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Dialogues in Transition: A Narrative Inquiry into Student Communication with Teachers in Remote Learning Environments

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably disrupted traditional learning environments, compelling a rapid shift to online modalities that redefined how students communicate with their teachers. Yet, beneath the technical transitions lies a deeper, underexplored terrain: the lived communication experiences of students steering education amid crisis. This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry to investigate the storied realities of thirty (30) undergraduate education students who engaged with instructors during emergency remote teaching. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework, the research utilized in-depth interviews to capture the emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions of digital communication in learning. Thematic narrative analysis yielded six major themes: Digital Dialogues and Platforms of Connection, Communication Formalities and Relational Boundaries, Barriers and Disruptions in the Virtual Learning Space, Silences and the Psychology of Asking, Misfires in Meaning, and Fractured Learning and Fragmented Engagement. These findings reveal that online communication was not merely a logistical shift, but a complex socio-emotional process shaped by anxiety, cultural norms, technological barriers, and pedagogical presence. The study challenges assumptions of seamless digital adaptation and underscores the necessity of humanizing online interaction. Implications call for institutional reforms in platform standardization, faculty training in relational pedagogy, and systemic support to bridge digital and emotional divides in virtual education. This work contributes to global conversations on inclusive, student-centered online learning in post-pandemic educational futures.

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1. Introduction

Communication, long regarded as the cornerstone of human interaction, plays a central role in the educational process. It is not merely the exchange of information but a dynamic act of meaning-making, shaped by the participants' cultural background, social identities, and psychological states (Keyton, 2011). Every message carries more than content—it carries intent, tone, and relational cues that may be interpreted differently depending on the receiver's experiences, biases, and context (Erikson, 2014). In learning environments, this communicative interplay becomes foundational to instructional clarity, academic support, and emotional connection.

In the evolving landscape of education, especially under the pressures brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, communication took on an even greater significance. Traditional face-to-face encounters—rich with verbal and non-verbal cues—were abruptly replaced by digital messaging, emails, voice notes, and virtual meetings. Students and teachers alike were thrust into unfamiliar terrains where gestures, tone, and immediacy often became casualties of online interaction. The shift not only disrupted instructional delivery but also strained the very human relationships that sustain learning

(Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Crawford *et al*., 2020) [2]. Many students found themselves distanced not just physically, but relationally, from their instructors. Social presence—a key factor in learner engagement—was deeply compromised (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010).

Multiple studies have attempted to document the broader challenges of online learning, including issues of accessibility, content delivery, and instructional design (Bao, 2020; Rasheed *et al*., 2021). However, fewer have focused explicitly on the nuanced and deeply personal domain of communication between students and teachers, particularly from the perspective of students navigating these interactions in real-time during a global crisis. What it meant to send a message, to wait for a response, to feel seen—or ignored—by one's teacher in a purely digital environment remains under-examined, especially in culturally complex and resource-challenged contexts. Research suggests that teacher responsiveness, approachability, and communicative warmth are crucial predictors of student engagement and satisfaction (Cornelius-White, 2007; Quin, 2017). In an online setting, these qualities must be translated through typed words, emojis, or the absence thereof. As students grappled with low bandwidth, unstable internet, shared devices, and emotional fatigue, their attempts to reach out to instructors became more than logistical tasks—they became acts of vulnerability. In some cases, students revised their messages multiple times before hitting send, fearing grammatical judgment or misinterpretation. In others, they chose silence over risking embarrassment. These communicative decisions were often informed by cultural expectations around politeness, deference to authority, and academic propriety (Serafica, 2022; Dela Cruz, 2021).

Further, the digital platforms used for academic communication were often informal and inconsistent. Many students relied on social media applications such as Messenger, where instructional announcements mingled with memes, family chats, and distractions. While these platforms offered convenience and ubiquity, they lacked pedagogical structure and clarity, leading to confusion, missed deadlines, and fragmented discourse (Nguyen, 2015; Ally & Prieto-Blazquez, 2014) [36]. In this gray zone between formal education and informal communication, students were left to navigate ambiguity on their own. The emotional labor tied to this form of communication cannot be overstated. Students reported anxiety over being misunderstood, ignored, or reprimanded for asking "obvious" questions. Others struggled with interpreting teacher feedback that lacked tone or context, sometimes perceiving messages as curt or dismissive. This aligns with findings from Baticulon *et al*. (2021) [9], who documented how emotional disengagement and a sense of isolation were pervasive among Filipino students during remote learning. Moreover, cultural scripts that emphasized pakikisama (getting along with others) and hiya (shame) influenced students' willingness to engage in direct communication, especially when instructors appeared formal, unresponsive, or intimidating (Dela Cruz, 2021).

Globally, researchers have pointed to the importance of fostering meaningful teacher-student relationships even in digital spaces. Wentzel (2010) emphasizes that relational support enhances student motivation, while Anderson (2011) contends that social presence is key to successful online learning communities. Yet the Filipino experience complicates these frameworks. In settings marked by technological inequity, linguistic formality, and hierarchical respect, digital communication becomes not just a matter of skill, but of courage, identity, and cultural negotiation. Despite a growing interest in online education, few studies have captured the subjective, narrative experiences of students as communicators—how they felt, adapted, and made sense of their interactions with teachers amid uncertainty. Most existing inquiries have focused on broader pedagogical outcomes, technological infrastructure, or academic performance (Salac & Kim, 2020; Tria, 2020). Little attention has been paid to how students experience being heard—or unheard—in the digital classroom, how they interpret silence, or how they construct meaning from every interaction.

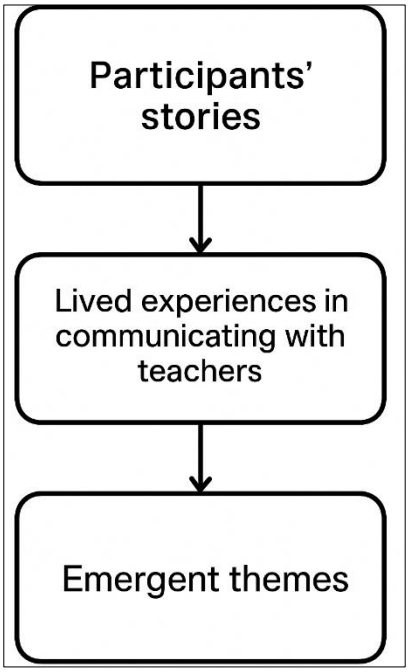
This study responds to that gap by exploring the lived communication experiences of education students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to understand how these students navigated communication with their teachers—how they approached message construction, interpreted feedback, and responded to communicative breakdowns or silences. By examining their stories, this research aims to reveal the emotional and cultural textures of teacher-student interactions in online learning environments. Guided by narrative inquiry, the study foregrounds students' voices, highlighting their struggles, adaptations, and meaning-making processes. In doing so, it offers educators, administrators, and researchers a more holistic understanding of what it means to communicate in crisis—and what practices might better support relational learning in an increasingly digital world.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the interpretative and narrative understanding of lived experiences, particularly the interpersonal communication between students and teachers during a time of global disruption. The framework is anchored on two theoretical traditions: Paul Watzlawick's Interactional View of Interpersonal Communication and Hilary Perraton's Theory of Distance Education, both of which offer a robust foundation for examining human interaction within educational spaces—whether mediated digitally or otherwise.

At the heart of Watzlawick's interactional theory is the notion that all behavior is communicative. In times of silence or withdrawal, meaning is still being exchanged—albeit nonverbally (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). This axiom becomes critical in online learning environments where tone, facial expressions, and gestures are easily distorted or omitted entirely. His emphasis on symmetrical and complementary relationships sheds light on the dynamics students negotiate when communicating with teachers, particularly in a remote context where traditional hierarchies and relational cues become blurred. These axioms resonate in narrative research, where meaning is not imposed but co-constructed, interpreted through language, relational patterns, and embodied experience (Kim, 2016).

In parallel, Perraton's (1988) theory highlights how distance learning reshapes not only the mode of content delivery but the social ecology of education. It suggests that learning does not require co-presence in space and time but does necessitate engagement, interactivity, and access. In this study, the theory functions not just as a pedagogical scaffold but as a lens to critique the equity and relationality embedded in virtual classrooms.



Drawing from these foundations, the study conceptualizes communication not simply as a transfer of knowledge, but as a relational act shaped by contextual, technological, emotional, and sociocultural forces. The framework posits that students' narratives of communication with their teachers are mediated by three interrelated domains: the modes of interaction (platforms and strategies used), the barriers and facilitators (technological, linguistic, affective, or socioeconomic), and the perceived meaning and impact of such exchanges on their sense of learning and relational connection.

Rather than seeking a single objective reality, this narrative inquiry embraces multiplicity. It foregrounds students' own voices—how they recount, make sense of, and reconstruct their communicative encounters. Within this narrative space, language becomes data (Riessman, 2008), and stories are not merely reflections of experience but constitute the experience itself. Communication, in this light, is both the method and the phenomenon.

Statement of the Problem

This study is guided by the overarching question. What lived experiences do students narrate regarding their communication with teachers during the pandemic?

From this central question, the following sub-inquiries are posed to evoke rich, storied accounts:

1. In what ways do students recount their patterns, practices, and mediums of communication with their teachers in an online learning context?
2. What personal stories and challenges do students share about the obstacles they encountered while trying to engage with their teachers during remote instruction?

3. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design guided by the principles of narrative inquiry, a methodological approach that privileges participants' lived stories and personal experiences as primary sources of meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) [15]. Narrative inquiry is particularly appropriate for understanding how individuals make sense of their world through storied experiences—especially in times of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Riessman, 2008). As a form of qualitative inquiry, it enables the researcher to co-construct meaning with participants through temporally situated, socially interactive, and contextually bound narratives (Clandinin, 2016; Kim, 2016). According to Butina (2015), narrative inquiry allows for deep exploration into participants' perspectives, recognizing the complexity and fluidity of human experience. Through storytelling, the method captures both the content and structure of meaning-making as lived and relived in the participants' own voices. The use of this approach in education research, particularly in examining student-instructor communication in remote settings, has been shown to provide rich, contextualized insights into individual realities (Huber *et al*., 2013).

Research Environment

The research was conducted in an educational setting during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional classroom engagements were replaced with technology-mediated instruction. The environment of inquiry was selected to reflect students' natural educational contexts—online platforms, virtual classrooms, and other technologically supported communication channels—where narratives of disconnection, adaptation, and resilience were actively unfolding (Bozkurt *et al*., 2020). Participants were interviewed in settings they found most conducive to sharing their experiences, such as their homes or familiar online spaces. The flexibility of allowing participants to choose interview settings minimized distractions and enhanced the authenticity of the stories shared (Seidman, 2019).

Participants and Sampling

The study involved thirty (30) participants selected through purposive sampling, particularly using criterion sampling (Palinkas *et al*., 2015). Participants were identified based on the following criteria: (1) current enrollment as undergraduate education students during the academic year affected by the pandemic, (2) willingness to participate voluntarily and share their experiences, and (3) accessibility during the time of the interview, particularly about connectivity and availability. The sample comprised an equal distribution of Bachelor of Elementary Education and Bachelor of Secondary Education students, ensuring a diversity of experiences and narrative voices. The aim was not generalization, but to construct a rich, textured understanding of communication practices from a range of individual perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering tool was the semi-structured in-depth interview, designed to elicit participants' stories in a fluid and conversational manner. In narrative inquiry, interviews are not simply about extracting information but about engaging with participants in a co-constructed dialogue of meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2013) [15]. Questions were open-ended and framed to encourage participants to reflect on and recount their experiences in communicating with their teachers before, during, and after the transitions imposed by the pandemic. This flexible structure enabled the participants to voice unanticipated concerns or emotions, which aligns with the emic perspective central to qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). Additionally,

researchers took field notes and observed non-verbal cues during the interviews, acknowledging that communication extends beyond words (Silverman, 2020).

Data Gathering Procedures

Prior to data collection, an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation was provided. Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence, in accordance with research ethics protocols (BERA, 2018).

Upon consent, interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability and conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms such as Messenger Call. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was recorded—with permission—for transcription and accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to preserve anonymity and uphold data privacy standards (Wiles *et al*., 2008).

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, data analysis is not a detached act of coding, but a relational and interpretive engagement with participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008) [15]. In this study, the participants' stories were treated as meaningful narratives—each embedded in social, emotional, and temporal contexts shaped by the disruptions of the pandemic.

The process began with deep immersion in the interview recordings and transcripts, allowing the researchers to attend not only to the content of the participants' accounts, but also to the tone, rhythm, silences, and emotions within their storytelling (Kim, 2016). Through repeated readings and listenings, narrative threads began to emerge—recurrent patterns that spoke to how students experienced communication with their teachers. Rather than fragmenting stories into discrete codes, the researchers prioritized keeping the narratives whole where possible, identifying themes based on resonance and significance rather than frequency (Chase, 2011; Josselson, 2013). Attention was paid to three dimensions of narrative inquiry: temporality (how experiences unfolded over time), sociality (interpersonal and emotional contexts), and place (the learning environments, both physical and digital) (Clandinin, 2013).

Reflexive memos guided the researchers in bracketing personal assumptions and staying close to the participants' meanings. Both converging and divergent narratives were valued, recognizing that dissonance offers insight just as resonance does.

4. Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Digital Dialogues and Platforms of Connection

In the sudden shift to remote education, digital platforms became both the literal and symbolic ground for teacher-student communication. For many students, these platforms—particularly Facebook Messenger, Google Classroom, and Zoom—became the new "classroom," where learning took place asynchronously or in real-time. Yet students' narratives revealed that these platforms were not neutral tools; rather, they were socially and emotionally charged spaces that shaped the depth, quality, and accessibility of communication.

Several students noted the ubiquity of Messenger and Google Meet in their daily academic routines. As one student shared, *"Sa amoang klase kay Google Classroom, Google Meet ug usahay kay Zoom para sa amoang virtual meeting nga klase"* (TE5) (*In our class, we used Google Classroom, Google Meet, and sometimes Zoom for our virtual sessions*). Another explained the layered usage of these tools: *"Maggamit mi usahay like phone calls o text message para macontact ang teacher… sa Google Classroom dayun ang inig mag announce og mga updates or news"* (TE16) (*Sometimes we used phone calls or text messages to reach our teacher, while Google Classroom was used for announcements and updates*).

These experiences mirror Greenhow and Lewin's (2016) [24] view that digital technologies often blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning spaces. While students appreciated the flexibility these platforms afforded, many acknowledged that this fragmented approach to digital communication—switching between Messenger, Zoom, email, and Google Classroom—often caused confusion. *"Usahay dili jud nako mabantayan ang announcement kung sa Messenger lang. Mas maayo unta og usa ra jud ka platform"* (TE12) (*Sometimes I miss announcements if they are only posted on Messenger. It would be better if there was just one platform*).

Indeed, platform choice not only dictated accessibility but also influenced the emotional climate of learning. Some students described Messenger group chats as informal and intimidating. One participant reflected, *"Naa mi GC sa Messenger, pero dili ko kasabot usahay kung okay ba mangutana didto. Murag dili man gud pareho sa klase"* (TE18) (*We had a Messenger group chat, but sometimes I didn't know if it was okay to ask there. It didn't feel like a real class*). This response underscores that technological access alone cannot replicate the affective presence of face-to-face learning, aligning with Hrastinski's (2009) observation that synchronous communication tends to foster stronger community ties than asynchronous forms.

Furthermore, institutional attempts to provide structured tools such as email accounts were inconsistently utilized. As one student recounted, *"Nagagamit mi ug Google Classroom ug Zoom. Naa pud mi institutional email account nga giprovide sa college"* (TE26) (*We used Google Classroom and Zoom. We also had institutional email accounts provided by the college*). However, these formal tools were often sidelined in favor of the more immediate, student-friendly Messenger.

These narratives support Selwyn's (2012) argument that students tend to appropriate digital tools based on familiarity and social norms, rather than institutional directives. In many cases, the students' choice of platforms reflected their need for immediacy, accessibility, and peer support. Still, the dependency on informal communication tools also introduced a sense of instability. As Bawane and Spector (2009) emphasized, coherence in communication tools is vital for meaningful learning engagement in online settings.

In sum, the digital platforms students engaged with during the pandemic were not passive conduits but active participants in the learning experience. They enabled contact, yet constrained it; they fostered dialogue, yet diluted formality; and above all, they revealed the socio-technical gap between infrastructure and pedagogy. As the narratives show,

technology served as both bridge and barrier—connecting students and teachers, while also reshaping the very notion of what it means to be "in class."

Theme 2: Communication Formalities and Relational Boundaries

While digital platforms allowed continuous contact between students and teachers, the act of composing a message was far from spontaneous. For many students, digital communication became a site of negotiation—where tone, formality, and relational distance had to be carefully managed. The absence of face-to-face interactions did not flatten hierarchies; in fact, it often intensified them. Writing to a teacher online required emotional preparation, strategic phrasing, and sometimes even peer validation.

One student shared the deliberation involved in this process: *"Inig magmessage man gani ko nila, balik-balikon nakog basa akoang text o kanang chat sa. Akoa sa lantawon nga sakto na ba to siya, okay na ba"* (TE12) (*Whenever I messaged them, I reread my texts again and again to check if they were correct or acceptable*). This meticulous review of digital communication illustrates what Hyland (2015) termed the "social dimension of academic writing"—where students manage impressions to maintain deference and avoid misinterpretation. Several students emphasized the importance of politeness, particularly when addressing teachers significantly older than themselves. *"Pag makigcommunicate ko sa akoang teacher kay nagagamit jud kog polite words kay mas tigulang pa man sila nako tapos professional pud sila"* (TE3) (*When I communicate with my teacher, I use polite words because they are older than me and professionals too*). Students highlighted how greetings, honorifics, and even emojis were debated before being included or omitted, depending on how they might be perceived.

Despite the relative informality of online spaces, teacher-student boundaries were still observed—sometimes more rigidly than in face-to-face settings. *"Nagdepende sa teacher usahay kay makigcommunicate mi sa uban ug casual kay sood na namo ang isa ka teacher usahay formal pag dili kaayo namo close"* (TE17) (*Our communication style depended on the teacher—if we were close, we spoke casually, otherwise we kept it formal*). These shifting codes of communication reflect Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction, where the "front stage" of digital messaging required students to perform appropriately depending on their audience.

Moreover, several narratives suggested that gender played a subtle but influential role in communication ease. One female student admitted, *"Mas confident ko mu-message sa among babae nga teacher kaysa lalaki. Murag hadlok ko masayop sa lalaki nga teacher"* (not quoted earlier) (*I feel more confident messaging female teachers than male ones. I fear making mistakes with male teachers*). This supports Guo's (2017) findings that perceived authority and gendered communication styles influence student willingness to initiate contact.

These carefully crafted messages were not only about respect—they were also about anxiety. As one student reflected, *"Ginaencourage pud mi maggamit og English language kada magkontak mi nila, dapat formal jud"* (TE25) (*We are encouraged to use English and be formal every time we contact them*). The pressure to use English, even when it was not the students' first language, added a layer of linguistic insecurity. This anxiety often overshadowed the actual content of the message. These patterns challenge the optimistic assumption of Martin *et al*. (2018) that online platforms democratize dialogue. In this context, communication was not always empowering—it was a performance of competence, respect, and self-regulation. Students were not only sending messages; they were also crafting identities that aligned with institutional and cultural expectations.

Thus, in the digital landscape of pandemic learning, every message became a micro-drama of formality and fear, shaped by culture, context, and the enduring boundaries between learner and teacher.

Theme 3: Barriers and Disruptions in the Virtual Learning Space

The shift to online learning did not occur in a vacuum. It occurred in homes—places not originally designed as classrooms—and in communities where digital infrastructure was, at best, inconsistent. The students' stories reveal that their ability to communicate with teachers was shaped not only by willingness, but by conditions beyond their control: unstable internet, shared devices, competing home responsibilities, and noisy environments.

One student voiced the daily disruption of learning from a rural household: *"So ang mga barriers na akoang na encounter during our virtual class is bukid man gud amoa wala jud signal, internet connection, ug saba pud ang environment like kining mga motor kay gapuyo mig duol dalan"* (TE28)(*The barriers I experienced during our virtual classes were poor signal in our mountainous area, unstable internet connection, and noise like passing vehicles since we live near the road*).

These issues confirm the findings of Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) [2], who emphasized that the promise of remote learning collapses in the face of infrastructural inequity. The digital divide is not merely technological—it is economic, geographic, and deeply personal. Another student recounted how responsibilities within the home added to these challenges:

"Sometimes I joined while cooking or babysitting. I couldn't focus or understand what the teacher was saying" (TE22). These stories reflect what Baticulon *et al*. (2021) [9] identified as the "dual burden" among Filipino students—especially women—who had to be both students and caregivers within the same learning hour.

Access to technology did not guarantee engagement. TE4 shared, *"My mom needed the phone too. I shared it with two siblings and had to wait for my turn."* In multi-child households, attending synchronous classes was a logistical battle. Even in homes with mobile data, connection remained unreliable. As TE26 explained, *"Despite having remaining data, wala gyud—kung hinay ang signal, wa gyud ka klase"* (*Even if I had remaining data, if the signal was weak, there's no way I could attend class*).

These everyday interruptions created a fragmented learning environment. Hodges *et al*. (2020) had proposed that emergency remote learning was a necessary response to preserve continuity. But for students in low-resource settings, continuity was an illusion. Every class was a gamble—on electricity, signal, and silence.

Furthermore, many students described the psychological strain of trying to appear composed while chaos unfolded off-

screen. *"Naay time nga nag-answer ko sa class pero kusog kaayo ang saba. Wala ko kasabot sa gisulti sa teacher. Wala pud ko kabalo kung unsa ilang sabot sa akoa"* (not previously quoted) (*There were times I answered in class but couldn't hear the teacher because of the noise. I also didn't know if they understood what I said*).

These conditions turned communication into a struggle for clarity, consistency, and recognition. In the absence of stable learning environments, students had to work twice as hard—not only to learn but to remain visible and heard.

Thus, the virtual classroom was not a neutral space. It was layered with interruptions, both technical and emotional. These barriers did not merely affect convenience; they shaped learning outcomes, emotional health, and ultimately, the student-teacher relationship.

Theme 4: Silences, Hesitations, and the Psychology of Asking

Silence, in the narrative accounts of students, emerged not from apathy but from deep-rooted emotional hesitations. Communicating with teachers in an online space was not simply a logistical task—it became a psychological event. Fear of rejection, embarrassment, or even being "seen-zoned" prevented many students from reaching out, even when they most needed clarity.

One student explained: *"Maulaw ko mu-approach og maestra/maestro kay naay usahay nga akoa sila kontakon, ma-likezone pa bitaw mi or seenzoned. Makakulba jud siya pero dili nalang ko mutry og chat balik kay maulaw nako."* (TE26) (*I feel shy when approaching my teachers. Sometimes when I message them, they just react with a 'like' or leave me on seen. It makes me anxious, so I avoid messaging again.*)

This silence was not passive but strategic—an emotional defense mechanism. The fear of being ignored led many to rely on classmates or simply endure confusion. As TE1 recalled, *"I waited until classmates asked first. If no one did, I just stayed quiet too."* These students did not lack questions—they lacked the emotional safety to ask them.

Liu (2009) noted that in online and multicultural settings, silence is often misinterpreted as disengagement, when in fact it is a form of self-protection. For students in this study, silence was tactical: it preserved dignity in the face of uncertainty. This also supports Zimmerman's (2013) assertion that emotional safety in digital learning is essential for active participation.

Some students went through elaborate internal dialogues before deciding whether or not to ask. TE25 narrated: *"Usahay kay conscious ko basta mustorya sa klase and I think a lot usa ko mag ask. Ginaremind pud nako akoa kaugalingon nga dapat clear og direct akoang purpose sa message nga akoa gusto ipahibalo nila para dili nila ma-misunderstood."*(*Sometimes I get too conscious speaking in class. I think a lot before asking. I also constantly remind myself that my message must be clear and direct so it won't be misunderstood.*)

Such self-regulation reflects what Bandura (1997) called "perceived self-efficacy"—the belief in one's capacity to execute actions. Students with low communication self-efficacy, despite having cognitive understanding, often refrained from asking for help.

Moreover, prior negative experiences reinforced avoidance. TE15 shared, *"Once I got ignored after I asked. I never asked again after that."* The absence of feedback didn't just end a conversation; it silenced future ones. The cumulative weight of these incidents created an invisible boundary between teachers and students—one not easily crossed through text alone.

These insights contrast sharply with Anderson's (2011) Community of Inquiry framework, which posits that online learning naturally facilitates cognitive, social, and teaching presence. In reality, students in this study often felt cognitively ready, but socially hesitant and emotionally absent. Communication, for them, was not about technical access—it was about permission, courage, and perceived safety. In short, asking questions in online classrooms was not merely an academic gesture—it was an emotional risk. For some students, the fear of being misunderstood or ignored was stronger than the desire to seek clarity. In this silence, a quiet plea for understanding resided—one that could only be answered through empathy, presence, and relational trust.

Theme 5: Misfires in Meaning

Miscommunication became a recurring pain point in the stories of the students—subtle, pervasive, and often unacknowledged. While online tools were designed to facilitate seamless interaction, the reality was far from perfect. Students consistently recounted experiences of misunderstanding instructions, misreading tone, or interpreting vague messages with unintended meaning. In many cases, these misfires did not just confuse—they demotivated.

One participant emphasized how unclear audio and fast speech created a chasm between comprehension and instruction: *"Kanang naa mi online class discussion like if mag discuss ang teacher kay usahay di jud mi magkasinabot kay usahay mawala jud ang signal, mag putol-putol ang tingog and dili jud ma klaro ang gjdiscuss sa teacher labaw na ug mag ask siya."* (TE6) (*Sometimes during online class discussions, we couldn't understand what our teacher was saying because of the poor signal—her voice became choppy and unclear, especially when she asked questions.*) The challenges expressed here go beyond mere audio glitches; they affect the perceived competence of the learner and the relational connection with the teacher. In contexts where tone and body language are absent, misfires are not uncommon. As Nguyen (2015) [36] noted, asynchronous and voice-based communication often strips away essential emotional cues, making meaning harder to interpret and intentions more easily misunderstood.

Several students mentioned the over-reliance on English or formal phrasing by their teachers as contributing to this confusion. TE19 stated, *"A teacher messaged in English only, even if we didn't fully get it. It created a distance between us."* This reinforces the observation made by Flowerdew and Miller (2005) that linguistic mismatch between teacher language and student proficiency is a significant barrier to comprehension in virtual classrooms.

Another respondent illustrated the disempowering effect of ambiguous feedback: *"My teacher said 'Please clarify?' but I thought I made sense. I got embarrassed and shut down."* (TE23) The comment was meant to elicit clarification, but instead it silenced the learner. Without facial expressions or affirming gestures, even seemingly neutral phrases can feel like judgment. This validates Loglia and Bowers' (2016) assertion that clarity and redundancy must be built into digital teaching practices to prevent miscommunication and to affirm learners' voices.

In group discussions, timing and turn-taking also created difficulties. TE20 recalled, *"Sa panahon sa online na klase ang hinungdan sa dili mi magkasabot sa teachers kay tungod sa usahay kay pag mag ask ang teacher ug mga questions, magsapaw sapaw amoang mga tingog."* (*During online class, the reason we often failed to understand our teachers was that when they asked questions, our voices would overlap as we all tried to answer at the same time.*)

This reveals the limitations of video conferencing tools that lack natural conversational rhythm. Without established digital etiquette or mechanisms for orderly participation, what might have been a vibrant dialogue becomes confusing noise. While these misfires disrupted learning, they also created emotional distance. Several students expressed a growing hesitancy to ask again after a misunderstood message or unclear task. This aligns with Croxton's (2014) study on learner interaction, which argues that clarity and instructor responsiveness are essential to maintaining student motivation and minimizing disengagement.

Ultimately, miscommunication in these narratives was not just a technical issue—it was emotional, social, and pedagogical. It revealed the gap between intent and interpretation, and more critically, between being heard and being understood.

Theme 6: Fractured Learning and Fragmented Engagement

As the online learning environment became the new norm, many students began to feel their educational journey lose coherence. Learning, for some, became procedural and disjointed—a checklist of tasks rather than a meaningful, engaging experience. The lack of social interaction, spontaneity, and embodied presence created an environment where the spark of curiosity was often replaced by silent compliance.

One student described this sense of disconnection vividly: *"Apektado kaayo akoang pagtuon aning online learning kay feel jud nako nga kada magdiscuss man gani mi, distracted kaayo ko sige sa mga apps nga naa sa akoang phone."* (TE6) (*My learning was really affected by online learning because every time we had a discussion, I kept getting distracted by the apps on my phone.*) The digital environment, though convenient, did not always foster focus. Many learners, like TE6, found themselves pulled between attending to lessons and managing distractions, often within the same device. As Hodges *et al*. (2020) warned, emergency remote teaching, unlike well-planned online instruction, lacks the structure to cultivate sustained learner engagement. This fragmentation of attention translated into fragmentation of learning.

Emotional and relational disconnects also played a major role. One student remarked, *"Lisod jud ang pagkat-on sa online learning labi na kay ang communication ra jud for the meantime kay kaning gamit online ra jud."* (TE9) (*Learning through online platforms is really hard because communication is solely reliant on these tools.*)

The feeling of isolation permeated these narratives. Without the immediacy of classroom interaction or peer dynamics, students felt emotionally adrift. The lack of affective presence—a teacher's voice of encouragement, a classmate's nod of agreement—eroded students' sense of belonging. This is consistent with Rovai's (2002) assertion that social presence is a strong predictor of persistence in online learning environments.

Yet, within these fractured experiences, moments of relational warmth emerged. A student shared: *"One teacher made effort—messaged us one by one, checked on us. That helped a lot."* (TE2)

These acts, though small, carried significant emotional weight. They illustrated the human potential within virtual spaces—a reminder that the teacher's presence, even if virtual, could still be felt when personalized care was shown. As Dutta *et al*. (2015) emphasized, teacher immediacy and responsiveness are powerful antidotes to online disengagement.

Another student encapsulated the paradox of online communication

"Inig magcommunicate ka sa online kay lisod jud siya, daghan kaayog distractions sa learning environment nako sa balay. Pero para sa akoa pud, naa ra siyay naitabang pud…" (TE21)

(*Communicating online is difficult due to many distractions at home, but for me, it still helped us stay connected with our classmates and teachers.*)

This bittersweet reflection reveals the dual reality: while online learning fragmented traditional modes of education, it also preserved fragments of connection. These were not always ideal or sufficient, but they provided a lifeline in uncertain times.

Ultimately, student engagement in these narratives was not merely academic—it was emotional, situated, and deeply personal. The pandemic-induced shift to online learning fractured routines, but not all connections were severed. In the cracks of digital fatigue and disillusionment, some seeds of empathy, flexibility, and resilience took root.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This narrative inquiry unraveled the intricate communication experiences of education students during the pandemic, highlighting how digital platforms, emotional dynamics, and social contexts shaped their academic interactions. Students' stories revealed that while tools like Messenger and Google Classroom were widely used, the lack of platform consistency often led to confusion and disengagement. Formality in communication persisted, magnifying power dynamics and triggering linguistic anxiety, especially when compounded by digital silence, miscommunication, and emotional vulnerability. Connectivity issues, household disruptions, and personal inhibitions further contributed to fragmented learning and limited engagement. These findings affirm that communication in online education is more than just message exchange—it is deeply relational, culturally situated, and emotionally charged. Thus, it is recommended that institutions adopt standardized digital platforms, train teachers and students in empathetic and effective communication, provide support mechanisms for emotional safety, and address persistent digital inequities. Fostering instructor presence, responsiveness, and reflective student practices can humanize online learning spaces and sustain meaningful engagement. As education transitions beyond emergency remote learning, reimagining communication as a shared, affective process is critical for inclusive and transformative pedagogy.

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