circle of compassionate communication pedagogy from child to adult learner and from parent to professor.

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