



# “It’s Been a Good Reminder That Students Are Human Beings”: An Exploratory Inquiry of Instructors’ Rhetorical and Relational Goals During COVID-19

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**Abstract:** As colleges and universities moved to remote learning during the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID-19, the traditional higher education classroom format was challenged. This study examines how instructors reconceptualized their rhetorical and relational goals in the pandemic classroom. A thematic analysis of 68 qualitative survey responses revealed that instructors adapted their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction due to a perceived change in students’ needs. Moreover, findings suggest that instructors intend to continue to use many of these instructional changes in their post-pandemic classrooms. These conclusions confirm that instructors should consider contextual factors not only during but also after COVID-19. We close with practical recommendations for instructors beyond the pandemic classroom.

In March 2020, colleges and universities across the United States (U.S.) and around the world closed their campuses, moved classes online, and sent their students home in response to COVID-19 (A. Hess, 2020; Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Instructors had weeks—in some cases days—to adapt their classes and prepare to engage in remote teaching/learning for what became the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester (Diaz, 2020). Throughout the shift to online learning, instructors adjusted assignments

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and reevaluated their expectations, and institutions allowed students to take courses pass/fail without repercussions (Lederman, 2020). For many instructors, the adjustment to completely online instruction was challenging due to increased workload, constraints on student engagement, and shifting student needs in this ever-changing instructional context (Diaz, 2020; Flaherty, 2020).

Instructors and students enter the classroom with specific goals and needs (Mottet et al., 2006). Instructors have rhetorical goals centered around how they communicate course content to students and relational goals focusing on how they engage interpersonally with students. Students have specific academic needs related to learning course content and relational needs regarding the connection they develop with their instructor. Mottet et al. theorized that when instructors communicate in ways that align with students' academic and relational needs, student learning is maximized. As the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the educational landscape (Rashid & Yadav, 2020), instructors were challenged to reconsider students' needs and adjust how they sought to achieve their own rhetorical and relational goals in the newly (re)defined *classroom* (Arnett, 2020).

The transition to remote learning was extremely difficult for many students (e.g., Lederman, 2020; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Pre-existing conditions, such as student food and housing insecurity, were exacerbated as states issued stay at home orders (Wright et al., 2020). Many students lost their only source of income due to canceled student employment and their access to much needed campus resources such as high-speed internet (Goldrick-Rab, 2020). In addition to these logistical challenges of completing coursework, students experienced heightened mental health distress (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression) due to the pandemic (Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Consequently, instructors were called on to adapt their approach to teaching (Arnett, 2020; Gadura, 2020). The purpose of this study was to explore the ways college and university instructors adjusted their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction during the rapid shift to online learning brought on due to COVID-19 in Spring 2020.

## Rhetorical/Relational Goals Theory

A significant body of instructional communication scholarship focuses on communication dynamics between instructors and students in the classroom (Mottet et al., 2006; Myers et al., 2018; Myers et al., 2005). One primary theory, rhetorical/relational goals theory (RRGT) (Mottet et al., 2006), posits that instructors formulate rhetorical (e.g., influencing students to learn course content) and relational (e.g., building interpersonal relationships with students) goals communicate in ways that achieve them (i.e., use of immediacy behaviors, use of positive nonverbals). Simultaneously, students have academic (e.g., learn course content, get a specific grade) and relational (e.g., to be understood and confirmed) needs that are met through interactions with instructors, classmates, and course materials. Mottet et al. (2006) suggest that learning and motivation are maximized when instructors engage in communication behaviors that address student academic and relational needs. Conversely, learning and motivation are reduced when these needs are not met.

## Communication Behaviors and Rhetorical/Relational Goals Theory

A good deal of research has been conducted to ascertain student perceptions of instructors' rhetorical and relational communication behaviors (e.g., Claus et al., 2012; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Myers et al., 2018). Goldman and colleagues (2017), for example, asked students to choose from a limited number of

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most preferred communication behaviors. Students selected clarity, competence, and relevance. When given the option to select additional behaviors, students also identified self-disclosure and immediacy (both relational) as important.

Regarding disclosure, Kaufmann and Frisby (2017) argue that relevant disclosure helps instructors achieve both rhetorical and relational goals. Other scholars have found that both rhetorical and relational communication behaviors influence students' impressions of their instructors. Students identified clarity as a communication behavior that helps meet both academic and relational needs (Myers et al., 2018). Exploring RRG T in the context of student and instructor misbehaviors, Claus et al. (2012) found that when students thought their relational needs were met, they engaged in less negative behavior in the classroom. In contrast, when instructors misbehave (e.g., are incompetent and/or offensive) students engage in more negative classroom behaviors, which may negatively impact students' academic needs.

Although most studies guided by RRG T have explored communication in face-to-face classrooms, Frisby et al. (2013) examined students' experiences taking online classes. They discovered that when instructors conveyed social presence, students "recall[ed] more about what they learned" (p. 474). We contend, however, that results from such studies may be influenced by students' socialization toward normative approaches to education that position instructors as knowledge providers and students as knowledge receivers. Thus, an inherent bias in them is the assumption that learning happens within isolated classroom spaces that privilege rhetorical over relational communication approaches. Consequently, the teaching/learning process and research examining it ought to be complicated in ways that move from a transactional to a co-creational model that acknowledges the influence of larger sociopolitical and instructional contexts on the classroom (Ashby-King, 2021; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Rudick, 2017).

## Considering Students' Lived Experiences in the Classroom

Much of the instructional communication scholarship published to date focuses on isolating instructor and student communication behaviors as quantitative variables and interrogating them using the process-product model (Friedrich, 1987; Sprague, 1992). However, student and instructor communication does not occur in a vacuum void of social, institutional, and departmental context (Hendrix, 2020; Hendrix et al., 2003). Yet, few scholars have considered how individual positionalities and contextual factors contribute to communication in the classroom that results in students being treated "more as variables than as individuals with agency" (Ashby-King, 2021, p. 206). J. A. Hess et al. (2001) suggest this could be accomplished by adding additional inputs to studies. More recently, Arrington (2020) argues that the racialization of U.S. society and students' perceptions and experiences creates a complex classroom environment when teaching an intercultural communication course. These works provide a starting point for theorizing beyond the process-product model approach. We argue that constraints brought about by COVID-19 illustrate how vital it is to expand the instructional communication research paradigm in these ways.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, student and instructor communication was influenced by contextual factors created and exacerbated by the crisis and the resulting shift to online learning (Arnett, 2020). Thirteen percent of college students did not have access to the internet at home and college students in rural, low-income, and Latinx households were most affected (Gao & Hayes, 2021). Thus, many students were not able to attend synchronous classes once they were required to move off campus (Goldrick-Rab, 2020; Lederer et al., 2020). Many students also experienced mental health challenges that may have impeded their academic success, such as worrying about sick loved ones and increased

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anxiety surrounding the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). The idea that students' lived experiences could influence their ability to learn is not new; however, COVID-19 intensified the need for instructors to adjust their pedagogical approaches based on contextual factors not often considered in instructional communication pedagogy (Ashby-King, 2021).

Institutions of higher education often cater to *traditional students* (e.g., 18–24 years old, recent high school graduates, financially dependent on parents/caregivers) and may not be structured to support the needs of students who do not fit into these demographics (Bahrainwala, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2020), 52% of full-time college students were employed in 2018 and more than half of those worked more than 20 hours per week. More than half of all full-time students did not live at home or in on-campus housing and almost 60% had children of their own living with them (NCES, 2020). Food and housing insecurity have also been highlighted as serious issues faced by college students and more than 60% of students in the U.S. were food-insecure to some degree in 2019 (AAC&U News, 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). These major stressors may negatively impact students' academic performance (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020). Some scholars are calling on instructors to take these contextual factors into account when designing courses and engaging with students (Bahrainwala, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). During Spring 2020, the shift to online learning highlighted these somewhat hidden issues and renewed calls for instructors to reconsider their approaches to teaching and learning.

As the COVID-19 crisis brought previously overlooked elements of student learning into focus, Spring 2020 provided an opportunity to reimagine how college and university instructors approach teaching based on contextual factors (i.e., COVID-19) influencing student learning. As such, the unprecedented experiences of teaching during a pandemic offers the opportunity to contribute to theoretical and pedagogical implications that can inform teaching/learning in a post-pandemic educational landscape. Guided by RRG, we sought to answer the following research question:

**RQ:** How, if at all, did college and university instructors adjust their rhetorical and/or relational approaches to instruction due to COVID-19?

## Methods

To answer our research question, we collected qualitative survey responses from 68 instructors who served as the instructor of record for at least one college course during the Spring 2020 semester. We conducted an interpretive thematic analysis to examine participant responses. The remainder of this section discusses participant demographics, data collection, and analysis procedures.

## Participants

Sixty-eight instructors participated in this Institutional Review Board-approved study. The majority of participants were U.S.-based and represented institutions located in 28 states.<sup>1</sup> One participant indicated their institution was located outside of the U.S. The majority of participants were tenured/tenure-track faculty (e.g., assistant professor, associate professor, professor). On average, participants

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1. Participants represented institutions in Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC.

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had approximately 13 years ( $SD = 10.4$ ) of experience teaching in higher education. Eighty-five percent of participants taught in communication or a related discipline (e.g., public relations, strategic communication, mass communication). The remaining participants taught in business, psychology, English, and advertising. Forty-three participants self-identified as female/women and 25 self-identified as male/men. A complete breakdown of participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

<b>TABLE 1</b>		
<b>Participant Demographics</b>		
<b>Demographic</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female/Woman	43	63%
Male/Man	25	37%
<b>Title</b>		
Professor	10	15%
Associate Professor	17	25%
Assistant Professor	16	24%
Instructor/Lecturer	9	13%
Adjunct	4	6%
Graduate Teaching Assistant	12	18%
<b>Years Teaching</b>		
1 to 5	21	31%
6 to 10	11	16%
11 to 15	14	21%
16 to 20	9	13%
21 to 25	3	4%
26 to 30	3	4%
30+	6	9%
Did Not Report	1	1%
<b>Region<sup>2</sup></b>		
U.S. West	9	13%
U.S. Midwest	15	22%
U.S. South	33	49%
U.S. Northeast	8	12%
Non-U.S.	1	1%
Did Not Report	2	3%

## Procedures

Participants completed the surveys in August 2020. At the time, they were far enough removed from the Spring 2020 semester to have reflected on their teaching experiences but had not yet begun to implement Fall 2020 institutional policies. We recruited participants on disciplinary (e.g., COMMNotes)

2. Regions were based on the regions used by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

and department listservs. We also recruited participants via social media platforms including Reddit, personal Facebook pages, and within specific Facebook groups where members were higher education instructors. No incentives were offered for participation.

After clicking on the survey link, participants were directed to the study's consent form and, upon giving consent, directed to the survey. Anonymous online qualitative surveys were used because the openness and flexibility of the method allowed us "to capture a diversity of perspectives, experiences, [and] sense-making" (Braun et al., 2017, p. 3). Qualitative surveys provided access to a geographically dispersed population and offered the opportunity to give voice to those who may otherwise choose not to participate in research. The anonymous nature of the studies may have allowed for increased participant disclosure (Braun et al., 2020; Davey et al., 2019). Moreover, due to the abruptness of the COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative surveys allowed us to quickly capture instructors' initial reactions to the pandemic and shift to remote learning that would not have been possible through other, more time-consuming approaches to qualitative data collection (e.g., interviews).

Closed-ended questions were used to understand instructors' mode of instruction during Spring 2020 and Fall 2020. Open-ended questions were used to capture rich descriptions of participants' experiences. After answering a series of demographic questions, participants were directed to answer the open-ended questions. These questions included: "After the switch to online learning, what values did you prioritize in your learning environment?" "How has COVID-19 influenced your overall approach to teaching?" "What changes do you plan on keeping for your courses and learning environment moving forward?" and "Thinking back to the spring 2020 semester, how did your expectations of students' engagement with the course and you as the instructor change from the beginning to the end of the semester?" Participants' survey responses resulted in 71 single-spaced pages of qualitative data for analysis. On average, participant responses to each question were approximately 37 words.

## Data Analysis

We examined the data via a thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, we engaged in both inductive and deductive coding to develop themes across participants' responses and to connect responses to our larger theoretical framework (Tracy, 2020). During the first review, we familiarized ourselves with the data by independently reading the responses. Based on the first review, we confirmed that RRGT was an appropriate theoretical framework for analysis. Guided by RRGT, we independently began the second round of data analysis abductively by moving between the theoretical framework and thematic analysis (Tracy, 2020). Using recurrence, forcefulness, and repetition, we independently coded the data to identify words, concepts, and experiences present across the dataset (Lindolf & Taylor, 2017; Owen, 1984). As patterns emerged, similar codes were organized into overarching categories. For example, responses that related to checking in with students and changes in classroom values were categorized under the overarching theme *shifting relational goals during the crisis*. During the third review of the data, we engaged in a collaborative sensemaking process. This allowed us to share our independent findings from initial analysis and interpretation, problematize our analysis and interpretation, and come to a shared understanding of the data that resulted in the study's final findings (Koesten et al., 2021). During our sensemaking conversation, we discussed the similarities and differences in the categories we identified and explored how the findings did and did not fit within our theoretical framework, leading to our shared interpretations of the data. We concluded by naming the themes and returning to the data to identify representative quotes that exemplified each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

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## Findings

Our analysis revealed that as instructors transitioned their courses online, they adjusted their approach to achieving rhetorical and relational goals based on students’ changing needs. More specifically, instructors adjusted both rhetorical and relational goals during the crisis and indicated these shifts would be long-term. Most instructors anticipated having to adjust their rhetorical and relational approaches to adapt to an online learning environment. However, many instructors also believed they would be able to rely on traditional teaching approaches once students were comfortable with online medium. However, instructors quickly learned that was not the case. In fact, they were required to adjust their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction, as well. As one participant wrote:

Expectations [of students] changed significantly. I expected students to still concentrate on completing the course, which in my mind meant keeping up with assignments and watching [the] content I posted online. I expected students to attend optional virtual office hours and ask for help. Needless to say, my expectations were not met . . . students had bigger issues than finishing the course in many cases. Extra work and/or family pressures meant many did not participate in virtual office hours or help sessions.

Another instructor stated, “[I] knew students would be much less engaged, but I was surprised how many kind of dropped off.” As these participants highlighted, instructors quickly realized that the changing context of the course, in addition to other challenges students face due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., food and housing insecurity, family members getting sick), changed students’ needs and therefore caused instructors to adjust their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction.

## Shifting Rhetorical Goals During the Crisis

Due to the shift to online instruction and to the contextual constraints exacerbated by COVID-19, instructors adjusted their rhetorical approaches to instruction in order to address students’ academic needs. For instance, instructors restructured expectations by “prioritizing [specific] learning goals” and “simplifying assignments whenever possible” and “trimming some requirements.” They focused intentionally on “core outcomes” and communicating course material in “smaller chunks.” Two subthemes highlighted the concrete changes participants made in their rhetorical approaches to instruction: (1) reconstructing expectations and communication behaviors; and (2) offering multiple options for engagement.

### ***Reconstructing Expectations and Communication Behaviors***

Participants reconstructed expectations of students to account for the constraints the pandemic was having on them. For example, one participant wrote, “All expectations became lax. Grading was less rigorous. Normally, I accepted nothing after a deadline, but I accepted assignments weeks after deadlines during COVID-19.” Another participant wrote, “I gave students no ‘deadlines’ other than the last day of class. Normally, I have pretty strict submission and late policy.” A third said, “I shifted more toward pass/fail activities.” Instructors revised their traditional class policies and expectations to honor learning outcomes and to help students finish the semester successfully.

Instructors also reimagined how they communicated course content. For example, participants explained that “regular, clear communication” and the “clarity of [their] communication” was essential to meeting students’ academic needs and drove the changes in their rhetorical approaches to instruction. Specifically,

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when transitioning online, participants attempted to streamline communication by packaging course content "into smaller chunks." Assignments were often reconstructed in order to avoid overwhelming students. Participants stated that using more frequent and smaller assignments and activities while online helped to avoid content overload for students. These examples suggest that instructors reconstructed their assignments with the goal of consolidating course content and communicated course content in ways that were clear and easy for students to engage with and understand.

### ***Offering Multiple Options for Engagement***

In addition to restructuring expectations, instructors also offered multiple ways for students to engage with course content. Instructors provided multiple methods of content delivery to meet differing student academic needs. These included making "lessons available throughout the entire semester, prerecord[ing] lectures in advance, and account[ing] for the time students would need to complete assignments." A key approach to this change was delivering material both synchronously and asynchronously. According to one participant, "I created asynchronous and synchronous options for every class, so students could do what worked best for them." Another explained that they adjusted the course design "so students could engage in the course in other ways than only during a Zoom session that was replacing [their] class session." A third shared that they "had to create multiple new opportunities to complete the assignments that were as equitable as possible and allow[ed] for student learning to take place while acknowledging the impact [of the pandemic]." As instructors realized that COVID-19 would change the way students engage with their courses, they sought to take multiple different rhetorical approaches to delivering course material in order to meet the varying needs of students.

### **Shifting Relational Goals During the Crisis**

Participants also discussed ways they adjusted their relational approaches, noting that COVID-19 had not only changed the mode of instruction but also students' learning and living environments. Participants explained that they had to understand and accept that, in the new environment, students could no longer enter classrooms isolated from their other lived experiences. As one participant explained:

The students were trying to cope with so much disruption. They lost their jobs, some were living entirely alone, other were bouncing between households of divorced parents. Some had responsibilities to care for younger siblings, some had no place to study, work or Zoom. Some lost family members to COVID.

The shift to online learning emphasized how faculty thought challenges, such as work and family responsibilities, influenced the learning experience for students. Therefore, instructors adjusted how they related to their students. One participant noted, "[I] tried to be more aware of students' emotional state." Another said, "I had to adjust my expectations of student engagement to allow students to be less engaged via Zoom because many students were not able to participate in Zoom meetings/class session." Two specific changes in instructors' relational approach to teaching provide examples for how they shifted their relational goals: (1) acknowledging the influence of contextual factors on student learning; and (2) providing additional support.

### ***Acknowledging the Influence of Contextual Factors on Student Learning***

During the initial shift to online learning, instructors sought to build relationships by communicating with students that they understood that factors beyond the students' control were influencing their

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engagement with the course. For example, as one participant wrote, "At first I thought synchronous online might still work, but I knew my students would not have easy access to technology. I thought they still might be free during class hours. I did not anticipate widespread unemployment." Another participant wrote, "I had several students who were ill, caring for children or elders, caring for sick family members or roommates, working more, recently unemployed, without stable housing, food or internet." Thus, instructors used more frequent personalized emails and reconstructed course expectations to acknowledge the impact of these contextual factors on students' relational needs. One participant explained:

A little bit of humanity/humility goes a long way. I explained to my students a bit of how I was feeling and how I was adjusting my expectations (downward) for myself. I made it clear that I cared about them first as people dealing with a health crisis and that their safety and well-being was always more important than the work I was asking them to complete in class.

Due to the changes caused by COVID-19, instructors acknowledged the changing circumstances affecting their ability to connect with students relationally by recognizing and validating students' lived experiences outside of the classroom and the impact of these experiences on classroom engagement.

### ***Providing Additional Support***

As instructors acknowledged the influence of COVID-19 on students' ability to engage in the course, instructors provided additional forms of support they did not traditionally use to achieve relational goals. According to one participant:

I had to really pay attention and check on who was logging into our Canvas course management site to identify those who were struggling. I reached out personally and for most we found a way to adapt things to allow them to successfully complete the course.

Instructors also facilitated additional check-ins with students as they realized that their students needed more support than what occurred during a typical in-person class session or through pre-recorded videos. For example, one participant said, "I did individual virtual check-ins with students about their writing about [two thirds] of the way through the semester." Another explained they held "required and optional individual check-ins." One instructor emphasized the additional support they provided, saying "my role became much more focused on 'you can do this' and [I used] tons of communication and notices." In doing so, instructors created additional opportunities to connect with students and provide the increased relational support that instructors perceived to be necessary to meet students' relational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Long-Term Shifts in Instructors' Rhetorical and Relational Goals**

Reflecting on their experience during the Spring 2020 semester, many participants explained that the experience led them to consider adjusting their rhetorical and relational goals moving forward. Participants said this was particularly important for the Fall 2020 semester, but many said what they learned during the Spring 2020 semester would lead to long-term changes in their approach to instruction. Two subthemes emerged: (1) distilling core concepts; and (2) centering student-instructor relationships.

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### ***Distilling Core Concepts***

As they reflected on the teaching and learning experience during the pandemic, instructors became hyper aware of “rethinking what is important to each course.” Participants highlighted that during the Fall 2020 semester, and possibly beyond, ensuring their rhetorical goals were centered around only the most relevant course content was a change they would continue. One participant described their approach saying, “I will concentrate on fewer topics this semester and focus on working with students to make sure they understand the core concepts.” Another instructor explained that their experience teaching during COVID-19 caused them to place an emphasis on the connection between the course content and specific skills that will benefit students as they seek employment. In their words:

COVID has refocused my teaching on job placement—ensuring that students have some tangible skills, a process for approaching resumes/cover letters, and exposure to real-world professionals. It has increased the clarity that I try to create in assignments. That said, it has also pushed me to give more freedom to students and to be more responsive to their needs and requests.

As instructors reflected on their experience teaching during Spring 2020 and the transition to online learning, they noted that they had begun to rethink the courses they were teaching, what content was most central to course outcomes, and how to connect the courses to the skills students needed post-graduation.

### ***Centering Student-Instructor Relationship***

Instructors noted that their experiences teaching during the Spring 2020 semester led to their desire to also maintain their shift in relational goals. Participants mentioned putting a larger emphasis on relational goals in their approach to instruction in the future. One important long-term change to relational goals was instructors viewing themselves as more of a support system for students. As one participant stated, “since students might have genuine needs, I plan to conduct needs analysis in my first week of teaching a particular class.” Other participants emphasized that they would continue to reach out to students and take into account students’ outside situations that influence their environment. As one participant stated, they will have “increased communication/transparency/empathy between [themselves] and their students” in future courses. Instructors also noted that they wanted to keep increasing their interpersonal communication and connection with students. One participant explained their shift in relational goals as, “I think centering the understanding that I care about my students. Wearing my heart on my sleeve a bit more with my students and remind them I want them to be successful in my class but in the world as well.” After experiencing a perceived shift in students’ relational needs during the Spring 2020 semester, instructors learned some of the hidden or even new relational needs that will continue to influence the classroom and learning outcomes beyond the pandemic, shifting their own rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction.

## **Discussion**

This study sought to gain an initial understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic and college and universities’ subsequent transition to remote learning influenced instructors’ rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction. A thematic analysis of 68 qualitative survey responses revealed that instructors did adjust their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction. As instructors perceived students’ shifting needs, they adjusted their rhetorical approach by reconstructing their classroom expectations,

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prioritizing clarity, using multiple modalities, and segmenting course content. Instructors adjusted their relational approach by acknowledging the influence of contextual factors on student learning and increasing opportunities for interpersonal engagement with students. These conclusions build on J. A. Hess et al.'s (2001) call to problematize the process-product assumptions embedded within RRG. To clarify, scholars and instructors ought to consider the teaching/learning process beyond the traditional notion of the classroom as an isolated learning environment wherein the instructor is knowledge producer, and the student is knowledge consumer (Ashby-King, 2021). By considering students' contexts and lived experiences as additional inputs (J. A. Hess et al., 2001), RRG may serve as a better guide for instructors and scholars.

### **Problematizing the Process-Product Model**

RRG (Mottet et al., 2006) was developed following the traditional process-product model that has guided much of the instructional communication literature and theory building (Friedrich, 1987; Sprague, 1992). As such, the theory's foundational assumption posits that learning is maximized when an instructor's communication behaviors meet student academic and relational needs. Unfortunately, this assumption tends to privilege rhetorical needs over relational needs, which were positioned as a luxury rather than central to the teaching/learning process (Goldman et al., 2017; Myers et al., 2018). Moreover, conclusions of this study reveal a major limitation of RRG. Relying solely on the process-product model does not allow for the consideration of individual, institutional, and societal contexts that influence student needs related to teaching/learning in the college classroom.

As J. A. Hess et al. (2001) note, scholars that follow the process-product model do not often take into account contextual factors such as individual student characteristics or teacher stylistic behaviors which could limit the value of their findings. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional learning environment, instructors adjusted their rhetorical and relational approaches based on shifting student needs. For example, as instructors learned about the variety of different challenges students were facing outside the classroom (e.g., food and housing insecurity, lack of stable internet access) (Goldrick-Rab, 2020; Wright et al., 2020), they adjusted their instructional approaches to meet these new student needs.

To address the changing landscape of higher education highlighted in these results, RRG ought to be extended in ways that address students' academic and relational needs in light of contextual constraints inherent in their lived experience. For example, when a student is experiencing food and/or housing insecurity, instructors may privilege meeting the student's relational needs by connecting them to campus resources that will help them meet their basic needs of food and/or shelter. Once these basic needs are met, the student may more easily engage with course material, allowing the instructor to meet their academic needs through rhetorical communication behaviors. Thus, by considering RRG from an input-process-product perspective, scholars may be able to expand on Mottet et al.'s (2006) initial suggestion that instructors should balance rhetorical and relational goals by considering how different contextual factors and individual circumstances (inputs) may call on instructors to privilege meeting one type of student need over the other in order to promote optimal learning.

### **Practical Implications**

These conclusions also point to some practical implications for instructors in the new normal exposed by the pandemic and in preparation for possible future crisis events. First, instructors can create open lines

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of communication by fostering an open classroom environment with students early in the semester to ensure students know they can share challenges they are facing with their instructor. By creating an open classroom climate, students may feel more comfortable asking for help related to their lived experiences inside and outside of the classroom. One way to do this is to invite students to share concerns via email or in a private conversation during office hours. This can set the foundation for instructors to then pass along important information about campus resources to help address student needs. Additionally, starting the course by collaboratively setting classroom norms and dialogue agreements with students helps provide students a sense of ownership and opens the door for two-way communication between an instructor and their students.

Second, low-stakes reflective assignments throughout the semester provide an opportunity for students to share course reflections, as well as lived experiences outside the classroom they want the instructor to know. By asking students to reflect on what they have learned so far, what has been unclear to them, and what they need their instructor to know so they can continue to be successful in the course, instructors gain direct feedback from students that provides contextual information that will help them understand students' needs and how those needs may have changed since the beginning of the semester. Instructors can then adjust their communication behaviors in order to meet students changing academic and relational needs. In a semester during a crisis (e.g., during a pandemic) this is especially important as student's environments beyond the classroom context can change from day-to-day.

Third, instructors could offer check-ins with their students in addition to reflective assignments. Check-in meetings offer instructors additional opportunities to build relationships with their students and provide students the opportunity to interact with their instructor one-on-one outside of a traditional classroom setting. If requiring students to meet outside of class, instructors must be flexible knowing that many students have a number of responsibilities in addition to being enrolled in their course. We suggest that instructors consider using class time to hold check-in meetings to avoid adding undue strain on students. If students have already blocked a specific time for a course meeting, it will be easier for the student to attend and engage in a check-in meeting during that time.

Finally, although these implications focus on college and university classrooms, they are applicable in other contexts, as well. For example, when designing training and development programs, facilitators could use pre-training surveys to get to know participants prior to a session in order to adapt the content and approach to facilitation to the needs of participants. Additionally, instructional communication occurs during many crises when government agencies direct the public to engage in certain behaviors in response to a crisis. Based on our findings in a higher education context, we suggest that crisis communication strategies could be enhanced by developing stronger relationships with key publics in order to construct more effective rhetorical messaging to be delivered during a crisis. In essence, lived experiences affect learning in multiple contexts including, but not limited only to, college classrooms.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

These conclusions should be considered in light of a few limitations. First, qualitative survey responses are a static form of data. Once participants completed the survey, we could not go back and ask follow-up questions, clarify a statement, or seek additional information. Future research could include other forms of qualitative data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups) in order to add depth to the current study's

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findings. Second, RRGTT focuses on instructor goals and student needs, but we only collected data from the instructor perspective. Thus, we relied on instructors' discussions and perceptions of their students' changing needs. Future research could focus on the student perspective or collect data from both students and instructors to gain a more holistic view of what could be learned from the experience of teaching and learning during the pandemic. Third, we did not ask participants to describe their institution (e.g., size, type). Looking at the differences in experiences based on university size and type may highlight inequalities experienced among instructors during the shift to remote learning.

Ultimately, future research ought to look beyond the process-product model to consider the role different inputs play in the teaching/learning process. In turn, this led us to argue for a more complicated, contextual understanding of RRGTT. These theoretical implications lead to a number of potential avenues for future research. First, from a quantitative, post-positivist perspective, the input-process-product model (see J. A. Hess et al., 2001) provides an avenue to revisit foundational findings that connect instructor communication behaviors to student learning and examine if different contextual factors help us better understand how said instructor behaviors influence student learning. Astin's (1991) input-environment-output (IEO) model may offer an additional starting point for instructional communication scholars seeking to enhance prior studies by replicating them and adding input variables to better understand how contextual factors influence communication in the teaching/learning process.

Second, from a qualitative, interpretive perspective, we suggest researchers pay specific attention to exploring student needs in the classroom. An interpretive approach to this area of research would be valuable as interview and/or focus group methods will allow scholars to collect data that has the depth needed to understand the nuances of differing student needs and what students believe instructors can do to address said needs. Further, taking this approach will help scholars examine the communicative, relational foundation of teaching and learning that is often missed when scholars focus on reducing the teaching/learning process to measuring specific variables and connecting them to student learning (Ashby-King, 2021).

## Conclusion

The transition to remote learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the learning environment in ways that also exposed many inequities perpetuated on college and university campuses. As instructors shifted their courses online, they adjusted their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction to meet student academic and relational needs in light of unique lived experience. These findings highlight the need for instructional communication scholars to look beyond the process-product model and consider the role contextual factors have in the teaching and learning process. By understanding different needs based on students' lived experiences outside the classroom, instructors may adjust their rhetorical and relational approaches to instruction in ways that improve student learning and the environment for student learning. As challenging as the shift to remote learning was for students and instructors, reflecting on these experiences offers instructors the opportunity to move beyond normative approach to teaching/learning and transform the classroom by considering students' varying contexts and lived experiences in order to enhance student outcomes during crises and beyond.

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