

Educational Social Context During the Covid-19 Pandemic:
An Examination into Mediated Communication and its Implications

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With the introduction of the Covid-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020, instruction and the social context surrounding connectivity and interaction has changed drastically. With concerns of the virus spreading quickly, students were sent home and education systems across the country, and the world, were forced to quickly find a new way to host school which meant teaching and learning in entirely new contexts. Context can be understood as the factors that surround a person or situation that have an impact on the way that the world around them is understood. This can be understood in terms of sub-contexts such as “unwritten” rules and restrictions offered up by societal constraints, or in more plain terms, the “background” that is seen and understood around people on a day-to-day place (Abra, 2021). Context changes from place to place as well as generally over time, depending on the situation. So, previously the context that surrounded students, specifically from a college students’ perspective, people attended lecture halls in which they settled into a seat they deemed as “theirs” from day one, they attended dining halls that were filled with people in which they would attempt to find a seat, touch the same surfaces as all others, with no concern about a potential germ pool, and lived within communal groups. The sheer lack of awareness of people around oneself paired with the lack of concern over protecting oneself or others against germs, students would often attend class even if sick, is now inconceivable. With the sudden onset of the pandemic, there was a quick and disorderly switch in social context, not only for education systems, but the entirety of society which was impacted by this necessary change. Businesses closed down, tens of millions lost their jobs, those who were fortunate to continue to work mostly began working from home, childcare services were no longer available creating another struggle as parents attempted balance home and work life within the same space, concerns over connectivity and disparity became more apparent, and an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety arose as people began adapting to a

new lifestyle (CBPP, 2021). Online and asynchronous instruction has caused many changes within education at every level, changing the makeup of organic and mechanical solidarity, continued differences in context, the creation of new rituals and release of old rituals, mediated emotion and feedback, leading to greater feelings of anomie and further isolation among social communities.

Something that has greatly changed within an educational context is the concept of connection and solidarity. In referencing Durkheim's work, one can look toward mechanical and organic solidarity in relation to the strength of relationships between the individual and others in their society or social group. Mechanical solidarity is created from the homogeneity of the individuals that comprise the social group (Durkheim, 2013). In having others who understand and intrinsically know the same information as another individual, these strong, fortified bonds are formed, and the individual rarely strays from the group as a result. Organic solidarity was defined as occurring after the Industrial Revolution as people diversified and so these strong bonds (mechanical solidarity) are no longer present. Organic solidarity is understood as multiple weak social bonds, the sheer volume of which make up for the lack of strength in these bonds (Durkheim 2013). With these weaker bonds, it is easier for individuals to stray from the group, especially if they are isolated from the social group. If this thin connection is severed, it can create anomie, or a disconnection from group which can lead to depression. In the current social context, interaction between individuals has significantly decreased as students and teachers no longer congregate in the same physical spaces. While the context between students and professors is differing due to home-life situations, for the most part, while zoom is currently the primary form of education, those bonds formed in classrooms and mutual study spaces or within clubs are not being constructed. Those multiple forms of organic solidarity are not present or

being made, and if they are, they are at a slower rate than what is necessary to remain tied to the social group. Students no longer make acquaintances with those that sit nearby, professors are not able to connect with students within a classroom as over zoom classes are taught asynchronously or if synchronous, students' cameras are often completely black, and clubs and other spaces on campus where people find others that share their passions and interests remain closed. Ultimately, this lack of formation of connection can lead to anomie, significantly increasing the concern over the mental health of those within the education system.

As understood by organic solidarity, straying from the social group which can cause anomie, can have real implications on our actions as individuals, even as drastic as committing suicide (Durkheim, 2013). This decline in mental health also has an effect on students' ability to focus and do well on assignments, which in turn affects their overall grade-point average (GPA). With the rise of online school, many professors have created open-book tests or quizzes, and if they are not open, they are proctored due to a concern over the ease of cheating online. In making assessments that are more difficult, students suffering from depression, may have a difficult time keeping their grades up to the standards that they previously held themselves to. This can further deteriorate students' mental health, causing them to further pull away from their social circle, creating an endless, vicious cycle for students to undergo. Further, this struggle within the education system for students can create a strain that becomes too much to ignore, leaving many with no other option other than to drop out of school. In fact, the dropout rate has been steadily increasing throughout the pandemic (McMorris-Santoro, 2021). In addition, within the social context of students, especially college-aged, returning to their home, they also have the difficulty of readjusting back to a lack of independence. Each of these difficult factors then leads to more strain on those weak ties that social context is dependent on.

Rituals in communication can appear as a verbal or nonverbal experience within a social context. While rituals may be less present in college, they are still utilized in specific classes. Pre-pandemic, the ritual often depended on the professor or individual, rather than a common collective. Depending on the professor, they would chat with students as they entered, students would take their personally pre-determined seat, and class would commence with certain rituals such as an iClicker question to take attendance or an overview of the class. When class would near the end, students would pack up and leave, often without thanking or saying goodbye to the professor as they have other things to get to. Depending on the culture, and context, this can differ from place to place, but rituals have changed within online instruction overall.

Currently, rituals have evolved for the context in which students learn. The rituals students may participate in throughout class can differ based on the individual, but within the zoom class, it remains subtly learned. Now, toward the end of a class, when a professor has finished lecture, students often unmute themselves to say thank you or type “thank you” in the chat before signing off. While this may have originally been fairly rare within in-person instruction, online it is perfectly normal and fairly rude and uncomfortable if it is not performed. While students often choose to remain with their cameras and microphones off in the larger zoom lecture, if put into breakout rooms, especially one on one, it is generally customary for students to turn on their cameras and microphones to discuss. Yet occasionally if the breakout room is large, and the students are tasked with answering questions, a prolonged silence and refusal to turn on cameras can persist. Students then become uncomfortable and unwilling to speak up to answer the questions or discuss as they do not wish to break the context created within that situation. Now, for participation and attendance points, many professors ask students to type their name in or answer a question in the chat box, straying away from typical rituals like

taking attendance verbally or having students use an iClicker. Rituals have had to adapt alongside many other aspects of online learning to adjust for the appropriate social context.

With the continued shift to online school, the context and norms associated with zoom and or asynchronous class have slowly been learned over time. The rules of this new social setting are generally created by the professor, much like the expectations of how a classroom is run in-person, yet the major shift is a flagrant disregard for these rules. While in-person, students are expected to show up, generally on-time, listen quietly and attentively, raise one's hand to participate, and take notes. With asynchronous classes, the professor is unable to see whether any of these general rules are being followed and must rely on online forum posts or office hours for participation or attendance grades. In synchronous zoom classes, it is fairly normal for students to leave their cameras off for professors to teach to a blank set of screens. Behind these blank screens are a variety of students: some feel it necessary to uphold the original classroom social context, seated at a desk and quietly taking notes, participating by speaking, or leaving their camera on. Others may simply sign in and fall back asleep, walk away from their computer, chat with their friends, scroll through apps on their phone, or generally pay little to no attention to the lecturer. Yet, all is not lost on these students as lectures are often recorded, so as the time crunch before exams sets in, these students watch these lectures right before or during their final to glean the information needed to pass the exam, and the class. The differences seen in the physical context can have implications on overall grades and mental health as well as student's drive to learn and professor's drive to teach.

The use of emotion and feedback received in and around the classroom greatly impacts the social context of learning. In-person, professors rely on students' facial expressions and body language to understand whether they are focused, confused, or enjoying the lecture, but now that

physical association of learning within a classroom has been taken away. Now that students and professors are no longer sharing a social context within a classroom, those emotional rules that were initially present have fallen by the wayside (Hochschild, 1979). With most professors and students teaching and learning from home, the rules of maintaining emotions until removed from the social context have disappeared. Professors now may share that they had to take time away from work for mental health, students are no longer always prepared to listen to a lecture and do not feel the need to participate or be attentive to be polite. In addition, professors have difficulty garnering feedback from students on their level of understanding or even if their jokes are landing. This leads often to a more mediated, less-emotion filled classroom in which professors may choose to simply lecture rather than legitimately engage with students, especially when students choose to turn their cameras and microphones off. In addition, students and professors alike may experience connectivity issues when attempting to communicate. This is not the only technical issue that causes a lack of connection as students who are home may suffer the consequences of being in different time zones. For some students, this means having class at 3:00am when they are meant to have it at 11:00am. Each of these factors compound on a student's ability to learn and understand the material and the professor's capacity to teach in a way that is accessible and understandable to all.

With the influx of this new age of digital learning, while everyday life has changed, the social context which perhaps was never given a second thought has completely been modified to adapt to the pandemic. While before Covid-19, the social context that members of educational communities were used to (being on a campus, attending classes and paying attention, having easy access to Wifi and other resources) have quickly diminished, causing a break in communication. As the bonds students and professors form on campus have all but disappeared,

relearning the context and rituals of online instruction has proven difficult for many (not to mention the social context of parents or others close losing their jobs or passing away from Covid-19), this pandemic has led to poor mental health and high rates of dropouts (Fernandez, 2021). With Covid-19, the world entered social isolation, grinding “normalcy” and society to a halt. Overall, the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have greatly changed the way that education systems function, greatly changing the social context within which impacts the members of these communities in a drastic way.

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