Beyond Basic: Transformational Potential of Pandemic Pedagogy

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Erratum
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Basic Course Forum: Response

Beyond Basic: Transformational Potential of Pandemic Pedagogy

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities to foster resilience as an ongoing process of productively adapting to crises and change. The fundamental communication course can serve a key role in building resilience on several levels: personal (for students and teachers), across courses and communication programs, and community-wide. Lessons learned from the pandemic include judiciously adopting new technological tools, counteracting regressive institutional resilience that resists change, and maximizing inclusivity in course design and delivery.

Keywords: pandemic, pedagogy, trauma-informed education, online teaching and learning

The articles constituting this forum highlight just how vital a role the fundamental course (FC) in communication, more commonly referred to as the “basic course,” can and does play amid the challenges educators have faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Even more important, the authors affirm how this crisis disrupted conventional pedagogical practices in ways that fuel innovation and ultimately can generate more robust fundamental communication courses, strengthen communication programs, and enhance student learning. My reflections have been shaped from twelve years as a fundamental course director (FCD) at two universities,
three years as a department head, and perhaps most uniquely as the founding administrator of a global social media hub for educators throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The Facebook group Pandemic Pedagogy,¹ established on March 11, 2020, when my university announced its impending switch to emergency remote instruction, quickly grew to exceed 32,000 members worldwide. With more than 1.4 million content items, the group affords a useful indicator of how pandemic-induced improvements in the FC compare with changes wrought in other fields and at various types of institutions. The following discussion addresses key issues raised in the forum, inviting readers to use those thought-provoking essays as springboards to probe more deeply into questions about what should constitute the FC and how it can play a vital role in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Rethinking Resilience

The contributions to the forum address post-pandemic pedagogy on several levels. On the micro level, reflection concentrates on invigoration of course design and delivery, which in turn will lay a solid basis for student achievement that can yield the golden egg sought by every institution: equipping students for greater academic success, improving instructor and student satisfaction with the FC, and ultimately increasing student retention. Tatum and Broeckelman-Post address the FC at a more programmatic level through proactive contingency planning analogous to disaster preparedness. Implementing what amounts to a hyflex approach of equipping the FC for delivery in multiple modalities can insulate the course from unforeseen interruptions (Miller, Sellnow, & Strawser, 2021). Brazeal examines systemic ways to rethink pedagogical practices, pushing beyond piecemeal accommodations to develop ways the FC can be re-engineered to maximize access to the widest variety of learners.

Although they cover different aspects of the FC, all the articles in the forum converge thematically on resilience: students and instructors who can anticipate, prevent, and move forward from setbacks; courses that can adapt to disruptions and resist threats to instructional quality; modes of instruction that empower students through maximizing access and inclusivity. Resilience percolates throughout the forum, infusing discussions of course design, program administration, instructor characteristics, and student outcomes. Broadly defined as the ongoing processes that foster growth after disruptive change (Brandhorst, 2018), resilience related to the FC

¹ https://www.facebook.com/groups/pandemicpedagogy1
operates on at least four distinct but intersecting levels: personal, course/program, community, and institutional. By marshalling adaptive capacities to withstand adversity and “bounce forward” (Spialek & Houston, 2019, p. 11) rather than simply reverting back to pre-pandemic practices, resilience can provide a foundation for rethinking, reforming, and reinventing the fundamental communication course. Building on how resilience informs this forum, a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding and practice of resilience can emerge.

**Personal Resilience**

Although the psychological research tends to treat resilience as an internal trait, a communication perspective highlights how human interactions and discourse enable people to adapt productively to extreme stress (Schwartzman, 2020). More specifically, the FC can strengthen the capacity of students and teachers to cope with uncertainty, restore social connections, and withstand adversity. The value of these skills extends far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Student Resilience.** Many of the instructional practices discussed in the forum connect directly with principles of trauma-informed pedagogy, especially in emphasizing mutual trust between instructor and student, rebuilding the student’s sense of agency and self-efficacy, and acknowledging intersectional traumas associated with various forms of identity-based discrimination overlaid upon the pandemic (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Affirmation of student agency can arise from the collaborative networks so characteristic of fundamental communication courses, with peers encouraging fellow students when they face challenges. A recent study of 1,323 French university students found that institutional expenditures on equipment had no effect on academic performance, but when students collaboratively used technology their performance improved substantially (Ben Youssef, Dahmani, & Ragni, 2022). The attenuation of social interaction throughout the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for more aggressive incorporation of team-based activities and peer-to-peer mentoring to restore lapsed social ties. Moving forward, the design of the FC should enact trauma-informed education by addressing the emotional needs of students as much as mastery of the subject matter and performance skills. The FC becomes a transformational opportunity through engaging the whole student emotionally as well as cognitively (Marquart & Báez, 2021). The student’s well-being assumes as much importance as performing well.
**Instructor Resilience.** Thoroughly training and supporting instructors provides necessary but not quite sufficient conditions for building resilience. Making instructional resources available can enhance resilience only if instructors are willing and able to use them. The fulcrum that allows instructors to pivot rests on a foundation of mutual care and trust between FCDs and individual instructors. Resilience can devolve into a responsibility foisted upon the individual (“Stay strong!” “Keep going!”) while attenuating communal and institutional systems of support. For example, constant reminders to “Exercise self-care” persist while flexible work policies implemented at the peak of the pandemic disappear. Although Tatum and Broeckelman-Post make a valid point about FCDs modeling healthy personal and professional behaviors, it is equally vital to acknowledge one’s own and each other’s limitations while developing ways to address them. Instructors can model acknowledgment of vulnerability and proper self-disclosure. Brené Brown (2012) endorses “normalizing discomfort” (p. 198) by creating an environment where everyone can feel safe to admit their limitations without experiencing shame for their disclosures.

A fine line distinguishes models from martyrs. A cadre of educators, be they within one’s own department or across a worldwide group of educators such as Pandemic Pedagogy, can fortify each other to weather crises. The content on Pandemic Pedagogy demonstrates that instructors can bond and support one another through many means, such as: mutual venting of frustrations, sharing assignments and activities that have proven successful, requesting and giving advice, and assembling extensive networks of guest presenters who can join classes live via video or provide reusable asynchronous content through recorded presentations and interviews.

**Course and Program Resilience**

Individual FC courses and all such communication courses collectively can parlay lessons from pandemic pedagogical practices into providing educational experiences geared to address the communication disruptions that students and instructors experienced. The ascendancy of Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms suggests an ongoing need to incorporate competency in this mode of communication into the FC. Beyond using videoconferencing as a mode of course delivery or to increase accessibility of office hours, oral communication via this medium should constitute a fundamental component of the fundamental communication course.
More generally, FCDs cannot afford to remain tethered to Aristotle’s toga by concentrating exclusively (or perhaps even primarily) on the in-person, one-to-many, “platform” public speech as the paragon of presentational communication. The FC could productively embrace a more multi-modal approach to how students produce and consume messages, acknowledging the need for fluency in creating, delivering, and reacting appropriately to video presentations, group videoconferences, podcasts, synchronously and asynchronously delivered content, mixed media presentations, and much more. Beyond mere technological savviness, this more digital realm calls for updating and adapting the core content of the FC, such as: organizational techniques, conversational practices, establishing credibility, judging the quality of evidence, adjusting delivery for the medium, etc. Courses that build such essential competencies for the emerging, increasingly digital workplace will strengthen their position as essential to the curriculum.

**Community Resilience**

If necessity is the mother of invention, then the pandemic becomes the parent of partnerships. Invigoration of relationships has long been recognized as a bulwark of building resilience, and the pandemic underscores the value of building collective strength through collaboration. Many educators found that collaborating to address the pedagogical challenges of the pandemic enriched instructional quality and that such practices should continue permanently (Román, Castro, Baeza, Knab, Huss-Lederman, & Chacon, 2021).

The contributions to this forum suggest many opportunities to enrich collaborations on several levels. Course enhancements such as those the authors describe could continuously reinvigorate instruction through interdepartmental sharing. Directors and instructors of fundamental courses across multiple disciplines could discover not only what works well (best practices), but also share how these innovations were designed and implemented (best processes). These interdisciplinary collaborations carry the added benefit of building coalitions to support fundamental courses and secure their place as a vital part of the institution’s core curriculum.

Building the multimodality of the FC along the lines that Tatum and Broeckelman-Post recommend may sound like a daunting task for the individual instructor. This hyflex course construction becomes more manageable and more effective through collaborations between the instructors as content experts and course designers who bring technological and systems expertise in optimizing user
interfaces. These course designers often can be found among the staff of Teaching and Learning Centers (or their equivalents) at institutions, but they may also emerge more organically. More than a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, at Northwest Missouri State University a cadre of undergraduates skilled in interactive digital media (IDM) worked in a center for instructional technology to develop digital learning objects that met each instructor's learning objectives. Many institutions may have untapped student talent in this area.

Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as Brazeal calls for, can pose challenges with already understaffed and overburdened Offices of Accessibility Resources. Embracing UDL, however, affords opportunities to collaborate more closely with students who have disabilities, proactively involving students in suggesting the kinds of instructional adaptations that they would find most helpful. These course updates then would be incorporated into course design and delivery. Building on Brazeal’s examples, instructors could refresh the humble online discussion board by accepting contributions in a variety of formats: text, video, audio, or graphic (e.g., infographics or drawings).

More broadly, interinstitutional collaborations could—and should—emerge to build a more robust FC. Organizations such as the National Association of Communication Centers and the Basic Course Division of the National Communication Association can devise strategies for FC design and support. Open-source digital learning objects could be showcased at conferences, and a catalog could be devised for locating and deploying these reusable items beyond the institutions where they were developed. Such repositories (e.g., MERLOT) have existed for many years, but they are not geared to the specific needs of the fundamental communication course.

Post-Pandemic Projections

Overall, what have we learned from the sudden, drastic disruptions in the FC? The articles in the forum furnish fruitful springboards for inventive FC improvements. The following reflections extend those authors’ ideas by offering caveats as we build more resilient courses, students, and selves.

Beware Regressive Resilience

Although not addressed directly in this forum, resilience also operates at the institutional level as colleges and universities scramble to retain students, recover enrollment losses, and address faculty turnover. *Regressive resilience* becomes manifest
as a reversion to previous, pre-pandemic practices. This institutional inertia treats the pandemic as a momentary disruption in business as usual, denying the need for systemic changes while reproducing the same practices that the pandemic challenged or delegitimized. The rhetoric of regressive resilience sounds familiar on many campuses: “Let’s get back to normal,” “Return to work” (as if everyone went on holiday throughout the pandemic), etc. In practice, these invocations involve practices such as: restore pre-pandemic proportions of face-to-face vs. online courses, and require physical presence as the default mode for all types of work.

In its regressive form, as Evans and Reid (2014) observe, “Resilience, as we have learned, is more a code for social compliance than a political ambition to transform the very sources of inequality and injustices experienced by marginalized populations” (p. 102). In contrast, the campus-wide interdepartmental partnerships that can foster community resilience may also drive institutions to retain or expand more flexible modes of instruction, leverage technology to maximize inclusivity, and prioritize student support services such as communication centers that can enhance student engagement in any course. Writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) warns: “Nothing could be worse than a return to normality” after the pandemic wanes, as it would erase innovations in education, labor practices, and collaborative possibilities that arose in response to the crisis.

**Digital Tools as Shiny (and Tarnished) Objects**

Brazeal’s contribution to this forum wisely cautions that any forays into new technological realms must arise from sound pedagogical rationales. Beware the tantalizing temptation of adopting new technological tools simply because they offer flashy features. “New” does not necessarily mean “improved,” despite their constant conjunction in sales pitches. Instructors should carefully consider not only which technologies to initiate or retain, but also which technologies to alter or abandon and why. For example, many members of Pandemic Pedagogy have raised serious concerns about surveillance technologies (e.g., Respondus Lockdown Browser, etc.) designed to prevent cheating during online tests. These reservations include the intrusiveness of the surveillance (mirroring objections to “cameras on” requirements for synchronous classes on Zoom and similar platforms), and ableist issues related to how these apps register certain bodily movements as signs of cheating. The discussions in Pandemic Pedagogy offer many suggestions about countering academic dishonesty through redesigning assessments, moving away from simply repeating
textual or lecture content and embracing more holistic assessment techniques. The FC can lead in such efforts, building on the long history of performance-based, authentic assessment in communication instruction.

Beyond deciding which technological tools to use, instructors should reflect on how to optimize use of the tools they already have. The Goldilocks principle governs instructional technology: find just the right level of technology so that time and effort spent learning it does not unduly compete with time on task (learning course content). Recently, I peer reviewed a fully online introductory language course (a “foreign” language for native English speakers). While facing the already daunting challenge of learning a new language, students were expected to become fluent in at least three different platforms in addition to the learning management system for the course to prepare assignments. Too often, instructors may incorrectly assume that as so-called digital natives, the current crop of students has technological fluency across all digital platforms (Jovanovic, Damasceno, & Schwartzman, 2021). Digital literacy does not necessarily transfer across technological domains.

Prioritize Access, Equity, and Inclusion

With its disproportionate disadvantages to under-represented, under-resourced, and marginalized populations, the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a social justice crisis as well as a health crisis (Schwartzman, 2021). We cannot simply engineer away the deep, systemic inequities that thwart full access to, participation in, and successful completion of the fundamental communication (or any other) course. Dolmage (2017) warns that students with disabilities could be “funneled away from on-site classes and into online classes as a method of exclusion” (p. 29), especially given understaffed university accessibility resource offices and inconsistent universal design architecture of courses, platforms, and apps.

Augmenting community resilience by forging partnership across institutions, departments, and instructors (e.g., closer collaborations between tenure-track and term appointment faculty) can help to recast course redesign as a collaborative process that builds on the strengths of each participant. Instead of hearing constant imperatives to “do more” as additional burdens on each instructor, we might revise such commands as invitations to “do more together,” with instructors and students continuing to explore ways to acknowledge and develop diverse approaches to teaching and learning. Beyond retaining technologies utilized during the pandemic,
we should rise to transform these technologies into tools that can improve engagement and accelerate social mobility for all students.

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