A Hyperpersonal Classroom? Experiences in Remote Learning Among Communication Arts Students at the University of the Philippines Los Baños

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In mid-2020, with massive lockdowns still in place and the new school year nearing, educators, students, and parents were all at a loss as to what would happen next in the Philippine education system. Within our family and relatives, there were many conversations about the uncertainty of the coming school year. While I work as a university faculty member, my mother and many aunts are schoolteachers in elementary and high school. We found ourselves at the receiving end of many questions from our relatives who had children all set to attend school around June. Numerous Facebook group chats contained inquiries day after day about whether or not the school year would push through as scheduled, and we who were members of the teaching force did not know how to answer them.

The Department of Education (DepEd) was resolute with its plans to continue the opening of the school year around August 2020. In many interviews, senate hearings, and press briefings, Education Secretary Leonor Briones expressed her appeal to President Duterte to allow the DepEd to open schools in remote learning modality because "education cannot wait" and "education must continue" (Hernando-Malipot, 2020; Ramos, 2020). While she admitted that the country could not achieve full readiness, she expressed the need to go full speed ahead with the education road map:

"*Kasi nakabuwelo na kami. If we suddenly be pulled to a stop, baka madapa kami*" (We have already gained traction. If we suddenly pull into a stop, we might stumble) (Garcia, 2020).

Basic education thus continued, forcing teachers to quickly shift to new teaching and learning modalities despite the lean resources provided by the education department. In fact, while preparing my own course packs, I had to help my mother print several modules. She received minimal funding to print voluminous pages that I had to solicit financial help from close friends and colleagues.

After DepEd announced its decision to begin classes remotely, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Chairperson Prospero de Vera III also expressed that state colleges and universities may continue to open schools through a combination of "digital and nondigital technology" by August 2020, although they had more freedom on specific dates of starting classes (Magsambol, 2020a). In the case of autonomous institutions such as the University of the Philippines System, we faculty members were given some time to recalibrate our existing course syllabi towards remote learning around the same month, which meant that the mandated teacher's break would have to be spent for work. Despite the recommendations from experts from our same institution to suspend classes until December 2020 (Magsambol, 2020b), the classes opened in September 2020.

As the adjusted academic calendar was introduced, I felt some anxiety in terms of teaching students in the coming term. As an introvert teaching in the face-to-face (FtF) setup, I find it difficult to connect with students because of my tendency to shy away from conversations outside the context of class discussions; overthink students' perceptions of my way of speaking and teaching; and my discomfort in trying to establish relationships with students. And so I remain as one of those professors who merely does what has to be done, and leaves after every class without creating the connection that teachers have to establish to ensure that their students feel comfortable, welcome, and understood in the classroom.

If FtF Relationship-building with students is difficult for me, would the remote learning setup make it even more challenging?

The glint of hope that I have rests upon Joseph Walther's hyperpersonal model in computer-mediated communication (CMC). His proposition was simple: "combinations of media attributes, social phenomena, and social-psychological processes may lead CMC to become 'hyperpersonal,' that is, to exceed FtF interpersonal communication" (Walther, 1996, p. 5). This means that it is more productive to establish relationships in CMC, whether in personal or professional contexts. In a later work, Walther and his colleagues (2015) further explained that while CMC lacks access to many verbal cues and is most of the time asynchronous in nature, the users of technology are able to take the opportunity to access a high degree of agency in creating a system where interpersonal communication strategies are otherwise intensified through mediated channels.

Anchoring on this contemporary perspective in viewing technology as user-driven and users as active agents in such shaping of technology, I wonder if the same case applies to my students during the school year. Remote learning has been a challenging experience for everyone, but I would like to think that there is some benefit to this situation, something that we can adopt when the world's situation becomes better.

During the year the pandemic hit hard, I handled courses in the undergraduate and graduate levels of the Communication Arts program at the University of the Philippines Los Baños. With this, I have the initial upper hand due to various reasons. Many, if not all, of my students are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) who are born into a world where technology is central. This means that they would be able to easily learn digital languages, patterns, and ways of life; and to navigate technological platforms of learning competently. Even more so, these are aspiring experts of communication, which means that a certain level of demeanor in the changing landscape of media and communication in various contexts, pedagogy included, is expected.

For my classes, I organized a learning management system (LMS) through Google Classroom, where I systematically posted many of my course materials, requirements, and activities. I made sure that weekly asynchronous activities are arranged in one panel that they can easily understand with less supervision. What used to be recitations, practical activities, and class interactions in groups became an activity in isolation: students were isolated

in time and space, accessing the materials in the best possible time in the comfort of their individual homes. There needed to be a recalibration of many of the activities and go-to tricks that I used to do: collaborative activities became individualized outputs; real-life experience-based activities became moments of reflection; and verbal explanations became lengthy readings that I could only hope that they could understand on their own.

The LMS also allowed for the reconfiguring of the ways by which students participated in class. For instance, instead of a recitation class where students would have to take into consideration what the student before them said, the LMS offered an option for discussion forums where other students' responses could not be seen without answering the question first. After answering, students would now have the opportunity to see other responses and interact with them through written comments to foster exchange of ideas asynchronously. Feedback and scores were returned separately to students as well, instead of the conventional returning of papers in the classroom where students could glance at the scores of their peers. The asynchronous modality was especially well-suited for Communication Arts students who were more skilled in writing. For them, discussion forums where short answers were expected became opportunities for essay writing.

I conducted synchronous classes at least once a week to help students process what they have read. However, we could not require the students to attend classes online, and we could not even require them to turn on their videos. Many might be studying under very low Internet bandwidth; others might not even have adequate gadgets for video conferencing. And so, I allowed them to turn off their videos and hoped that every time I conducted synchronous classes, they were in the opposite side of the multinetworked line, listening and learning as much as they could. I would record the sessions for those who could not attend and had suddenly become disadvantaged in remote learning setups. While they can listen to and access the discussions, there was no opportunity for them to react, ask questions, and participate in real time.

Another tool that I used was Discord. This was not usually used in the context of the academe. This instant messaging app with audio and video options, set through channels, is common among gamers. Its low bandwidth requirement allows gamers to communicate for strategy without

compromising the speeds of their already-bandwidth-heavy games. It is for this reason that Discord was something that my colleagues and I considered to connect with our students. This would be helpful for students with slow and limited Internet connection. At the same time, many of the students are already familiar with the app because they have been using this as well. Furthermore, Discord allowed my students to loosen up from the formal environment in Google Classroom and emails. I encouraged them to talk freely, share insights, and interact with each other about practically anything. It became a space that we used to have during the FtF setup, like a classroom before the class starts, the hallways and the food stands, the vast Freedom Park at the University where we had some illusion of freedom.

Meanwhile, some students who did not have access remained in the dark. Printed modules were delivered to them by the university administration, and they were left to answer the materials on their own. The least we could do was call them through their mobile phones, and even this was challenging particularly for students in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA), who would usually live in the dormitories in normal circumstances, or those who experienced floods during typhoon season. Whenever I called these students or whenever they had the slim chance to respond to the emails that I sent with their intermittent connectivity, I could feel the uncertainty in their voices and their written words. I could feel the helplessness. But I could also feel the effort to continue.

Later on, these students would find ways to have more stable Internet connections, whether through the help of the University or when their parents finally realize the need for reliable Internet not only for their children's learning but also for their own remote work requirements. These students would eventually join the rest of their classmates in the synchronous sessions. These sessions started dull and lonely, making me feel more alone that I ever was. There were so many times when I would have to literally ask if anyone was listening, beyond those small rectangular representations of the space where my students should have been, nothing but black spaces, an avatar here and there, and names that I could not associate with faces.

Little by little, they warmed up. It all started when I shook things up and conducted an online game, good old-fashioned Family Feud where I incorporated communication theories into what the survey says about how

people behave in order to emphasize the importance of culture in shaping language, communication patterns, and social interactions. Little by little, laughter started coming out from my headset as the highlight indicating who was speaking started glowing in a stronger color. Little by little, the black boxes became small windows into the different homes and faces and situations of my students. Little by little, we started to connect.

When I had this opportune moment to encourage my students to open up, I started getting to know them deeper. I would know their communication patterns: who tends to joke more, who tends to take the leadership role when I would ask them to discuss concepts in the class, who is more willing to speak, and who is more comfortable to type insights through the chatbox. Communication in the virtual classroom, I realized, was simultaneous. With such a limited view of the laptop screen, I get to access to many communication messages: spoken through audio, typed through the chatbox, reactions through ready-made icons, facial expressions in videos, and even extra sound in audios that were accidentally unmuted. I could also access them at the same time and respond with spontaneity. The students were able to control their communication patterns even more, taking agency on how they would like to communicate. They could unmute themselves when they wanted to speak; they could mute themselves back when the noise from their end was irrelevant to the current communication situation. Our hands, our fingers, our mouths, our eyes, our ears: they were functioning to the best of their abilities to make communication more dynamic within the virtual platform.

Through the hyperpersonal nature of CMC, I had access to my students and they had access to me even in the most unlikely times. In Discord, we were able to chat not only about the class but even about the difficulties we encounter, the TV series that we watch, the interests that keep us going, and our feelings about our current experiences. Despite the distance and through technology, we got to feel that we were there for each other. Technology-mediated communication was not limited only to student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions; my colleagues and I also had our own Discord channel. We had many sessions where we would stay at the audio channel while we worked separately. Every now and then, one of us would ask a question or open up a discussion, taking us back to our office cubicle for the usual chatter. Part of the teaching experience is the opportunity

to exchange insights with colleagues and to share experiences about the daily happenstances of the life of a teacher. Back in our office, interacting with each other served the purpose of diminishing the stress from the workloads that we carried. When the classrooms were transported into the digital space, so did our offices, both in terms of formal meetings and informal chatter and intellectual discussions. Through CMC, we were alone together.

CMC also allowed me to know my students and the various facets of their personalities. I had a student who was also an Internet content creator, and through Twitter, I encountered one of her trending videos. I saw a side of her that was different from her rather formal self in the classroom because she was creating humorous content online. I would sometimes also receive screenshots from friends who follow my students online. They would mention my name and their experience in my class—both positive and negative—and this allowed me to restructure my classes for their benefit.

This was important to point out because, so far, I have talked about how I took the deliberate effort of connecting with my students and making them realize that the bounds of CMC actually made our interactions boundless. However, this was only happening during our weekly scheduled synchronous sessions. Back in the FtF setup, we would establish rapport within the classroom, at the department office for consultations, and in physical spaces around campus, where dynamics shift from formal to informal. This did not mean that the students had no online personas that reached teachers. In fact, we teachers would be aware of the same things that the students would post on their Twitter accounts, and these served as nonconventional ways of receiving feedback from them. Some students would even directly interact with teachers' social media accounts. We would follow each other on Twitter and add each other as friends on Facebook, which was helpful because it made students see a human angle in the teachers that they revere, fear, or respect in the classroom.

Now, the space where the learning happened and the online personas were created became one and the same worlds. The online persona and its various facets—the Zoom attendee, the Twitter user, the TikTok content creator with a huge following—became the same persona that the teacher had to interact with. There was no longer a way for the teacher to make distinct differentiations about the person in class and in social media, given

that everyone was existing within the same realm. In the Zoom sessions, we no longer shared mere stories. We shared links, Internet memes, and emojis. In our classes in the virtual world, we did what netizens do. With CMC, my students became hyperpersonal because I no longer saw them as just students. I got to know them as citizens from various communities; as friends; as online personalities; as individuals experiencing how the pandemic takes its toll on their well-being; and as multifaceted and three-dimensional characters in the virtual realm.

Even more so, the technological component of their remote learning experience gave them more power as learners. Instead of students who merely follow what the teachers say, they were able to express what they truly feel about the situation. They would share how tired they were after facing many Zoom sessions in a day towards the end of our session, when I ask them how they are coping. They would send emails expressing their confusion about the course pack, requirements, readings, and lesson, as well as uncertainty not only about their future in their classes but also about the world at large. They were able to respectfully but truthfully request and negotiate requirements and deadlines, which I appreciated more instead of them ending up not completing the course. Because of the online correspondence, they became free from the constraints brought about by the space between a teacher and a student at the faculty office, the gestures that already send a message of dismissal to students, the stern looks in some of their teachers' eyes, and the judgment from the world out there. They became courageous, and any kind of courage, as long as treated with understanding and expressed with respect, is admirable to a teacher.

Computer-mediated communication, based on my experience in the hyperpersonal virtual classroom, exceeds FtF communication in terms of how CMC can allow the student participants to present the many versions of themselves, all contributing to their identity, in formal and informal classroom communication without fear of judgement. They do not feel the social pressure of belonging and being the best in class as they work on their requirements. One of the dimensions of the hyperpersonal model is that it does not constrict learners to communicate due to the condition of visual anonymity and removes the pressure of stereotyped perceptions of how best to communicate (Walther et al., 2015). In the case of my students, collaboration during

synchronous sessions was encouraged by allowing them to discuss concepts together in the Zoom session, even while I felt that I did not have to grade them based on their participation. What was important for me was their willingness to participate.

Attendance was also not recorded during the remote learning modality because we acknowledge that some students do not have stable Internet connection and other resources during the scheduled sessions. As long as they were able to view the recordings of the session in most convenient times and that most essential learning competencies were reflected in their outputs, proper grades were given to them. In a difficult time like this, it might be best not to pressure them to excel when the circumstances they face are far from ideal.

In addition, they see the virtual classroom, especially one where their voices are heard, as a safe space where the goal is to learn and not merely earn their grades. The students shared ideas in two comfortable spaces. On one hand, they were learning in the comfort of their homes, inside venues that serve as their personal space. On the other hand, it was also their online persona who was communicating, a vital part of themselves that they were comfortable to show to the world. Computer-mediated communication allows participants to express what they want to say; to think and construct their thoughts carefully before they say it; and to have their own space and means of expressions based on what is comfortable to them. This is also a central dimension in the hyperpersonal model: the ability to rethink, edit, and reconstruct messages to make them more appealing (Toma & Hancock, 2011). The asynchronous nature of the classes made this possible.

Participants are also able to choose the channel that is most favorable to them as communicators. As observed in my students, this was apparent in many ways. In Zoom sessions where I would invite them to share their thoughts, they had many options for interactions: turning their video and audio on, turning only their audio on, or typing their responses on the chatbox of the teleconferencing app. In asynchronous sessions and consultations, I made myself available in various platforms, such as e-mail, text, chat, LMS, and Discord, leaving the choice to the students based not only on their accessibility but also on their level of comfort. Some would communicate

with me through an informal platform such as Discord, especially for quick concerns; while others who would like to have more open discussions on lessons and personal shortcomings in relation to the course requirements would send me an e-mail.

Lastly, CMC allows users to take control of their self-presentation. This alludes to nature of the hyperpersonalized communicator and how the self-presented self is accepted and reciprocated, leading the participants to act based on how they are perceived and treated in the communication situation. Snyder, Tanke, and Bercheid (1977, as cited in Walther et al., 2015) calls this behavior confirmation. This makes communication more effective and successful in its goal of mutual understanding, something that tends to be challenging in modalities.

However, a heightened communication dynamic through the hyperpersonal nature of CMC, I also realized, is possible only if three things are present: expressiveness, technological expertise, and willingness. First, participants have to express what they think or feel in the platform that is most comfortable and efficient for them. Second, participants have to be well-versed in their use of technology to exhaust its affordances. Third, participants should be willing to communicate and establish relationships given varying positionalities and power dynamics. When these three things are achieved, CMC can reach its full potential in terms of hyperpersonal communication.

Today, many students of my institution continue to face the struggles of online learning. Connectivity remains a disadvantage for many. The physical, mental, and emotional well-being of many students continues to be challenged by the situations at home, school, and uncertainties brought about by the global pandemic. These are problems that I acknowledge and admit to be valid and difficult to address. Still, in an ideal world where teachers, students, and workers in the academe are ready and able to use technology to facilitate learning without the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning can be efficient, productive, and inclusive. What the FtF learning setup offers can be far-reaching when what FtF cannot provide is instead supplied through CMC. With the nature of students as digital natives, experts even, they would be able to increase effective classroom communication, learning, and productivity through CMC. In turn, teachers have to be understanding, compassionate, and accepting of the new era in education. Instead of resistance, technology should be understood and

teachers should serve as guides in ensuring that students are able to balance learning and leisure, which are both offered by technology.

Ultimately, for CMC to work as the new frontier in pedagogy, understanding is crucial. The students whom we have today should feel that they are understood so that they would open up more. Technology continues to offer more challenges in various aspects of human life, but when we exert the effort to understand it and its avid users more, then we can make technologies propel relationships instead of impeding them, especially in the context of teaching and learning where relationship building is crucial. From there, we could rethink the changing landscape of teaching and learning with an open mind, and make the experience more worthwhile.

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