



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 42: Communication in a Changing World: Navigating Relationships During and Post Pandemic

****Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.****

Participants:

LaKesha Anderson
Jered Borup
Elizabeth Dorrance Hall
Chris Segrin
Mitch Vaterlaus
Courtney N. Wright

[Audio Length: 01:02:08]

RECORDING BEGINS

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*.

LaKesha Anderson:

Hello, I'm LaKesha Anderson, Direction of Academic and Professional Affairs at The Communication Association, and I'm your host on *Communication Matters*, the NCA Podcast. Thank you for joining us for today's episode.

Hi listeners and welcome to a special episode of *Communication Matters*, the second in the two-part "Communication & Resilience: COVID in Contexts" series presented by NCA. NCA typically holds public programs twice each year. These public programs serve to disseminate relevant information about communication to public audiences and are open to community members, members of the media, communication teachers and students, and anyone interested in learning more about communication. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NCA's 2021 public programming is being held as a special series of the *Communication Matters* podcast as well as a series of videos. Today's program, "Communication in a Changing World: Navigating Relationships During and Post Pandemic" is the second in this series. Today, we will explore interpersonal relationships and social support in the context of COVID-19, both in and outside the classroom. Be sure to check out NCA's YouTube channel for a video recording of today's conversation in this special public program series.

Joining us for today's conversation about the pandemic's impact on relational communication is Jered Borup, Associate Professor at George Mason University; Elizabeth Dorrance Hall, Assistant Professor at Michigan State University; Chris Segrin, Steve and Nancy Lynn Professor of Communication at the University of Arizona; Mitch Vaterlaus, Associate Professor at Montana



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State University; and Courtney N. Wright, Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee. To view our panelists' bios, visit our website at natcom.org/publicprograms. Hi everyone and welcome to *Communication Matters*.

First let's begin with a question about how the pandemic has altered, or made different, personal relationships like those with family and loved ones. How has sharing physical space in unprecedented ways (such as during stay-at-home orders) impacted the way families and/or couples coordinate and communicate about their lives?

Elizabeth Dorrance Hall:

Hi, everybody. Thank you for having us. This is a great question. I mean I think the COVID has been an experience of extremes, right? And so that's what happened with our relationships as well. We either spent a lot more time with the people we loved, sort of trapped in the house with them, right? Or we didn't get to see our loved ones as much as we would have liked, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. So that was a big major change in terms of sort of experiencing that extreme end of togetherness or being apart from our loved ones. And it also prompted some really interesting, unprecedented conversations about needing more or less emotional support from our loved ones and about navigating physical space that a lot of people probably haven't had before, especially it was in my experience anyway the first time I'd spent 24/7 with my partner in the four walls of our house. And so thinking about how to effectively have those conversations especially at a time when there's so much uncertainty going on in the world. We know that that causes turbulence in relationships. So experiencing uncertainty outside the relationship sort of puts pressure on the interpersonal relationships in your life. And so little things can kind of blow up into much bigger issues. And so having those conversations about like, hey, I know we're going through this pandemic together and it's difficult, but I need some space was a new and different experience. So some of the research that I did was on that topic, on navigating these physical and emotional space conversations. And we found that people who had those conversations tended to report that their relationships were quite turbulent and that three months down the road, sort of in summer of 2020 later on in the pandemic, they reported less relationship resilience. So these conversations were difficult. They were being had especially by people who were experiencing turbulence and had sort of some at least short long-term effects on the relationship.

Chris Segrin:

So picking up on some of the ideas that Elizabeth was talking about, scientifically what we would say is that this context increases the interdependence within the family system. That is to say that the individuals in the family are more prone to affect and influence each other when they're confined in this physical space, and this is sort of a dual-edge sword. Higher interdependence



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creates much greater opportunities for interference, but it also creates greater opportunities for connection. And one of the dominant themes we've seen in family science for decades is what we call the continuity effect, which is basically the ones who have a solid relationship before the stressor comes along will usually do well through it. The ones who have a shaky relationship and then a stressor comes along, those are the ones where we would predict the interference. So what a pandemic and things like the stay at home orders do is it sort of magnifies and intensifies through this interdependence process issues and phenomena that are already evident in the family system and just makes them all the more dramatic in some cases.

Jered Borup:

Chris, you're reminding me of very specific interviews that I've conducted with parents with online learning even before the pandemic. I mean oftentimes parents, their students would be having a bad experience in person, and they thought, oh well, I know how to fix this. I'm going to have them learn online. And guess what? Their relationship got worse, they kind of gave up in a lot of ways, and there's fewer natural boundaries, right? Not only during the pandemic could they not go to school, they couldn't hang out with their friends or they couldn't go to the mall or they couldn't do these other things that that really gave them an outlet. And so the frustration kind of built and built and built for a lot of these people. I didn't say anything earlier because my kids were like right next to me before. And so now they're gone. It's a little bit quieter. I can focus more. So even as a parent, it can be kind of frustrating when you need to get something done, and there's so much activity going on around you. So yeah, I think Chris is exactly on point when he says that whatever was going on in the relationship, it's amplified during the pandemic.

Courtney Wright:

It also added a certain aspects of perception. When this all began, there was a lot of talk about working from home, and then it shifted to living at work, right? So the difficulties that people had in understanding and kind of defining their space and the importance of borders, right? So when we're thinking about what is permeating our respective borders in space and the reminders of work, home-related work during work day, career work day and vice versa. In addition, people experience greater levels of self-awareness in some cases. Even going to Chris's point about the perceptions of relationships, thinking that you were healthier and able to withstand certain dialogues and perhaps encountering a different perception. In addition to that, I'd add that when we consider relational interest, so Chris's point about the health of relationships make me think about just the basics of communication, that there's a content component and a relational component. And the ways in which we can struggle over the relational component of messages. Who are we to each other? Versus relationships that are healthier can focus on the content. So we become aware of these relational interests and relational goals when they aren't being met. Same with our identity interests and goals. So I think a lot of people found themselves



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encountering confirming messages that align with their relational and identity goals as well as messages that conflicted with that that led to greater levels of cognitive processing and problem solving and conflict, be it engaged or avoided, to try to work through those challenges.

Mitch Vaterlaus:

I also think building on what you just said in terms of like content and also our specific identities or age groups, that varies too in families. So how parents communicate with children about these scary topics. One interview I did, the mom talked about how terrified her son was because he kept hearing how many people were dying of COVID and thought that he would die of COVID. So considering the different developmental stages of these people in the relationships that are communicating is important. And also, different like the gender identities or sex of the partners in those communications because there are differences we saw, the amplification of women taking on more roles in childcare and household duties. We saw more women exiting the workforce or limiting hours. So I think there are some of these other characteristics we have to consider within identity and age as we think about how people communicated and what those power differentials might be or developmental differences might be in that process.

LaKesha Anderson:

Great. So I wanted to kind of follow up on what you just mentioned, Mitch, about how there's differences and or challenges to the way that particularly women and children have managed the pandemic. But what kind of social support is most helpful during times like this and is there ever such a thing as providing too much social support during a novel or an uncertain situation?

Mitch Vaterlaus:

I think that there are a lot of considerations you have to take into account. Time and stress were quite high and still are for a lot of families. So any type of social support that's time intensive might not be perceived as helpful. I also study social media and its influence, and I think there were well-intentioned people posting what they're doing, learning new things, and managing their children this way or having these conversations in their relationships. But they may not be attainable for all families or even possible. So I think that's more like informal sources of social support. But if we were to do effective types of social support, some of the things that I've recommended as outcomes for my research are more brief informational supports. So like infographics on how to talk to your children about hard things or these are four questions you should ask yourself while you're navigating shared space in your environment. So thinking about how do we make this accessible but also brief for these individuals and families so that it's not overwhelming them and then not making them feel worse because they aren't doing it perfectly like they see people on Instagram doing it because that's just one slice of someone's day that they've chosen to document.



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Chris Segrin:

I don't know if there's an area in interpersonal communication research where the quest for the Goldilocks effect is more important than delivery of social support. Social support is most effective when it meets the needs and the desires of the recipient. And as the Goldilocks effect implies, yes, of course, there's such a thing as too much or too little or the wrong kind. So the effect of communicator would start with some sort of assessment, some sort of appreciation, conversation, a lot of listening to understand what does the recipient need. Someone who lost a loved one from the pandemic may need a lot of emotional support. Someone who lost a job may need financial or informational support. Someone with a sick child who's trying to juggle that with a job, they may need instrumental support. All of this is to say that the effectiveness of the social support exists to the extent that it matches the specific needs of the individual, and that's where there can be too much because the individual may only need a certain amount or may need a different kind than what's being delivered. So again, I want to stress that I think the effective communicator starts out with a lot of listening to figure out what does this person need and then hopefully provides the social support that matches that need.

Courtney Wright:

One thing that challenges this particular period is that everyone needs social support, right? So a lot of times when we're thinking about social support, it's clear the role of the communicator to focus on the needs of the recipient versus current times where everyone is stressed, everyone is in need of social support at different times. So I think it's really brought to the forefront the importance of intra-personal communication and the self-awareness to figure out what it is that I need to ask for, what type of social support am I in need of in this current moment. Because many people who had various setups for social support and self-care have found themselves kind of reaching the limits of those approaches, right? Saying I don't know what I need but I need something different because this has gone on much longer than what they anticipated. So this has really been a critical time period for agency self-awareness through intra-personal communication to 1) identify what to ask for and to balance those needs of listening within relationships because it can't be overwhelmingly in one direction over another. But the importance of equity is really clear now in ways that couples and family systems and peer relationships might not have realized previously.

Elizabeth Dorrance Hall:

Yeah. Along those same lines too, a really unique thing about the pandemic although it was experienced differently by different people is that we were all under stress just like Courtney was saying. And that really to me brought up the importance of communal coping, right? That this is something we can do with our community with the strangers online. I know in the beginning of the pandemic, people were connecting with cousins they haven't talked to in years or friends from a



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really long time ago because we were all dealing with the same thing at the same time which is so unique. And so to be able to kind of reframe and story tell and make sense of the pandemic together was really important and continues to be important especially as things continue to change and continue to be uncertain. And so it's a unique time to do that. I also wanted to add that thinking about support and too much support and dietic coping which is coping with a partner that there are certainly negative forms of that that can have negative outcomes. So if you're providing that support, but it feels like a burden to you and it's clear to the other person that it's a burden to you, we see negative outcomes for the relationship and well-being associated with that type of coping and support. So again, like Courtney was saying, being aware of how much you have to give and your ability to do so is really important. And just one more thought there on some of the most vulnerable people especially at the beginning of the pandemic, I think we all spent some time thinking about who can we give support to—or hopefully we did—and who needs support and in terms of family relationships and work relationships. There are people within those groups who are maybe a bit more isolated than others, right? In families, we have people who are kind of gatekeepers and the people who share information and get a lot of contact, and then there's people sort of on the outside and the edges, marginalized family members, for example. And those people may especially need that kind of support but may be also resistant to getting that kind of communication from people who they may not have the best relationship with. So I think we learned a lot about the challenges with providing social support during a global stressor that everyone's experiencing. And yeah, there's a lot a lot more to learn. And a couple of studies that I've seen that have come out have shown that especially perceived social support. So that's when social support isn't necessarily like oh, they brought me food, right? There's this thing I can point to, but it's this idea that I have people that I can turn to if I need something. So just knowing that you have people in your social support network is so powerful. And there's been a couple of studies that have already come out showing that people who had that were more resilient during the early days of the pandemic, had lower levels of depression and anxiety. So that perceived social support is especially important as well.

Jered Borup:

This idea of knowing what the student needs is huge, right? I remember doing a focus group with students, and we asked them, how do you know that your mentor, your teacher knows you and cares about you? And a lot of it is noticing. A lot of it is them noticing them or not noticing them too. I mean sometimes they say, I didn't do anything for two weeks in my online course and no one reached out to me. It didn't seem like anyone noticed. No one cared. So I think especially with adolescents and children, it's just noticing them, acknowledging them can make a huge difference. And the other point I'd make is oftentimes they'd also say, well, they gave me great feedback on my assignments. Well, we wouldn't necessarily see that as social support. That's



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more academic support. But there is this strong relationship that if you're providing them support in any way, there's a social component to that.

LaKesha Anderson:

Great. So I kind of wanted to call back to something that Jered had talked about when we first started which is how kids are learning online now and how they lack their regular connections that maybe they're used to. So can you tell me a little about the ways that we provide social support and how that has changed during the pandemic? So for instance, students who did not and in some cases still do not have face-to-face interactions with teachers or classmates or in some cases, in the case of college students, for instance, not even their families that they're able to see as often. And we can even extend that past kids in school. Partners who are working together in the home for the first time, learning to navigate that physical space challenge. Can you talk to me a little about that?

Jered Borup:

I think at the start of the pandemic, we relied heavily on Zoom or Google Meet or whatever webinar platform we were using to meet synchronously or live with students. And that was good. I mean we had opportunities to interact with them, have rapid exchanges, and that was good for a lot of students. But for other students, that wasn't very good, right? They had so much going on, they couldn't focus at a certain time. Parents couldn't support them at that moment because they're doing other things. And I think one way that we've been adjusting that is we're providing them with multiple means of communication. So for instance, if you have a student with a learning disability, for instance, they might not be able to communicate synchronously very well. But if you let them send an email or you let them record a video and then send it to you later, you're going to be able to hear that voice much better than if you're just relying on one way to communicate. And I think that the other thing that we kind of lacked was this learner-to-learner interaction and support, and I think that as the pandemic has gone on, we've provided more and more opportunities for them to interact and collaborate and also recognize that off-topic communication is actually really good and it happens naturally in person, but it almost has to be planned online. And so working that in. And I saw lots of teachers doing like morning warm-ups or these morning meetings where it had nothing to do with literacy or math or anything like that. It was just providing a space for students to express themselves, to communicate with each other, and I think it actually impact—well, you want to do that regardless. It actually impacts the academic side of a learning community as well.

Elizabeth Dorrance Hall:

This is taking it back to the partners and the families. But something Chris mentioned earlier about interference between partners, that's always an issue that couples and family members and other kinds of interdependent close relationships deal with is we all have our own goals, right? And so



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sometimes our goals conflict with other people's goals. And so we experience interference in terms of—and by goals, I don't mean like five-year long career goals. I mean even just like getting through the day and you're trying to have a decent time and making lunch, right? Feeding myself, I don't know about you all, it was very hard during the pandemic. Like little things like that became more difficult because of all the uncertainty and things we were facing and stress. And so interference is an interesting issue that couples face and certainly became a really big thing when we were all home. But there's another side to that. So couples can also facilitate each other's lives and other kinds of close relationships can facilitate, parents, children. And in the research that I did, we collected information on interference and facilitation. And facilitation had more significant findings attached to it, and one of them was that people who were in a relationship where they felt like their partner was facilitating their lives during the early days of the pandemic, they reported having more hope which I don't know if you remember those early months but hope was a hard thing to come by. So it was really cool just to see that couples can maybe find ways to help each other get through the day and reach their goals and that that has really kind of positive outcomes forever for their partners.

Mitch Vaterlaus:

I also think people that are living maybe geographically different in their families might have some different outcomes. We collected data the very early weeks of the pandemic and then looked at age groups and their experiences in their families. And older adults talked about how the frequency of interaction increased, but they had to learn new technology to do that. So they appreciated all of the new technology and they also appreciated the frequency. And I thought it was interesting also that because they had more frequent communications, they were moving beyond just the basic content that may be like, how's your day into going into deeper feelings about their experiences. So some of these older adults expressed some appreciation for this new opportunity to more frequently connect with their adult children and also dive deeper into some conversations maybe they haven't had in the past or be able to emote more. So I thought that was an interesting outcome of the pandemic.

Jered Borup:

Yeah, my mom can text me now. It's amazing. And she can get on a Zoom okay. And teaching our loved ones at a distance how to use technology has been challenging, but I think it's going to have long lasting effects.

LaKesha Anderson:

I think it will be interesting to see how five years down the road, teaching older people how to navigate the online environment and use these types of channels for social support will be interesting, and I can't wait to see how it impacts health actually. Hopefully, we'll see less



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depression and older people and things like that will come out of it. Hope, right? So I want to turn our attention specifically to student relationships and what support should be considered when helping young adults navigate their interpersonal relationships both in and out of the classroom following the pandemic.

Jered Borup:

I think with relationships, there's two parts, right? As a student, it's important that you feel known, and then it's also important that you know the teacher and that's really required to develop this trust. And I think one thing that we've really seen during the pandemic is that teachers have shown more about their lives during the pandemic out of necessity obviously. I mean they're probably recording from home and things like that. Students have met their pets, their family members. They know what's hanging on their wall, all these types of things. But I think that using technology, even now that we're back in person, we can use technology to really share more with students with boundaries. So for instance, I'm remembering one teacher in particular that she was teaching about unit rates to her elementary school students. And so she was at Wegmans, the local grocery store, and she was seeing unit rates there. And so she pulled out her phone, and she was using an app called Flip Grid where you can post video messages. And so she filmed, hey, look, I'm in the cereal aisle, and here's the unit rates. And then she was showing her shopping cart and her husband was in the background. And just saying, hey, look, here's some more unit rates. I bought this deli meat and things like that. Or sometimes she would record from home and she would start by saying, hey, say hello to my dog. And I think that before the pandemic, if we saw our teacher in Wegmans or a grocery store, that was weird. Like what are you doing outside of your classroom? But I think using technology, we can share more in an authentic way while we're teaching the content.

LaKesha Anderson:

I think it humanizes the teachers a little bit. I know my son is a sophomore, and he was online for biology in the ninth grade and found out his biology teacher was a gamer, which the boys in class thought was really interesting since their teacher identifies as female. So she was often sharing how something in her game related to something in biology, and the boys had so much more respect for her after that just because they felt like she was actually a human instead of this just person who gets to stand up in the front of the classroom and talk at them. And I really think it changed the dynamic of that classroom.

Mitch Vaterlaus:

I think one of the challenges that has happened with the pandemic is we've navigated different modalities of teaching in higher education. Like initially most universities went online, and in the Fall, like nearly 50% were doing like either full campus returns or partial campus returns. We



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collected data that Fall just to understand what the interpersonal relationships were like for college students during that. And bringing students back didn't necessarily mean they had more connection because they had restrictions the number of people that could be in dorm rooms, the number of people that could be in the cafeteria at the same, time the distance that they had to sit away from people in the classroom with masks on. And one of the benefits for college student development and the outcomes is that they can have value development and attitude change and see new world views. But that's most impacted when they meet people different than themselves, engaging with viewpoints that are different than their own. So for me, one of the things I'm thinking about a lot is how do we help these high school students who had atypical endings to their high school careers? A lot of the experiences would have been rights of passage. And then beginnings of the freshmen and their sophomore years have now also been atypical where they haven't been able to meet people from different contexts or different backgrounds or different identities. So I think institutionally we can look at how do we target these specific groups. We do freshman seminars but could we do ones for sophomores that encourage and promote interaction between different people or juniors so that they're having this opportunity to engage with people that are different than themselves? The other thing I think about is some of the students have very different perspectives on how to live during a pandemic than their families and that caused some great tension. And I think we might need to provide some support in how do we repair those relationships and help young adults navigate that with their families because we want them to have the social support of families while they're in college. So those are my two ideas that I keep thinking about.

Courtney Wright:

I'll add to that that when we're discussing teaching, when we're discussing student relationships, oftentimes we present it as static, right? And as if everyone, students and faculty, know how to do these skills, right? So what it means to be known in the classroom, what it means to build rapport with your students can be altered by the modality. But a lot of these things that we're discussing can and were occurring face-to-face with four faculty who had that type of demeanor in the classroom and were challenges for faculty who struggled in that regard face-to-face. And it might have made it easier online or perhaps even more difficult. So in terms of giving support systems and helping both parties, I think in many cases faculty were left without that support because I'm not sure that higher education spends a lot of time teaching faculty how to engage with students face-to-face, number one. So I think a lot of the support that faculty received was focus on the technology, right? Here's how to post, here's how to record, here's how to monitor, right? But there really wasn't much on how to engage particularly when we're thinking across disciplines, when we're thinking about content areas that lend themselves more easily towards certain types of disclosure and developing rapport. And I teach interpersonal communication and conflict. I can't help but create that type of connection. That can be very difficult for my colleagues



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in STEM disciplines, right? So where do we create that support? And I'll add that a lot of my rhetoric with students was reminding them that faculty are going through a pandemic as well, and we're going through different pandemics. I mean even this entire conversation has focused on having to stay in the household and COVID-19 and teaching online. Well, for other individuals, they were dealing with anti-blackness and racism, right? So we were dealing with multiple pandemics, and we weren't really, as effectively as we could have, provided students with resources for how to engage as a student online. Not how to use the technology, how to log in. But what does it mean to show up. And I was trying to help students realize the loss that we have in non-verbal, the importance of showing your face in some capacity, and accounting for the absence of your face. In other words, how do we teach students to manage their own education which I would argue are skills that were lacking before the pandemic, and we just saw them magnified during the pandemic, right? And then also being mindful of the prevalence of master narratives where people might start meetings or start class by noting oh, how much I miss hanging out at a pub but completely ignorant to the fact that you might be speaking to people who've lost family members whose fundamental basics of life as they knew it are no more. So being really mindful of master narratives and focusing on getting to know our students, allowing them to present themselves and giving them opportunities to do that I think is really critical. But when we're talking about support systems, I would say that higher ed and probably the communication discipline missed a significant opportunity in helping our institutions know what it means to provide that support, right? That education as a collaborative experience for which there are responsibilities for faculty as well as responsibilities for students and what does it mean to show social support in an instructional relationship and how does that differ across other relationships, family, peer, and workplace. So I think those are all critical components that we need to be mindful of, not only just in this conversation but how we go to impact our respective institutions and our students and colleagues moving forward.

LaKesha Anderson:

Okay. So we've obviously talked about how communication in an online environment is different and particularly for students. But how can teachers leverage online communication to better develop a community of learners?

Jered Borup:

I think during the pandemic, we've really felt what we couldn't have with communication, and we've kind of ignored all the great parts about online communication. We kind of have this romantic view of in-person. Like we got to get back to in-person and everything will be better once we're back in-person. But I think as we're getting back to in-person, we're noticing oh, this wasn't as good as maybe we thought it was in some ways. There's some deficits. There's some gaps. And so I think one thing that we can do is really consider what was best in the online environment,



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what was best in the in-person environment, and then try to blend that together, right? So for instance, with the discussion, online asynchronous discussions are great because it's equitable. Everyone can participate. Everyone has equal opportunity to participate. But it's also hard because it doesn't have that same dynamic or the same synergy that we feel in-person. So why not have a discussion that's blended where you might start it online, where everyone has a chance to share their ideas, and then wrap it up in-person, right? One metaphor I've been using is Marie Kondo, how she'd tell you hold something in your hands and then see if it sparks joy. And if it sparks joy, keep it and then organize it with your other things. And I think that as we consider this online experience that we've all had, I think mentally we need to hold things and see what sparked joy. And if it sparked joy, keep it. And if it didn't, get rid of it. And if you're keeping it, figure out a way to really integrate it in with everything else that is great about in-person learning.

Courtney Wright:

I was struck by the multitasking and once as instructors you get used to that, you can see how full the classroom can be, right? Monitoring the chat as well as students who are participating using their microphone. So I've been really struck with how to not lose the opportunities for perhaps less intimidating as well as perhaps more efficient participation from a chat standpoint. Where are those opportunities for students who might be quiet, more reserved, and also the jokes that manifested in the chat that were relevant to the course material, right? So considering the missed opportunities and how to have students feel more comfortable talking during class and not seeing those contributions being viewed as disruptive but trying to create chatter and energy around the content more broadly described. Kind of from day one, what does it mean to be engaged? How do we as faculty let students know we want to hear your thoughts whatever they are, those that align, those that might challenge, what's being presented. But I really appreciated how online classes immediately became popcorn discussions whether students realized it or not, that they were drawn in in part because they had different levels of engagement that were readily available to them. So thinking creatively about how we can bring that into the face-to-face classroom I think is really helpful.

Mitch Vaterlaus:

Building on what Jered and Courtney said, I think some low-stake assignments too are really helpful that are outside the purview of the instructor on some level. A lot of my online classes were asynchronous, and a lot of them were feeling exhaustion from online discussions. I think a lot of us probably felt that greeting them too. So I piloted before the pandemic a phone a friend assignment where I would give them lots of advanced notice and put them in small groups and just give them case studies that they could use. And all their reporting back to me is that they had the conversation. So it was a low stake assignment but then they would have these conversations on the side and develop friendships and create community. And I would do that in a normal



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classroom and I wouldn't know what everyone's saying anyways. So to me, it wasn't like I needed to know that they covered every single detail in this one assignment, but I was valuing more that they were building connections and then they could connect with each other about assignments they had and that they knew that they could talk to each other outside of this asynchronous environment.

Chris Segrin:

I have a message for my fellow university administrators. This pandemic has sort of forced us to engage in this great experiment of online learning whether we liked it or not. We had to do it. And there's a fantastic opportunity here to leverage what we've learned, best practices in the service of inclusivity. There are so many people in this country and in this world who don't have access to a university campus whether it's due to childcare needs, employment demands, or maybe just geographic contexts in which they're situated in a rural setting and they just cannot get to a university campus. I will admit I am personally not a huge fan of online education, but I want to make a pitch for it because inclusivity is making this education accessible to all, to all at least who want it. And I think this experiment that we just engaged in would be something of a waste if we didn't take away from it the lessons that we learned about how to do this correctly. And these other people on this panel are telling you that right now. And I think there's a great opportunity here now moving forward to take this and apply it in the service of inclusivity to make education more accessible to the masses. I don't think we would be as well situated to do that moving forward had we not been through this pandemic.

Elizabeth Dorrance Hall:

One thing I really enjoyed teaching about during the pandemic and will continue to do is about social isolation and loneliness and just the prevalence of that in the United States and abroad everywhere before the pandemic and how the pandemic really just amplified that for a lot of people and how we can combat that or at least sort of work to lessen the experience of loneliness and social isolation. And one thing I found really nice about the pandemic, although again, people experienced it really differently, is that we had this common example to work from, right? Because everyone in some way or another felt that sort of isolation and loneliness. Even if you were in a house with lots of other people, it wasn't the same. We didn't have the freedom to see the people we wanted to see. And so having those common examples to work from at least in the next couple of years and beyond in terms of here's this very real applied problem and here's the communication research that we have about how to be resilient and utilize our social capital and communication networks to fight those feelings. I think a much greater emphasis on communication technology although that was growing and growing over the past several decades in our classrooms has been incredibly important in terms of making us feel some social presence and like we're with other people and especially how we can best utilize nonverbal communication



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over communication technology. Courtney was talking about that earlier with the videos on in the classroom. We just lose so much when all we do is text or just commenting on social media. So the importance of those. Communication research and scholarship and knowledge just has so much to contribute to our understanding of how humans connected during this pandemic and kind of what we can take away from it.

Courtney Wright:

I think this time has helped all people but I'd say particularly students in terms of their dependency on social media and the ease with which they can associate themselves with others underneath the umbrella of friendship, really start to reconsider what it means to be a friend, what it means to have social support, and to become more astute in how they are vetting relationships and relational partners. In my conflict quarters throughout the pandemic, I've had several students talk about the loss of friendships during this time and seeing people as being either ill-matched, ill-equipped, or unwilling to support them in ways that they view their needs for support. So a lot of students were grappling with kind of realizations that I don't think older individuals were dealing with which was my circle is much smaller than what I thought it was, right? And here I am in need of social support. And I think that creates a really nice opportunity through this shared experience for students to have realized the depths at which they need to connect, the type of quality of relationships that they need much earlier in life than they might have considered for previous generations, and starting to think differently about how they associate themselves with others. Are there people, are there qualities even that they might have overlooked and taken for granted that they now need to seek out in others? And even more importantly, how do they develop those skillsets themselves so that they can be viewed as quality relational partners for others?

Mitch Vaterlaus:

I think that the pandemic's been a messy problem in the sense that there's so many different outcomes and different experiences. Something in family science we can always talk about is that families don't just experience one stressor. They experience compounded stressors. So it's one thing after the other, and they have resources and definitions of their problems they get to decide that helps determine their outcomes. But I think this is a great opportunity for us to think more interdisciplinary, to see how healthcare policy influenced relationships, to see how essential workers in the economy, where work-based policy influences relationships. So I think this is an opportunity for us to show the importance of relationships in the workplace, the importance of relationships in schooling, and that relationships should be considered in all of these disciplines and we can be the voice for that. And I think it's empowering students to see that they're not just learning about relationships. They're learning about something powerful that influences so many different things. And there are inequalities that could be addressed through relationships and policy building. And so I just feel like this is a great opportunity for us to collaborate with colleagues



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because in STEM, they had experiences in their relationships too and in business, they had experiences in their relationships. So I hope that we'll move more forward in an interdisciplinary way and bring some of those topics into the classroom to show the diversity of experiences under this common messy problem.

Jered Borup:

You can't have a podcast without talking about TikTok, right? So with the TikTok challenge where students are like stealing things or like they're breaking things in the bathrooms and things like that, I think that's an extreme thing, but it is happening. Like I am talking with teachers where they're like, oh, our bathroom is closed. And why would students do that, right? Well, obviously, they don't feel invested in the school for them to do that. They're more invested in their online communities and things like that. But I've also spoken with teachers where they have noticed an increase in classroom outbursts or disciplinary issues, and I really think it all comes down to relationships. They probably haven't formed a strong connection with the school, some of them. And so I think working on that, working to build school-wide community but also classroom community is really important and positivity projects, all these things, especially with children to teach them sometimes directly how to interact with each other and how to collaborate and things like that. The other kind of really exciting thing for me is I've been researching online learning for eight or ten years, and I remember there was a report where these full-time online students, they were attending these cyber schools full-time programs. And the report found that a lot of these cyber schools relied on an independent study program, meaning you could have a high schooler graduate online never having had to have meaningful interactions, discussions, collaborations with students. And during this year, I've been working with one full-time school, and the teachers are making huge strides in adding more interaction, more communication with learners. And so I think we're focused on how does this impact in-person learning and things like that, but it's also impacting online learning and I'm really excited for how that is going to get a really improved student learning especially for those that are learning entirely online which there's a good sized student population that's doing that.

LaKesha Anderson:

It's funny you mentioned the TikTok challenges. I think you must have children in the Fairfax County system like I do. We're getting that and the positivity project and all that. I'm like, I've heard all this stuff before. But I was actually going to ask the same question is how do we support both students and teachers who have been out of the classroom for two years and now they've come back to the classroom and maybe the communication is different or the behavior is different and there's not a lot of buy-in from the students and the faculty are trying to kind of rein that in but at the same time bring in some of that new communication style in order to change kind of the way that we communicate with our students to be more inclusive, to be more welcoming, to kind of



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meet them where they are but also not let them have free reign of the school? How can we better support those students and get them to buy into the school and also support the faculty who are trying to walk that line?

Jered Borup:

It's tough, really hard. And when teachers were going back, they had to manage not only the in-person environment but also the online environment. They had these what they called concurrent teaching or high flex teaching where it's almost impossible. Like I can't even imagine having monitored or facilitated a synchronous session and then also having to do that in-person at the same time. It's not really fair for teachers, and I think that we've asked so much from teachers during this time. I really feel for them, and I meet with them frequently, the teachers that are in my master's program. And what do you do? I mean you can't really ask anything more of them? They've just been doing such an amazing job with the situation. I think that a lot of students return to the classroom thinking, yay, we get to collaborate, we get to interact. And instead, here's your tape on the floor. You need to stay in that box. We're still social distancing. We're still wearing masks. Children are not vaccinated. And so I think that in a lot of ways, it was harder for students in-person because they had less freedom to kind of roam and to move and things like that. And so I think as school administrators or policy makers, we need to find ways especially in the next few months before children can be vaccinated where they can kind of move, communicate with each other, and move physically, right? And also social distance, maybe while the weather's still good, using outdoor spaces and things like that. And I think those investments aren't going to be wasted once we reach a certain level of vaccinations in schools. I think all these things can be brought in and continue to be used throughout. So all those investments are good. But it's tough. I mean it's really hard to say, hey, teachers, you need to do this other thing right now. It's really, really challenging for them too. So we need to be aware of the stresses that we've been placing on them.

Courtney Wright:

Seems to be an added stressor that is created when we go back to normal so quickly as if things have ended, right? I feel that that created a lot of stress on both parties, right? In the case of teachers, you're required to do everything better or equal to how you did it before the pandemic as if there isn't a trauma occurring and as if there is more certainty. One could argue that we have more uncertainty now than we did when the pandemic first started in certain respects, not just related to COVID but also related to the socio-political climate in which we're trying to navigate it and the implications of those broader relationships on how we move forward, right? So part of the anxiety and stress that I think individuals feel is the use of communication about events and policies that completely ignore kind of the elephant in the room, right? So that people don't have any type of confidence or certainty about what they're entering into once they get to the classroom



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or once they get to the meeting or the faculty meeting or whatever social events. So in our rush to I think address the anxiety and bring things back to normal, thinking that that was best for individuals, in a way, we've eliminated opportunities to discuss it, right? So people don't know can we bring this in as a topic of discussion, are people in need of sharing and seeking social support and communal support around challenges that they're facing, or are we just going to kind of say, oh, it's 2019 again, let's completely erase what took place and move forward accordingly? And I think that that has created an added trauma that we'll continue to see the effects of years from now. Because in the case of students, where are there opportunities to discuss what's going on? Both academically, students have lost certain skillsets depending on what their home environment was like during the pandemic while other students have excelled, right? So we have even larger gaps in the classroom. We have kind of the unspoken and unknown experiences of the family system and the household, right? What was felt within the entire family system and what might have been a very lonely and isolated journey that students were experiencing. So where are those opportunities to not only discover the intra-personal journey that individuals have been on but to cultivate the skillsets for communicating them? How are faculty being trained accordingly to usher in certain types of conversations that are full of uncertainty? You don't know what someone's going to share, right? But the need to know that it's okay to not be okay despite our system's reckless urgency to kind of present a façade of everything is okay and normal for all parties involved.

LaKesha Anderson:

Okay. So my final question. What are some of the positive influences of the pandemic on interpersonal relationships and what has the pandemic taught us about support relationships?

Jered Borup:

I think one aha moment that a lot of teachers and parents and students have had is that the online learning environment does not have to be isolating and that in many ways, I hear over and over teachers say, I got to know my students better online than I did in person. And I think that we can carry that forward. We don't want to get rid of that. I think that our relationships can get even stronger if we carry forward this blended way of communicating with online communication and also in-person communication. And by doing that will provide a more equitable learning environment but also I think a closer one where we recognize each other more and we see their needs and we can reach their needs better using technology than perhaps we were trying to do before the pandemic without technology or the technological skills that we've developed.

Chris Segrin:

If I could take this up to a macroscopic level, I would say that this pandemic has shown us examples of human behavior at its very worst and human behavior at its very best. And listeners



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should never ever forget this very basic and important fact. In this life that we are living, all of us right now, there is absolutely nothing that is more important than what we can do for other people. The survival of our species is dependent upon what we do for other people. This may be humbling, but the gray squirrel that's climbing up and down the oak tree right now in your local city park has a much greater ability to survive on its own than human beings do. That's because we're social animals. It's built into our DNA that we interact with other people, we depend on other people for our welfare. And that's what separates social animals from solitary animals. As simple as that. As sophisticated as we may think we are with our advanced degrees and whatnot, we need other people for our survival and for our welfare. And I think in this pandemic, although the media sometimes has focused on the boisterous parent at the city council meeting protesting mask mandates and whatnot, in fact, many people stepped up to the plate during this pandemic. And we sometimes take that for granted, that some people got vaccinated, they wear masks even though they're vaccinated out of a desire to protect other people, to do things for other people. We've seen nurses and physicians at hospitals engaging in absolutely heroic behavior. Again, that doesn't often make the headlines in the news. We've seen parents and teachers and family members and neighbors respond to horrific losses that people in their social networks have had with astonishing levels of social support. This is what it means to be human. This is what the most important part of our life is, what we do for other people. And we should never lose sight of that, that in this pandemic, as tragic as it was and it'll certainly be responsible for the loss of at least three-quarters of a million human beings, a lot of people really stepped up to the plate and showed us what it means to be human and to deliver social support and to express care and concern for other people, sometimes were complete strangers. And I think those people belong in the spotlight, and they should occupy a very, very important part of our memory. And I think that to me is something that this pandemic showed us. Amidst all the noise that was going on in the background, and there was plenty of it, we should not lose sight of the people who really did show care and concern for all kinds of other people.

Mitch Vaterlaus:

Here, here. I think that's exactly on, and I think you talked about this earlier, Chris, relationships, the way they are before is going to determine how they become later. And I think maybe one of my participants said is a somewhat tarnished silver lining might be that we have the opportunity to recognize the importance of our relationships and to privilege them in our lives to recognize how important they are beyond the other things that are in our world. So prioritizing those relationships but maybe also seeing the importance of them on, like you're saying, a macro level and maybe funding more preventative care for relationships and parents and children and marital relationships, partner relationships. So prevention is a great way to prevent problems. And when we have public health crises, we can have these strong relationships and families to help them struggle well through these crises.



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Elizabeth Dorrance Hall:

I think also we learned a lot about the relationships that are maybe in our outer layer of our social networks, right? So like Chris is saying, we're social beings, we have this need to belong, and those closest to us play a really important role in that. But the people who we see at our yoga class or at our church on Sundays or that aren't our very best friends or our closest network members, those people, we had to make a choice not to see and not to interact with. And that's a really important level of that sense of belonging, belonging to the community other than what we were able to do online which was amazing what we were able to do via technology in terms of trying to replace those experiences. But I think we learned a lot about the importance of that just outside those five or even ten closest support network members. Those people are really important to you.

LaKesha Anderson:

Okay. Many thanks to the panelists who joined me today on this special episode of *Communication Matters*, and thank you for listening. I hope you enjoyed this discussion. For more information about NCA's public programming efforts, visit the public programs page on the NCA website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms.

NCA News:

In NCA news, there's still time to register for the NCA 107th Annual Convention to be held November 18-21 in Seattle, Washington. Members can save on convention registration by registering before November 14 at natcom.org/register. We also remind attendees that they must be fully vaccinated to attend the convention per a health order issued by King County. Visit natcom.org/convention-and-covid to learn more about the vaccination requirement and NCA's precautions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope to see you at the NCA Annual Convention in November. Also, in NCA news, we congratulate the more than 30 communication scholars who will receive awards during the upcoming convention for achievements in more than 20 teaching scholarship and service categories. Recipients will be honored during the presidential address and awards presentation on Saturday, November 20th. The awards presentation will also be live streamed for those unable to attend, and no registration will be required to access the event online. To learn more about the awards and this year's recipients, visit natcom.org/awards. And again, congratulations. And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters*, the NCA podcast on October 28th. This timely episode will address environmental communication challenges with guest scholars José-Castro Sotomayor, Edward Maibach, and Bridie McGreevy. Be sure to check out this episode to learn more about communication related to climate change and collaborations between communication researchers and local communities related to sustainability and the environment.



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Conclusion:

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world.

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives. *Communication Matters*, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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