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**(Missed) connections: how the textual communication environment caused by Covid-19 impacted English Composition instructors' ability to communicate and connect with colleagues and students**

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(Missed) Connections: How the Textual Communication Environment Caused by Covid-19  
Impacted English Composition Instructors' Ability to Communicate and Connect with Colleagues  
and Students

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Presented To  
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of English in Rhetoric and Technical Communications

By  
Alyssa G. Cummings  
Spring 2021

THESIS OF ALYSSA CUMMINGS APPROVED BY

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## **Introduction**

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (Dickens, 1859). It was times patented by shortages of toilet paper and abundances of political unrest. Times marked by social distancing, and the oft-spoken statement, “You’re on mute.” The spread of the global pandemic in the spring of 2020 marked drastic changes in society. Holding no regard for geographical borders, the notorious Covid-19 left in its wake a path of unknowns and reimagined spatial borders and social boundaries. The pandemic impacted the way educational systems function, the way classrooms are structured, and the way educators communicate.

While the pandemic did not introduce us to the ubiquitous age of technology, it has served to push us deeper into its bottomless bosom. Entering a season of purely remote learning and remote instruction has caused our composition workplaces to become places of digital ambiguity. While remote learning and instruction is not a new phenomenon, the capacity to which we are now forced to operate within it is quite experimental. The National Center for Education statistics showed that in 2018 14% of undergraduate students were engaged in a fully remote learning environment and 34% had participated in an online course (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). While statistics pertaining to the 2020 year are not yet concrete, Education Data, a platform run by a dedicated team of researchers, estimates that 97% of undergraduate students were enrolled in exclusively online instruction. In addition, prior to the pandemic, 43% of students enrolled in traditional face-to-face classroom courses had not taken an online class before, 21% had only taken one online class prior to the pandemic, and only 35% had taken two or more online classes (Education Data, 2020). Given the mandatory remote learning environment, it is important to explore how this transition to a more textual communication environment impacted educators’ professional and personal communication. Research has previously explored, and continues to explore, the impact the remote learning

environment has on students' perceptions of communication but has not addressed the impact on educator communication habits (Armstrong 2011; Jefferey & Bauer, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Rose & Adams, 2014; Tanis, 2020;).

The sudden transition to an exclusively online learning environment left students feeling unprepared and anxious. Murphy et al. (2020) found

the swift and unanticipated transition to virtual classes made over 50% of students feel uncertain and anxious... with 81% of college students indicating that they experienced greater stress due to disruptions from the pandemic, while almost 44% worried about their ability to either enroll or stay in college. (p. 7)

In addition to anxieties over the pandemic and virtual coursework, students were experiencing feelings of discouragement from missed academic milestones and achievements, as well as displacement due to leaving the campus setting (Efuribe et al., 2020). Several surveys identified that undergraduate students were experiencing trouble focusing on their studies, anxiety and stress, and greater levels of depression (Active Minds, 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2020; John, 2020). Previous studies have identified fear of miscommunication as a key factor in contributing to student anxiety and concerns over instruction in an online environment and have highlighted communication within the online learning environment as imperative for student success (Armstrong, 2011; Jefferey & Bauer, 2020; Rose & Adams, 2014; Tanis, 2020). Armstrong (2011) discusses students' experiences and perceptions in the online learning environment, and highlights:

When faculty were perceived missing from the educational conversation the academic quality was perceived diminished compared with face-to-face instruction. When the academic quality was perceived low, participants exhibited a strategic or surface approach to the learning. (p. 225)

Furthermore, a recent study established that students identify promptness of faculty response as key when evaluating communication within the online learning environment (Tanis, 2020, p. 16). Jeffery and Bauer (2020) revealed that peer communication is an intricate part of student understanding and motivation to engage with coursework, an element that was lost in the online learning environment.

Given students' communication concerns and challenges within the online learning environment, it is important to address and examine how educators faced the communication challenges presented by a mandatory, solely remote learning environment. This paper will explore the findings of my 13-question survey to answer the following question: how did English composition instructors respond in a more textual communication environment given the online communication environment caused by Covid-19 during spring quarter 2020? My study was administered to Eastern Washington University's English composition department via SurveyMonkey. The purpose of my study was to explore how the transition to a more textual communication environment, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020, impacted English composition instructors' perception of communication within their personal and professional relationships.

## **Literature Review**

While the idea of teaching (working) remotely is not a novel idea to higher education composition instructors, the option had always been just that: optional. With the sudden rise of the Covid-19 virus, teaching in a remote environment was no longer optional but mandatory. In a matter of weeks, entire universities made the hasty and drastic transition to a solely remote learning environment. Prior research has been conducted concerning textual communication and the primarily textual communication medium of the online learning environment and its

impact on educators and students. However, there is limited research concerning how a more textual communication environment impacts composition instructors.

### *Textual Communication*

The fields of technical communication and composition have previously studied the impact of textual communication mediums, primarily email, and their impact on communication in the workplace and classroom environment (Berry, 2006; Ishii, 2005; Lam, 2013; Lee & Lee, 2009; Pendharker & Young, 2004; Volkema et al., 2011). Studies have highlighted numerous advantages to using email compared to face-to-face communication. One advantage is the flexibility over time and distance that email provides due to its asynchronous nature (Berry, 2006). It also provides the ability for many topics to be addressed and discussed by various individuals at various times of personal convenience (Berry, 2006; Ishii, 2005). As Lam (2013) noted, email requires a short-term commitment to the communication act making it an ideal form of communication for individuals who have busy schedules. The asynchronous nature of email is less personal making it a user's more comfortable means of communication when delivering bad news (i.e., informing group members that a member did not finish their portion of the project) or critiques (Lam, 2013). Moreover, email offers easy storage and references of messages increasing efficiency (Berry, 2006; Munter et al., 2003; Volkema et al., 2011). In addition, Berry's (2019) study revealed that online instructors who reached out early through email were able to better establish a sense of classroom community and connection with their students.

Many of the advantages of communicating in a more textual communication environment can also be disadvantages. While communication via email offers flexibility over time and distance due to its asynchronous nature (Berry, 2006; Ishii, 2005; Sapp & Simon, 2005), it can

also increase risk of miscommunication (Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2009; Munter et al., 2003). In addition, while textual communication allows individuals the luxury of choosing what time to respond, communicating through email is more time intensive (Berry, 2006; Ishii, 2005). While many topics can be addressed by various individuals at various times when communicating through textual mediums (email, discussion boards, online announcements), it can be difficult to gauge nonverbal cues and to receive instant feedback on ideas and projects (Berry, 2006; Byron, 2008; Daantje et al., 2008; Dockter, 2016; Munter et al., 2003; Volkema et al., 2011). Volkema, et al. (2011) discuss the textual communication environment in terms of business negotiations and notes that while offering efficiency, the hasty convenience of email can reduce quality of information (i.e., shorter messages) and limit opportunities to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. The challenges communicating through these textual communication mediums presents transfer into the primarily textual communication environment of remote learning.

### *Textual Communication in the English Composition Classroom*

Textual communication within the English composition classroom presents various challenges such as difficulties connecting with students, difficulties encouraging student and instructor interaction, and miscommunications (Dockter, 2016; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012; Salisbury, 2018; Sapp & Simon, 2005). Communication within the online learning environment is primarily written (textual) communication (Dockter, 2016; Salisbury, 2018). As a teacher of the English language, one might assume a composition instructor is positioned to address textual communication challenges effortlessly. However, communication within the online learning environment poses various challenges. Instructors struggle to connect with students due to an increased transactional distance and students' individualistic interpretations

of written communication (Dockter, 2016). Additionally, Sapp and Simon (2005) note that, “few [teachers] have the sophisticated communication skills necessary to connect with students interpersonally, to build trust and rapport in unfamiliar virtual environments” (p. 478). This is in part due to an increasingly litigious climate where emotional factors, such as caring between educator and student, can be challenging to express effectively and appropriately online, making instructors more cautious and even cryptic when communicating in a textual communication environment.

As textual communication is nonverbal, feedback given through the online learning environment lacks important vocal cues; this can cause instructor feedback to seem robotic, callous, and generic further diminishing personal connections (Berry, 2006; Sapp & Simon, 2005). While Berry (2019) established that the use of email can help encourage personal connections between instructors and students, a personal connection and sense of community was best established when email was utilized in conjunction with other features of the virtual classroom (i.e., chat and web-conferencing software). Moreover, online instructors often use textual communication tools such as discussion boards, emails, and announcements to complete functional and organizational tasks, such as reminding students of due dates, instead of encouraging interaction (Salisbury, 2018). Composition instructors struggle to connect with students when relying solely on textual communication mediums to communicate within the online learning environment (Dockter, 2016; Sapp & Simon, 2005).

Composition instructors also face communication challenges in the online learning environment through the challenges this medium presents when expressing emotion (Byron, 2008; Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012; Sapp & Simon, 2005). Laflen and Fiorenza (2012) identified the need for composition instructors to provide students with strategies to express and communicate in a textual communication environment, noting that “Even a cursory examination

of online discourse reveals that writers tend to display emotion very readily online” (p. 296). Compensating for the lack of non-verbal cues with key linguistic features (i.e., all caps, repetition of punctuation) lends itself to miscommunication which creates misunderstandings. Blackburne and Nardone (2018) note the importance of students exercising rhetorical awareness when composing emails and the important role tone (friendly, sarcastic, condescending, courteous, disappointed) plays in predicting perceptions of emails.

### *Preparing Instructors for Teaching in the Online Environment*

Understanding composition instructor’s perception of communication within the textual communication environment provides a better lens in which to view educator training and preparation for the online learning environment. Research has already identified the importance of adequate training for instructors when making the transition to teaching an online course (Toquero, 2020; Sheffield et al., 2015; Sword, 2012; Osika et al., 2009; Fein & Logan, 2003). It has also been recognized that instruction and communication in the online learning environment is more time consuming than instruction and communication in a traditional face-to-face learning environment (Haug & Hsiao, 2012; Spector, 2005; Sheridan, 2006; Van de Vord & Pogue, 2012). In addition, scholars have noted the importance of adequate instructor preparation, including physical, technical, and mental preparation when entering an online learning environment (Daumiller et al., 2021; DiBiase, 2000; Osika et al., 2009; Sheffield et al., 2015; Sheridan, 2006; Sword, 2012; Tanis, 2020).

Sheffield et al. (2015) notes the importance of instructor’s mental preparation when entering the online teaching environment: pre-conceived, negative beliefs concerning the online learning environment creates feelings of apprehension and disinterest in teaching online. Osika et al. (2009) also identified that while university instructors believe online courses offer flexibility,

they also felt that online courses did not offer the same quality of learning as face-to-face courses. Tanis (2020) highlights the importance of preparing your course to thrive in the online environment by having “clearly explained course objectives, and requirements listed in the syllabus, on the course calendar and in the class,” (p. 16) and active learning techniques (i.e., not repeating silent PowerPoints and discussion boards). Sword (2012) highlights the importance of ensuring instructors have adequate technology skills and providing support and training such as, orientation programs, mentors, continuous professional development for online teaching, and meetings to address time commitment and workload concerns. In agreement with Sword (2012), Sheridan (2006) advocates for adequate preparation time, educator training, and support in designing online courses.

Sapp and Simon (2005) advise instructors to write personal comments and facilitate conversations with students in the online learning environment. In addition, Berry (2019) establishes the importance of instructors building a strong sense of community within the online learning environment. Dockter (2016) and Berry (2019) assert that an online instructor must employ a multitude of communication mediums and not just rely on textual communication to successfully establish a sense of community and sense of identity. Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of instructor preparation for communicating within the online classroom.

### *Evolving Literature Concerning Covid-19's Impact on Educators*

Research has been conducted concerning textual communication mediums and the impact a more textual communication environment caused by online learning has on instructors and students. However, it is also important to view the evolving literature concerning Covid-19's impact on educators as the pandemic has caused the online learning environment to become

mandatory and provided limited time for instructor training and support. University instructors joined students in feelings of anxiety and uncertainty concerning the mandatory online learning environment (Penado et al., 2021, p. 9). One study highlights key stressors experienced by educators during this time and advocates that learning how to cope with stress is a fundamental professional skill which is currently lacking in education programs (Macintyre, 2020, p. 12). Educators are experiencing an exponential workload increase (Flack et al., 2020) and an increase in stress levels and mental health struggles (Daumiller et al., 2021; O'Grady, 2021).

We would assume, due to the sudden and unexpected transition to an entirely remote learning environment, that instructors were required to transition their composition courses to an online format which, for many, may have required a complete restructuring and revamping of their course materials. Results from DiBiase's (2000) year-long-study indicates that "the amount of effort required to teach a distance course may be inversely proportional to the effort invested in instructional design and development" (p. 19). In addition, a study conducted by Sword (2012), which explored nurse educators' transition to online teaching, noted that participants described preparation time as essential to successfully teach online (p. 269). Gillam and Wooden (2013) highlight the importance of effective online composition course design, course design that embodies collaborative experiences, to create a successful learning environment. In addition, it is vital for the online educator to build a classroom environment that is user-centered and encourages a strong social presence (Greer & Harris, 2018; Watts, 2017). Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2021) show that the pandemic has taught us that technical communication instructors should format courses by first considering outcomes, interactions, relationships, and projects instead of if the course will be on-campus or remote: "Such an approach allows teachers to respond productively in rapidly changing circumstances" (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2021, p. 154). Structuring courses through outcomes, interactions, relationships, and project-

based approaches enables the course to become more adaptable to multiple learning environments. By creating flexible pedagogies, teachers can re-scaffold their instruction to accommodate the specificities of changing media and modes.

The Covid-19 pandemic and mandatory transition to an online learning environment is unprecedented, leaving a large gap within the literature concerning educators' perceptions of textual communication within a mandatory remote learning environment. My research explored how the remote learning environment influenced English composition instructors' communication patterns in a variety of ways: such as, the time it took to communicate, the ability for educators to maintain professional and personal relationships, and the blurring of workspace and personal space. As students' and educators' experienced anxiety concerning communication in the mandatory online classroom, it is advantageous to better understand instructors' communication experiences within the textual communication environment.

## **Methodology**

The methodology section will provide a complete and detailed overview of how my study was conducted. I will discuss the choices made in structuring the survey in order to achieve the research goals and meet the research objectives. I will also include information regarding the process of selecting participants, the format of the survey questions, and the method used for collecting the data.

### *Research Objectives and Goals*

The objective of my survey was to gather data to assist in answering the following research question: How did English composition instructors respond in a more textual communication environment given the online rhetorical situation of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020? The survey

featured questions which provided a deeper understanding of how communication patterns were impacted, influenced, and adapted during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020. The goal was to identify changes in English composition instructors' communication habits due to a mandatory transition to a more textual communication environment.

A survey was chosen because it enabled me to collect the data remotely. In addition, the term "survey" encompasses a range of research goals, sampling and recruitment strategies, data collection instruments, and methods of administration (Ponto, 2015). A survey is also recognized as an appropriate tool to capture data on attitudes and perceptions of behaviors and is often used when exploring human behavior (Singleton & Straits, 2009). As my research is intended to explore human behavior and perceptions of a textual communication environment given the remote learning caused by Covid-19, a survey was an effective choice through which to gather data. Furthermore, a survey enabled me to gather a large amount of data in a relatively short period of time, allowing me to gather data from participants while the experience was still clear and present in participants' minds. The survey was approved for administration by Eastern Washington University's IRB board (IRB number HS-5949).

### *Participants*

Participants for this survey were current English composition instructors, including faculty, quarterly, lecturers, and graduate student assistants (GSAs), who taught the first year English composition sequence (English 101 and English 201). This sequence is a university requirement for all degrees. All participants taught at a regional comprehensive university in the Pacific Northwest. All participants had to be 18-years old or older (legal age of consent) and be

an English composition instructor who had experienced working in an online learning environment during the spring of 2020.

### *Recruitment*

I recruited participants through email by sending a message to the university's English composition program regarding the nature of my research (see Appendix A for recruitment email). The email also provided a link to my survey (see Appendix B for full survey). No participants were turned away based on education level, age, teaching experience, technological skills/experiences, or income (see Appendix C for consent form). The survey was administered remotely via SurveyMonkey. Responses were anonymous, as SurveyMonkey collected the response data, and no identifying information, such as personal or contact information, was collected. The survey was open for 5 months and participants responses were recorded and collected over this 5-month period.

### *Survey Questions*

The survey consisted of 13-questions (see Appendix B for full survey). Questions 1-4 established the participant's demographic information. This included, age, length of time teaching English composition, length of time teaching English composition online, and education level. Questions 5-9 and 11-12 were formatted using a 5-point Likert scale. Question 10 utilized a 3-point Likert scale, and question 13 was an open-ended question.

The responses collected from the Likert-type survey questions (questions 5-12) were grouped into three categories and intended to explore the following concepts:

- Category One: Educators' Perceptions of the Use of Communication Mediums During a Remote Learning Environment.

- Category Two: Physical and Mental Separation of Professional Space/Time and Personal Space/Time.
- Category Three: Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of a More Textual Communication Environment on Relationships.

The Likert scale questions helped gauge faculty's perceptions concerning the impact more textual communication mediums had on communication given the required and sudden remote online learning environment. It also enabled me to analyze English composition instructors' perceptions of how these changing mediums influenced communication and consequently impacted professional and personal relationships, as well as how these changing mediums influenced the physical and mental ability to separate workspace and personal space.

Questions 5-6 and question 10 of the survey focused on Category One: Educators' Perceptions of the Use of Various Communication Mediums in a Remote Learning Environment. Questions 5-6 concerned instructors' use of communication mediums (Zoom and email) and question 10 evaluated the amount of time instructors believed it took to communicate through these communication mediums compared to face-to-face communication. These questions were provided to establish if use of these communication mediums had increased during the spring of 2020 and if this transition to a more textual communication environment had impacted the length of time it took to communicate.

Questions 7-9 focused on Category Two: Physical and Mental Separation of Professional Space/Time and Personal Space/Time. Question 7 examined the separation of work time and personal time. Question 8 explored how well instructors were able to mentally separate workspace from personal space, and question 9 provided data concerning the participants' ability to physically separate their workspace from their personal space. These questions enabled me to see how textual communication impacted instructors' ability to distance

themselves mentally and physically from the work environment given the increase of communication through textual communication mediums.

Questions 11 and 12 focused on Category Three: Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of a More Textual Communication Environment on Relationships. These questions were included as they provided insight into how participants felt personal and professional communication was impacted by a more textual communication environment.

A Likert scale was chosen as it presents a solution to the challenges of applying numerical data to qualitative items such as feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Joshi, 2015, p. 397). Developed by Rensis Likert (1931), a Likert scale was designed to help assess attitudes and can be a very reliable tool for measuring self-efficacy (Maurer, 1998). Likert scales are widely adopted and accepted as a strong method to quantify participant's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. It is considered a fundamental research tool in educational and social sciences research (Bishop & Herron, 2015, Joshi, 2015, p. 396, Croasmun, 2011, p. 19, Harpe, 2015, Norman, 2010). In addition, a Likert scale is very effective at translating qualitative data into quantitative data by assigning each response a point value (Gay et al, 2009).

When using a Likert scale one can gauge participant's feelings on a certain statement because "Likert Scales provide a range of responses to a statement or series of statements" (Croasmun, & Ostrom, 2011, p. 19). The survey included 7 quantitative data questions in the form of a 5-point Likert scale and 1 quantitative data question in the form of a 3-point Likert scale. The Likert-scale responses ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), Frequently (1) to Never (5), and Excellent (1) to Very Poor (5). The survey was designed with an odd-numbered Likert scale to provide "an option for indecision or neutrality. By giving responders a neutral response option, they are not required to decide on way or the other on an issue" (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011, p. 19). This helps eliminate the idea of response bias: "the

tendency to favor one response over others. Respondents do not feel forced to have an opinion if they do not have one” (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011, p. 20).

While there have been decades of debate concerning if Likert scales can be analyzed using an interval or ordinal scale, for the purposes of this study an ordinal measurement scale was chosen (Boone, 2012; Carifio; 2008, p. 1151; Harpe, 2015; Sullivan, 2013, p. 541; Townsend, 1984). Similar studies which explored teaching English from home during quarantine, individual needs while teleworking, work-to-family conflict, and students’ perception of Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic also utilized a Likert Scale (Ahmad et al, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020; Masuda et al., 2012; Serhan & Mittal, 2020; Saienko & Chugai, 2020).

Question 13 was an open-ended question and the responses to question 13 have been classified as qualitative data; participants were able to type their response in a provided textbox. The question gave no requirement for a minimum or maximum word count. Instead of using preset categories the qualitative data from this item was analyzed using an emergent categories approach. Categories were defined after evaluating the data and as a result of the data; responses were read and themes, topics, and issues that recurred in the data became the categories. This is referred to as pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 151) and enables ideas and concepts to emerge which may not have previously been considered.

Through establishing a strong foundation from which to conduct my survey, I was able to gather insightful data results to address the research question: how did English composition instructors respond in a more textual communication environment given the online rhetorical situation of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020?

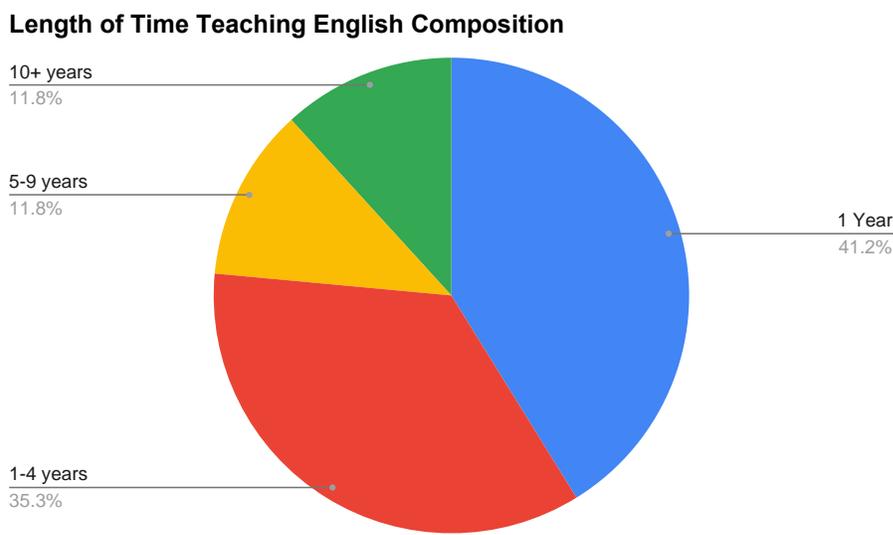
## **Results**

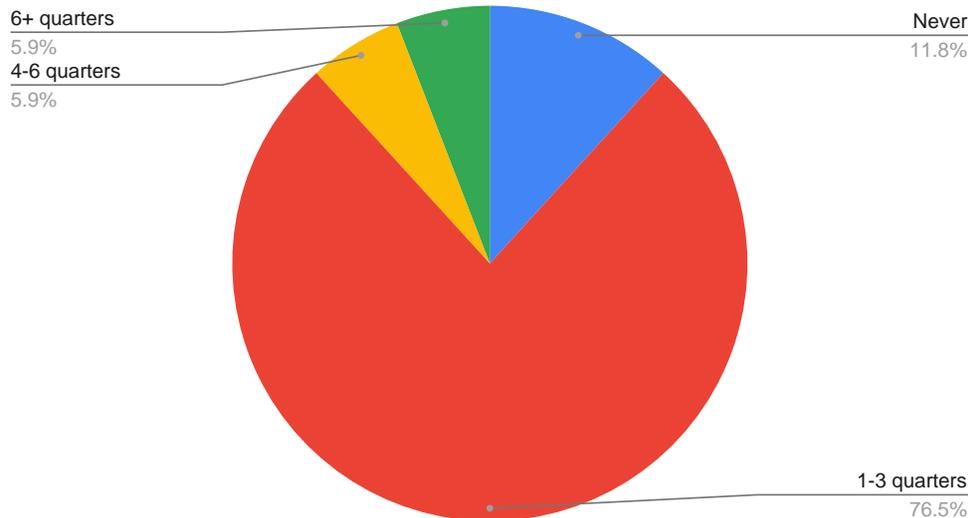
I will begin by reviewing the demographic information which was collected in the first 4 questions of the survey. There was a total of 17 English composition instructors who participated in the survey. The majority of participants were 18-25 (9 participants), 5 participants were 26-35, 2 participants were 36-55, and 1 participant was 50+.

All participants were English composition instructors and fell into the following categories for length of teaching time: 7 participants have been teaching English composition for 1 year or less, 6 participants have been teaching English composition for 1-4 years, 2 participants have been teaching English composition for 5-9 years, and 2 participants have been teaching English composition for 10+ years (Figure 1). While all participants were English composition instructors, the length of time teaching English composition in an online environment varied. 2 participants had never taught English composition online, 13 participants had taught online for 1-3 quarters, 1 participant for 4-6 quarters, and 1 participant for 6+ quarters (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

*Length of Time Teaching English Composition*



**Figure 2***Length of Time Teaching English Online***Length of Time Teaching English Composition Online**

Participants' education levels varied from current master's degree students (GSAs) to master's degree graduates to PhD graduates. Of the 17 participants, one participant did not answer this question; therefore, data was analyzed for the remaining 16 participants. 10 participants were graduate students working towards a master's degree (GSAs), 3 participants held a master's degree, and 3 participants held a Ph.D.

The questions collected from the Likert-type survey (questions 5-12) covered three main categories:

- Category One: Educators' Perceptions of the Use of Communication Mediums During a Remote Learning Environment.
- Category Two: Physical and Mental Separation of Professional Space/Time and Personal Space/Time.

- Category Three: Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of a More Textual Communication Environment on Relationships.

*Category One: Educators' Perceptions of the Use of Various Communication Mediums in a Remote Learning Environment.*

Questions 5-6 and question 10 of the survey focused on Category One: Educators' Perceptions of the Use of Various Communication Mediums in a Remote Learning Environment. Questions 5-6 concerned instructors' use of communication mediums (Zoom and email) and question 10 evaluated the amount of time instructors believed it took to communicate through these communication mediums compared to face-to-face communication. In spring 2020, 66.7% (10 participants) utilized Zoom more frequently for communication during teleworking compared to a face-to-face learning environment during spring quarter 2020. While the majority of participants noted the more frequent use of Zoom, 12.5% (2 participants) only sometimes utilized Zoom, and 25% (4 participants) rarely utilized Zoom. During spring 2020, 93.3% (15 participants) used email for communication frequently in a more remote working/learning environment compared to a face-to-face environment. Only 6.3% of participants (1 participant) believed they sometimes used email for communication in the remote learning environment (see Figure 3).

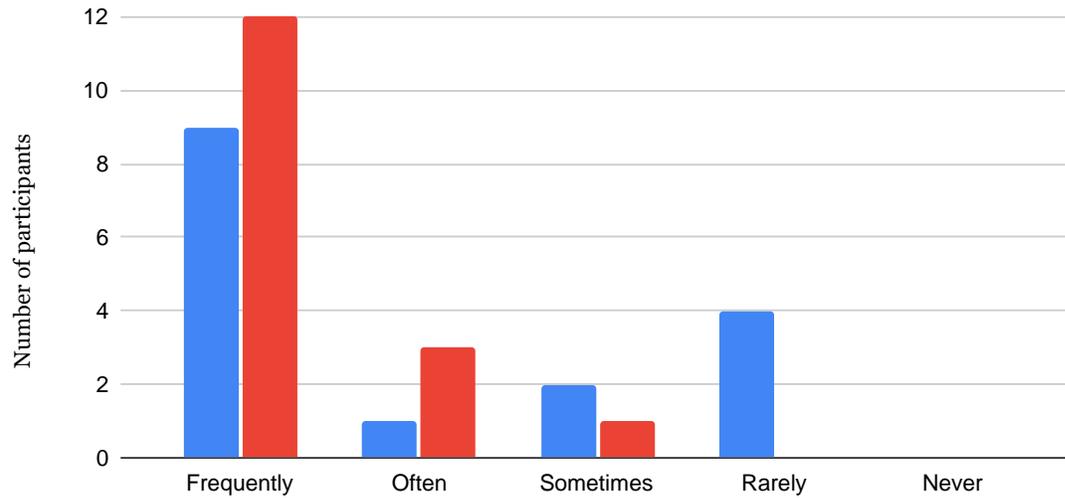
Question 10 examined perceptions of length of communication time in a more textual communication environment. During spring 2020, 75% of participants (13 participants) believed it took more time to communicate in this textual environment compared to a traditional physical work environment. However, 18.75% (3 participants) believed it took the same amount of time and 6.25% (1 participant) believed it took less time (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

*Various Communication Mediums used in Remote Learning*

**Remote Communication Mediums**

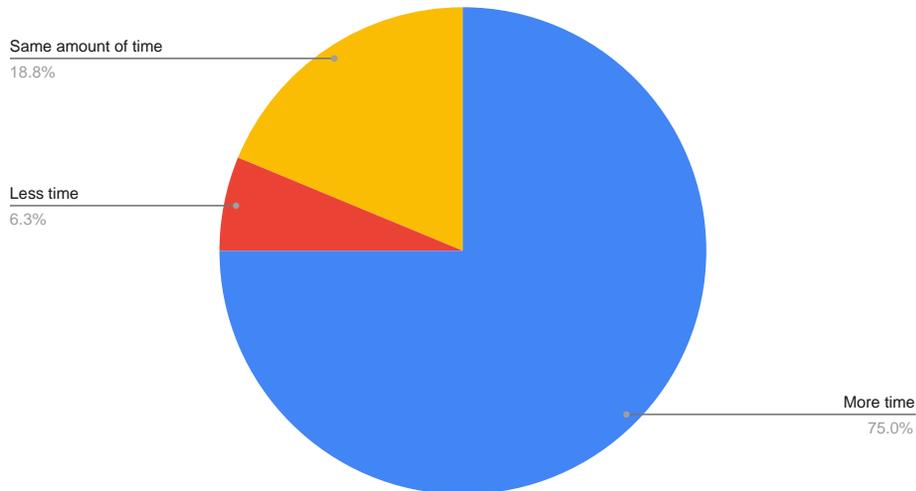
- Question 5: How often did you utilize Zoom for communication during spring quarter 2020?
- Question 6: How often did you utilize email for communication during Spring quarter 2020?



**Figure 4**

*Time it took to communicate*

**Time to Communicate Remotely vs Face-to-Face**



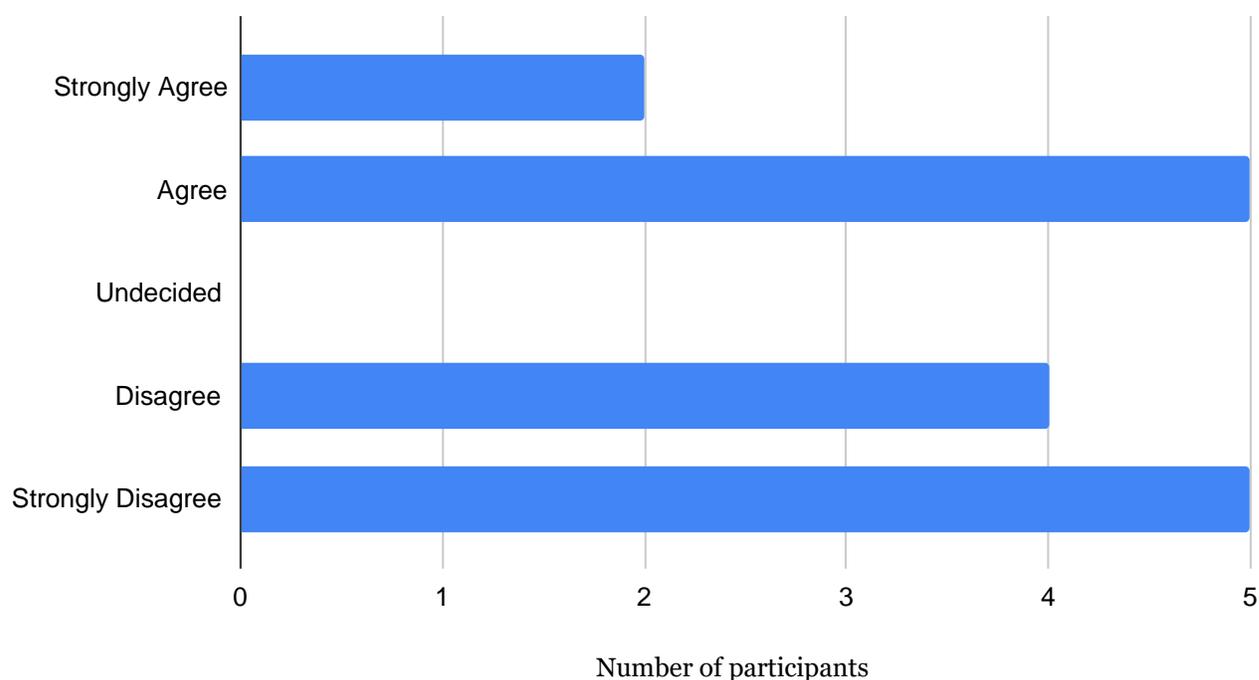
*Category Two: Physical and Mental Separation of Professional Space/Time and Personal Space/Time*

Questions 7-9 of the survey focused on Category Two. Question 7 examined the separation of work time and personal time. 16 out of 17 participants answered question 7. The results were divided with 56% of participants (9 participants) indicating they were *unable* to separate work time and personal time and 44% (7 participants) of participants indicated they were *able to* successfully create boundaries between work and personal time (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Separation of Work Time and Personal Time*

### Able to Successfully Separate Work Time and Personal Time



Question 8 explored how well instructors were able to mentally separate workspace from personal space. While responses were slightly varied, the majority of participants agreed that the mental separation of workspace and personal space was challenging during this time. While 23.53% (4 participants) said they were frequently able to separate these spaces, the majority of participants, 76.48% (13 participants), concluded they were sometimes, rarely, or never able to

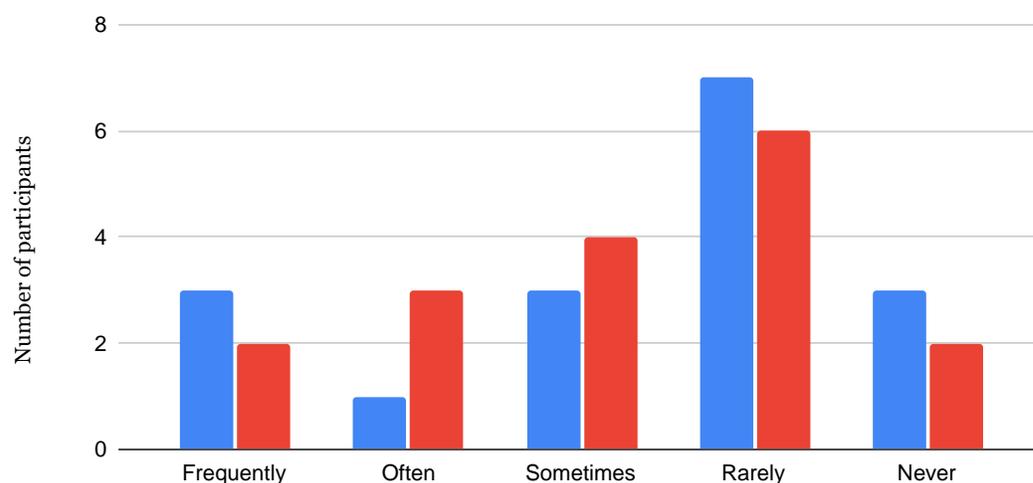
mentally separate these spaces (see Figure 4). Question 9 provided data concerning the participants' ability to physically separate their workspace from their personal space. While the responses varied slightly, the majority of participants were unable to physically separate these spaces. Few participants, 29.42% (5 participants), indicated that they were frequently able to physically separate their workspace and personal space, and 70.58% (12 participants), indicated that they were only sometimes, rarely, or never able to physically separate these spaces (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Mental and Physical Separation of Workspace and Personal Space*

### Mental and Physical Separation of Workspace and Personal Space

- Question 8: I was able to mentally separate my workspace from my personal space.
- Question 9: I was able to physically separate my workspace from my personal space.



### *Category Three: Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of a More Textual Communication Environment on Relationships*

Survey questions 11-12 provided data for Category Three. For question 11: I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my professional relationships while working remotely, 52.94% of participants (9 participants), felt they were able to maintain excellent professional

communication during this time. On the other hand, 47.06% (8 participants) felt they were unable to maintain strong communication in their professional relationships during this time (see Figure 7).

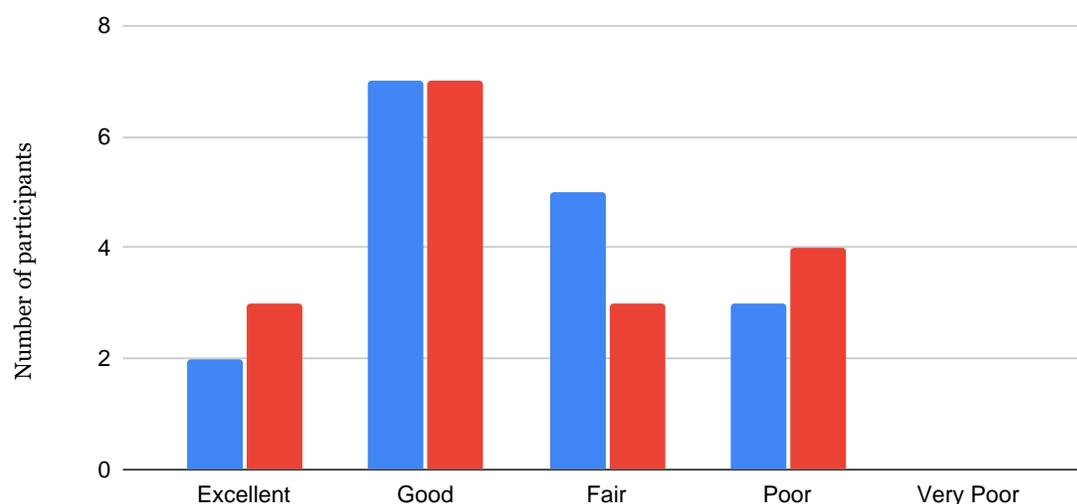
For question 12: I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my personal relationships while working remotely, participants had mixed feelings concerning communication in their personal relationships while working remotely. During the remote learning environment of spring 2020, 58.83% (10 participants) felt they were able to maintain excellent communication within their personal relationships, while the remaining 41.14% (7 participants) felt they were *unable* to maintain strong communication during this time (see Figure 7).

### Figure 7

*Communication in Professional and Personal Relationships*

#### Communication in Professional and Personal Relationships

- Question 11: I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my professional relationships
- Question 12: I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my personal relationships



*Written Response: Question 13: How did working remotely affect the way you communicate?*

Question 13 was an open-ended question and asked participants to type a brief response. A textbox was provided for participants to type a response, and no minimum or maximum word count was indicated. 14 of the 17 participants responded to question 13, and three emergent themes surfaced from the data.

**Theme 1: Communication needed to (and did) become more formal and intentional.**

42.86% (6 participants) of participants noted communication had transitioned to become more formal in nature and observed the need for communication to become more intentional. One participant stated it might have been because “all communication must be formal in terms of the social standards previously set for email communication.” Drawing definitions from the contextual data, participants seemed to define “intentional” as communication with a purpose; communication could no longer naturally occur as unplanned office interactions, organic classroom discussions with students, or conversations after class. When an educator needed to communicate, deliberate effort had to be exerted in order to execute this communication. This ties into participants’ definition of “formal.” The fact that participants needed to intentionally communicate created a more formal sense of communication; communication took place through more formal mediums, i.e., discussion boards and email instead of organic conversations occurring within the classroom and office spaces.

**Theme 2: It was challenging to build personal connections with colleagues and students.**

57% (8 participants) of participants noted the challenges a remote learning environment created in regard to candid communication with colleagues. One participant expressed, “There was less joking and more discussing of work and serious matters. It seems that working remotely has taken a lot of the “fun” out of work, leaving just work...and a lot of it.” Small interpersonal

interactions and the office dynamic were missed. Another participant noted, “Small as they may seem, these brief, interpersonal encounters are actually very important to networking and just feeling connected to colleagues.”

In addition, participants felt that it was difficult to build meaningful connections with students through a more textual communication environment. One participant expressed the challenges of building a classroom community through a remote learning platform, stating, “Rather than building a classroom community and fostering relationships, it feels as though I am speaking to strangers even after spending about two months together.”

**Theme 3: The boundaries between workspace and personal space became blurred.** 21% (3 participants) of participants mentioned challenges distinguishing workspace and personal space. Within this remote work environment participants felt pressure to be available outside of standard office hours. There was a general feeling among these participants that, “students seem to be having a difficult time respecting boundaries of personal time and they seem to expect immediate responses regardless on the time they've sent their email and regardless of whether or not they are communicating on a weekday or weekend.”

The data provided from the survey results contribute imperative insight into furthering the English composition community’s understanding and insights into English composition instructors’ perceptions of communication given a more textual communication environment. The analysis and discussion will serve to discuss, explore, and interpret the result findings in relation to the current and past literature concerning remote instruction and communication.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

*Category One: Educators Perceptions of the use of Communication Mediums in a Remote Learning Environment*

Category One was intended to help determine if the use of textual communication mediums had increased and, if so, how the increased use of these mediums impacted the time it took to communicate. The questions in Category One included Questions 5-6: how the use of Zoom and email were impacted by a remote learning environment, and Question 10: how the amount of time it took to communicate was impacted by the remote learning environment. The data indicated that use of the communication platforms Zoom, and email increased during spring 2020 due to all courses being conducted online in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Question 5, which inquired how often participants utilized Zoom for communication in spring 2020 compared to face-to-face instruction, revealed that the use of Zoom as a communication medium increased, with 66.7% of participants indicating they utilized Zoom frequently during this time. Question 6, which asked how often participants utilized email for communication during teleworking compared to a face-to-face environment, revealed that the use of email increased during spring 2020 with 93.3% of participants indicating they used email frequently during this time.

The data from Questions 5 and 6 of the survey indicated that while the use of video conferencing communication via Zoom had increased during spring 2020, email was the more dominant communication tool. The results from this data indicate that email was the preferred form of communication for the survey's participants. A study conducted by Spector (2005) which focused on communication methods in online courses, revealed that email was less efficient than threaded discussions or chat sessions for instructors. The findings from Spector's (2005) study may provide further insight into the survey data, as the data from question 5 indicates that although the use of Zoom increased, the use of email increased substantially more. Additionally, this increase in email usage may have impacted the length of time it took participants to communicate.

Question 10, which inquired if communication had required more, less, or the same amount of time to complete tasks remotely during Covid-19 in spring 2020 revealed that 75% of participants believed that communicating in a more textual communication environment took more time to execute than face-to-face, verbal communication. These results are consistent with researchers Huang and Hsiao's (2012) study which revealed that communication in an asynchronous teaching environment is more time intensive. The results from Question 10 also provide further insight into Question 6 in relation to Spector's 2005 study. Spector's (2005) study revealed that email (the dominant form of textual communication for participants within my study) is the slower form of communication when communicating within an online course.

*Category Two: Physical and Mental Separation of Professional Space/Time and Personal Space/Time*

Category Two was intended to determine how well instructors were able to separate their professional and personal time and space mentally and physically during the textual communication environment caused by the pandemic. Questions 7-9 of the survey focused on Category Two. The data collected from Question 7: I was able to effectively separate 'work' time and 'personal' time during the Covid-19 crisis in Spring 2020, revealed that participants were divided on their ability to separate their work time from their personal time (44% were successfully able to create boundaries between the two and the remaining 56% were unable to create boundaries between work time and personal time). However, the data from Question 8: I was able to mentally separate my workspace from my personal space, revealed that while roughly half of participants were able to separate work time and personal time, the majority of participants (76.48%) struggled to mentally separate these spaces.

Participants may have struggled with the mental separation of these spaces in part to having constant access to work related material. Previous studies have explored the role email plays in employee stress and information overload. Hair et al. (2007) examined academics and creative workers' use of email. The study found that 34% of participants felt stressed and overwhelmed by the large quantity of emails. In addition, 50% of participants checked their email every hour while 35% checked their email every 15 minutes. The ability to constantly and continuously check work-related emails even after traditional work hours have ended could have challenged participants to mentally separate their workspace from their personal space.

In Question 6 of my survey, 93.3% of participants noted an increase in the amount of email communication during spring 2020. As shown by Hair et al.'s (2007), constantly, communicating through this medium may impact one's ability to effectively mentally separate workspace and personal space. As Nam (2013) notes, "Work and life tend to increasingly intertwine rather than exist as separate spheres in this age of technology-driven connectedness" (p. 1017). Teleworking blurs the lines of workspace and personal space potentially making it increasingly difficult to mentally separate these spaces.

In addition, a study exploring separation of workspace and personal space during the pandemic discovered that "once the workday was complete employees strategically disconnected and/or stored tools connected to work" to better create boundaries between work and home (Allen et al., 2020, p. 79). In agreement with Allen et al. (2020), Cho (2020) noted, the pandemic may require that employees implement new boundary management strategies to help differentiate between the blurred physical role boundaries. Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) also highlight how important physical and mental disengagement from work is in order for employees to recover. As previously mentioned, the data from question 6 revealed that the communication medium of email drastically increased during this time, resulting in an increase in textual

communication. In addition, Hair et al. (2007) noted that when communicating for work via email, it is easier to check email continuously, making it challenging to mentally disconnect from work. The data from Question 6, in correlation with the data from Question 8, shows there may be a connection between the increase of communication in a more textual communication environment (i.e., email) and participants' difficulty mentally separating professional and personal space.

A little over half of the participants (58.82% participants) were novice educators (GSAs). The lack of experience could also play a part in the difficulty participants experienced mentally separating work and personal spaces. Sheffield et al. (2015) conducted a survey of education graduate students and their study found that "Overall, participants reported that they would prefer to teach face-to-face (50%, n = 10) or in a blended environment (45%, n = 9), while none would choose a fully online environment" (p. 9). Their study also revealed that "Lack of training opportunities and experience with learning and teaching online, as well as beliefs about the ineffectiveness of online learning in comparison with face-to-face learning, play a role in creating feelings of apprehension about teaching online and in fostering a preference for teaching and learning in the classroom" (Sheffield et al, 2015, p. 10). Higher levels of apprehension and lack of training in an online learning environment could have contributed to participants' struggles to mentally disengage from work.

The data from Question 9 of my survey, "I was able to physically separate my workspace from my personal space," indicated that the majority of instructors (70.58%) were only sometimes, rarely, or never able to physically separate their workspace and their personal space during the Covid-19 crisis in spring of 2020. This is important to note as previous research has explored the importance of separating workspace and home space when working remotely (Allen et al., 2020; Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Shockley & Clark, 2020). When evaluating

boundary management and work-nonwork balance while working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, one study found that being unable to physically separate workspace and home space may contribute to the difficulty of mentally separating these spaces (Allen, et al., 2020).

In addition, Crosbie and Moor's (2004) study found that "having a dedicated workspace was emphasized as a necessity by many of the professional homeworkers" (p. 228). A participant from Crosbie and Moor's (2004) study stated, "'When the room is full of cartoons and work things it is not my home it is my factory, but my family have to live in my factory' (Male electrical assembly worker: Interview 6)" (p. 228). As Allen et al. (2020) and Crosbie and Moor's (2004) studies revealed, physical separation of space aids in the mental separation of space. As previously mentioned, the data from Question 8 of our survey revealed that participants experienced challenges mentally separating workspace from personal space which could be in part due to the majority of participants (70.58%) being unable to physically separate these spaces.

### *Category Three: Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of a More Textual Communication Environment on Relationships*

Questions 11 and 12 provided insight into Category Three. Responses for Question 11, "I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my professional relationships while working remotely" and Question 12, "I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my personal relationships while working remotely," were divided. Roughly half of participants (52.94%) believed they were able to maintain excellent to good professional relationships during the remote learning environment caused by the spring 2020 pandemic and 58.83% believed they were able to maintain good to excellent personal relationships. However, 47.06% of participants

felt they were only able to maintain fair to poor professional relationships and 41.14% felt they were only able to maintain fair to poor personal relationships during this time.

While the survey was anonymous, I speculate if the responses were varied due to the experience (or inexperience) teaching. As Question 3 of the survey showed, the majority of participants were inexperienced teaching English composition in the online learning environment (88.2%). In addition, Question 4 revealed that a little over half of participants (58.82%) were novice, graduate assistant instructors. Discomfort of the unknown, which inexperienced instructors may feel when teaching in an online format, could contribute to the challenge of balancing personal and professional relationships in this remote environment (Kebritchi et al., 2017, p. 18). When working remotely it becomes easier for the line separating work and home life to blur. Because of this “quality (and quantity) time with family and friends may suffer, [in turn] social support systems may weaken” (Matheny et al., 2000, p. 2). Roughly half of the participants in the study may have struggled to maintain the balance between personal relationships and work due to half of the participants lacking teaching experience.

The data collected from Question 11: “I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my professional relationships while working remotely,” is in agreeance with Collins et al. (2016) who discovered that teleworking could cause social disconnect among professional relationships simply due to lack of office interactions. As Question 11 of the survey indicated, 47.06% of participants struggled to achieve good to excellent communication in their professional relationships. This could be in part due to the lack of office interactions.

*Question 13: How did working remotely affect the way you communicate?*

Question 13 provided a space for English composition instructors to state, in their own words, how they perceived working remotely impacted their communication. Three prominent themes emerged from the data.

**Theme 1: Communication needed to (and did) become more formal and intentional.**

42.86% (6 participants) of participants noted communication had transitioned to become more formal in nature and identified a need for communication to become more intentional. As one participant noted in their response to Question 13, “I feel that it [working remotely] made my talks with people, both personal and professional, a lot more formal.” Another participant observed that, “Now, it feels as though all communication must be formal in terms of the social standards previously set for email communication.” This is reflected in previous studies who have also found that email is often seen as a more formal form of communication compared to verbal communication (Gómez & Dailey, 2017).

In addition to email being a more formal mode of communication, participants expressed that it also created the need for communication to become more intentional, as indicated in a participant’s response, “My communication was far more intentional with students, colleagues, family, and friends.” This parallels Gómez and Dailey’s (2017) observations that “formal communication is goal oriented. Unlike informal communication, which can be social and relationship maintaining, formal communication is purposive and goal oriented” (p. 4). The data from Theme 1, email is a more formal form of communication, provides insight into Theme 2: challenges building personal connections with colleagues and students. As Gómez and Dailey (2017) highlight, formal communication is more focused on completing tasks instead of building personal and professional connections.

One participant noted in their response to Question 13 that there was a “Greater window for miscommunication.” This statement is consistent with Huang and Hsiao’s (2012) study which

identified that “miscommunication was more likely to occur online, especially in asynchronous text-based environments” (p. 27). The identification of miscommunication indicates that communication should increase in intentionally.

**Theme 2: It was challenging to build personal connections with colleagues and students.**

57% (8 participants) of participants noted the challenges a remote learning environment created in communicating candidly with colleagues and students. This indicates that there may be more challenges to build and maintain professional connections in a more textual communication environment. This is congruent with Collins et al. (2016), “due to teleworking, this social disconnect among teleworkers, colleagues, supervisors and managers may lead to their diminishing social relationships” (p. 68). The results are consistent with Bennett and Lockyer’s (2004) conclusion that “Online teachers need to cooperate with others in their institution to a much greater extent to obtain the support they need” (p. 242). As one survey participant noted in their response to question 13, “I felt very disconnected from my colleagues and students because I didn’t have regular time to meet with them all.” Yet another survey participant mentioned:

What we lost with the onset of Covid were the little interpersonal interactions that happen around the office. Zoom, email, and the other helpful teleworking tools just do not have space for these kinds of interactions. Small as they may seem, these brief, interpersonal encounters are actually very important to networking and just feeling connected to colleagues.

In addition, participants noted the challenges in building a connection to students in this more textual communication environment. Kebritchi et al. (2017) found similar results: “Some faculty find the online environment cold and distant for students and have not yet made the connections between the content and how best to deliver their lessons online... This discomfort

is the fear of the unknown, or it may be related to the inability to connect with students within the online environment” (p. 18). Moreover, Rose and Adams (2014) identified that many online educators struggle with “failure of care; the teacher may be ‘bothered’ by her inability to get to know the student ‘as a real person,’ beyond the boundaries of the online course” (p. 12-13). Mirroring the above studies’ results, the survey participants recognized similar feelings. In one response to Question 13, the participant noted that “Rather than building a classroom community and fostering relationships, it feels as though I am speaking to strangers even after spending about two months together.”

These feelings of disconnect may be in part due to difficulties communicating in the remote learning environment and feelings of formality within a textual communication environment. Question 11 of my survey identified that 47.06% of participants were unable to maintain good to excellent communication in professional relationships during this time which may have contributed to challenges building connections with colleagues and students.

Theme 2, which emerged from Question 13, identified that half of participants (42.86%) viewed the textual communication environment as more formal in nature. The formality of email communication does not lend itself to building professional and personal relationships (Gómez & Dailey, 2017). The lack of ability for an instructor to build personal connections between colleagues and students can be detrimental to educator and student success. As Docket (2016) noted, it is vital to provide varied forms of interactions through various mediums, not just written communication to successfully build an online classroom community.

**Theme 3: The boundaries between workspace and personal space became blurred.** 21% of participants (3 participants) mentioned challenges separating workspace and personal space. While this theme is more subtle it is an important trend to acknowledge. The skewing of lines between personal space and workspace are linked to high percentages of burnout (Macintyre,

Gregersen & Mercer, 2020; Shlenskaya et al., 2020). This feeling of burnout expressed by participants seems to counter McCann and Holt's (2009) research which "revealed that there were appreciable differences in syndromes for burnout when comparing online and traditional teaching methods. In fact, it appears as though the online instructor is less stressed than his/her counterpart" (p. 108). The challenges of separating workspace and personal space could be in part due to the sudden, mandatory transition required of novice educators from a face-to-face classroom and communication environment to the mandatory online communication.

As mentioned previously, Question 3 revealed that 58.82% of participants were GSAs, novice educators. In addition, Question 2 revealed that while 58.9% of participants had taught English composition for 1 year or longer, only 11.8% had taught English composition online for 1 year or longer. Sword, (2012) revealed that instructors who previously taught face-to-face were challenged and overwhelmed by the constant individual email communication required to maintain the online learning environment. Tower's research (2006) revealed similar results, and noted that while working remotely provided flexibility, it also increased expectations. It was expected that staff would almost always be available to do work, thus making it easier for lines between work and family time to blur, creating an increase in workload. In addition, Sword (2006) discovered that:

As long as the employee feels they are on duty, temporal and spatial boundaries are fluid, as the non-work location and non-traditional work hours form the temporal and spatial environment inside which work is performed. People can feel they are on duty as soon as they wake up; they check their e-mail immediately, just as they had done before they went to bed. (p. 615)

Rose and Adams (2014) observed that "Unlike their 'offline' colleagues, online teachers are finding themselves increasingly on call and available to be interrupted via email, texts, and 'pop-

ups” (p. 5). As one of my survey participants stated, “I find myself constantly checking emails or messages on Canvas to respond immediately for ‘effective’ online teaching. As much as I want to be accessible to students, I find it difficult to separate work and home.” This feeling of needing to be continually available as expressed by my survey participant is congruent with a 2020 study which found that during Covid lockdowns “Employees also adjusted their work schedules, extending the range of time they worked, as indicated by the first and last email or meeting of a day, and sending more emails outside of working hours” (DeFilippis et al., 2020, p. 7).

In addition, a study conducted in April 2020 concerning language teachers’ coping strategies during Covid-19’s mandatory online environment, found that blurred lines between home and work and irregular hours were key factors contributing to instructor’s stress (Macintyre et al., 2020, p. 7). Finally, a study conducted in 2020 examining the rates of university instructor burnout highlighted instructors’ feelings of overworking at the computer and inability to separate work from their personal life (Shlenskaya et al., p. 98-99). The responses from Question 13: Theme 3 correlate to Questions 8 and 9 of my survey. The majority of participants (76.48% and 70.58% respectively) had difficulty physically and mentally separating workspace from personal space. Contributing to participants’ feelings of needing to be continually available, these feelings are closely correlated to educator burnout (Hogan & McKnight, 2007; Shlenskaya et al., 2020).

### *Discussion Summary*

The analysis and discussion revealed several key points. Category one revealed that instructors’ use of email dramatically increased and the amount of time it took to communicate in a more textual communication environment also increased. Category two showed that

participants struggled to physically separate their workspace from their personal space, which in turn may have impacted participants ability to mentally separate these spaces. Category three revealed that participants' responses were divided concerning their ability to maintain strong communication within professional and personal relationships during this time. The discussion of category three indicates these results could be in part due to approximately half of the participants being novice educators.

The analysis of Question 13 revealed three key themes. Within this more textual communication environment participants found that communication needed to become more intentional and formal. In addition, participants agreed that it was more challenging to build personal connections with colleagues and students within this more textual communication environment. Finally, the boundaries between workspace and personal space became blurred causing participants to feel the need to constantly be accessible to students and colleagues.

I join the voices of other educators in advocating for the importance of adequate instruction preparation and training to enable teachers to not only operate but thrive within the remote learning environment (Daumiller et al., 2021; Good & Shumack, 2013; Macintyre et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Tanis, 2020). My survey revealed several key areas where instructor training is needed: providing educators with the tools to build a healthy mental and physical separation of work and personal space in remote learning environments, effective tools to build an optimized online course which fosters collaboration and communication and reduces communication time, and as Macintyre et al., (2020) states, "tools to better learn how to cope with stress as a fundamental professional skill, a skill which is currently lacking in education programs" (p. 12).

Developing instructor training in these areas will help prevent burnout in this ambiguous and quickly changing instructional environment. Survey data gathered across Australia and New

Zealand revealed that “Across both countries, 70% of teachers said planning time had increased either ‘slightly’ or ‘significantly.’ Written responses included references to an ‘exponential’ workload increase, with one teacher writing: ‘We are exhausted’” (Flack et al., 2020, p. 4). As my survey showed, the length of time it took to communicate in spring 2020 increased, educators struggled to separate workspace and personal space, and participants felt the need to be continually accessible. It is vital our composition programs show our instructors how to optimize the tools of technology so that the online learning environment can be an opportunity for continual development and growth.

To better educate, inform, and prepare instructors, collaboration is key. Educators who are new to the online learning environment could benefit from the collaborative mentorship of educators who have experience in the online learning environment. As Trammel and Bruce (2008) postulate, “Learning is a social activity, and we are social beings; and everything is connected” (p. 55). As educators, we should take the idea of learning as a social activity to heart. Professional collaboration benefits educators and propels our fields of study forward. In fact, “collaborative teachers report more confidence in their teaching and greater job satisfaction” (European Commission, 2013). Additionally, when collaboration and communication is lacking between instructors, teaching becomes “a solitary activity, all too often leading to unsatisfactory results for both teachers and students” (Nathan, 2008). As Questions 11 and 12 of my survey showed, during spring 2020, the online learning environment resulted in educator disconnect from professional and personal relationships. Creating a strong network of collaboration and community within a remote learning environment could aid in reducing educators’ feelings of disconnect and burnout. Collaboration through mentorship may transform areas of hardship and struggle into windows of opportunity. It is acknowledged that in this online

world educators “have an intimate chance of getting to know [their] students through their ideas and not just who raises their hand or speaks first” (Committee on Best Practices, 2011).

While communicating in this more textual remote learning environment proved to challenge my survey participants, King and Moore (2013) advocate that technology within the college composition classroom aided in creating a collaborative learning environment that was extremely beneficial to instructors. Perhaps facing the online learning environment in collaboration, instead of in solitary isolation, may transform the communication challenges posed in a more textual communication environment.

The pandemic has opened the educational system’s eyes to the many ways they are failing educators. My survey results highlighted several key challenges English composition instructors experienced within this more textual and remote learning environment. Covid-19 should “be considered as a catalyst for university systems to better prepare faculty members not only for online teaching, but also for unexpected challenges in general” (Daumiller et al., 2021, p. 8). Even once the educational systems return to a tentative and new “normal,” support and training must be offered to educators regarding optimizing technology to reduce communication time and instructor burnout in the remote learning environment.

Perhaps, despite its many hardships, Covid-19 has benefitted the educational community through its unforeseen yet enlightening spotlight. It has divulged the underlying flaws in our educational system and effectively removed the image of educators and educational institutions as machines. As Bari (2021) states:

perhaps we need to continue to allow this slack -- this being kind to ourselves -- in workplaces that have been hectic, high pressured, and unhappy not just for the last year but for decades now. The result of all this remote learning [caused by the Covid-19 pandemic] has been a humanization of our work.

## **Conclusion**

My research survey revealed several key outcomes: communication in a more textual communication environment increased the time required to communicate; communication in this more textual communication environment resulted in instructors struggling to connect with their students and colleagues; and communication in a more textual communication environment contributed to instructors' struggle to physically and mentally separate workspace and personal space during. English composition instructors' responses to this unknown and challenging instructional environment reveals key areas where our educational programs are failing to prepare educators. It is vital that education programs are readying educators to become adaptable and resourceful in a variety of learning environments. Tuominen and Leponiemi (2007), founders of HundrED, a global online education platform, stated, "The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has been, and will continue to be, both a massive challenge and a learning experience for the global education community" (p. 7). Through collaboration, improved instructor educational programs and grace for each other in these ambiguous times, we can learn, grow, and collaborate as an education community to better prepare ourselves and future instructors to not only face, but adapt and thrive within the adverse challenges presented by an ever-changing educational environment.

### *Limitations of Study*

The majority of participants in the survey were graduate students (GSAs) and novice educators. While this provided insight into a novice educator's experience, recruiting a more diverse demographic of the university's English composition faculty would have provided further insight into the research question. This could have provided a deeper understanding of the differences that levels of teaching experience, age, education level, and experience teaching in an online

learning environment play in to see how those factors might influence perceptions of communication in a more textual communication environment.

In addition, upon completion of my survey I realized clearer insight could have been provided towards answering my research if I had included survey questions concerning the use of Canvas messages and Canvas discussion boards, as Canvas is the primary platform for online education at this particular university. Inquiring after the use of these mediums would have established a clearer baseline for how the use of textual communication mediums changed. Asking about Canvas message and Canvas discussion board would have provided further insight into perceptions of textual communication environments as Canvas message and discussion boards are textual in nature.

Finally, the survey only collected data from a small percentage of English composition instructors. A larger sample size could have revealed more subtle themes and communication changes.

#### *Areas for Future Research*

For future research I recommend exploring how the instructor's level of experience influences their perceptions of communication in a more textual communication environment. In addition, how does the instructor's perception of online learning influence their perceptions of communication in a more textual communication environment? As researchers, Fein and Logan (2003) state, "it is important to make sure instructors are selected because they want to work in an online arena and have the skills, knowledge, and support they need to do so" (p. 46). Because of the social distancing requirements due to the Covid-19 pandemic, instructors were not given the option of transitioning to an online learning environment, and this may have influenced perceptions of the communication environment. Various studies also show that an

instructor's level of familiarity with technology impacts their perceptions of the online learning environment which, in turn, could also influence perceptions of the textual communication environment (Seaman, 2009; Oskia, 2009; Wingo et al, 2017).

The communication effort required to teach in this online learning environment could have been expounded due to the lack of time to design courses. Communication may have taken more time, in part, because educators were unprepared for this transition. It would be beneficial to complete a longitudinal study which would examine if communication will become less time consuming as instructors continue to teach in the online environment and are able to continually develop and adapt the structure and content of their online courses. In addition, I would recommend the longitudinal study explore rates of instructor burnout in a more textual communication environment in relation to how a well-designed course impacts the length of time required for communication.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear EWU Composition Community,

My name is Alyssa Cummings, and I am a current Eastern Washington University English graduate student. Under the supervision of Dr. Kate Crane, I am conducting research for my master's thesis in Rhetoric and Technical Communications. My thesis will be exploring how English composition instructors responded to a more textual communication environment given the online rhetorical situation of COVID-19 during the Spring of 2020. Specifically, I will be looking at the rhetorical element Kairos, a proper time for action or opportune moment, given the rhetorical situation of COVID-19 in spring of 2020. As English composition instructors I would greatly appreciate you taking the time to complete this brief survey to aid in my research. Your participation would be greatly appreciated! All responses are completely confidential. The survey is 13-questions and depending upon the depth of your responses, participation time varies from 10 to 20 minutes. I greatly appreciate and value your time and would like to thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Alyssa Cummings

## Appendix B: Survey Questions

- 1) What is your age?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-55
  - d. 56+
  
- 2) How long have you been teaching English composition?
  - a. 1 year
  - b. 1-4 years
  - c. 5-9 years
  - d. 10+ years
  
- 3) Have you taught English composition online and if so for how long?
  - a. I have never taught English composition online.
  - b. I have taught English composition online for 1-3 quarters.
  - c. I have taught English composition online for 4-6 quarters.
  - d. I have taught English composition online for 6+ quarters.
  
- 4) Please type your highest level of education and your degree title in the space below.  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 5) How often did you utilize Zoom for communication during teleworking compared to a face to face environment during Spring quarter 2020?
  - a. Frequently

- b. Often
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Rarely
  - e. Never
- 6) How often did you utilize email for communication during teleworking compared to a face to face environment during Spring quarter 2020?
- a. Frequently
  - b. Often
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Rarely
  - e. Never
- 7) I was able to effectively separate “work” time and “personal” time during the COVID-19 crisis in Spring 2020.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Undecided
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
- 8) I was able to mentally separate my workspace from my personal space.
- a. Frequently
  - b. Often
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Rarely
  - e. Never
- 9) I was able to physically separate my workspace from my personal space.
- a. Frequently
  - b. Often
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Rarely
  - e. Never
- 10) Communication required more, less, or the same amount of time to complete tasks remotely during COVID-19 in Spring 2020?
- a. Communication required more time
  - b. Communication required less time
  - c. Communication required the same amount of time
- 11) I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my professional relationships while working remotely.
- a. Excellent
  - b. Good
  - c. Fair
  - d. Poor

e. Very poor

- 12) I was able to maintain \_\_\_\_\_ communication in my personal relationships while working remotely.
- Excellent
  - Good
  - Fair
  - Poor
  - Very poor

- 13) How did working remotely affect the way you communicate? Please type a brief response below.
- \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C: Consent Form**

My name is Alyssa Cummings, and I am a Rhetoric and Technical Communication graduate student. Under the supervision of Dr. Kate Crane, I am conducting a study on textual communication teaching via distance learning in spring 2020. This study is for my graduate thesis at Eastern Washington University. My findings from this research project will be included in my thesis write up. Data will be reported as a group so to keep participant information confidential. I am hoping you will complete my 13-item online survey that will take about 10 minutes to complete; the link to the survey is below.

Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that your responses are confidential as they do not require you to disclose any identifying information. You may skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering, and you may opt out of the survey at any time. The risks of participating are not expected to exceed the risks encountered in normal daily life. You are not likely to receive direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how best to teach composition and how best to communicate in a remote learning environment.

Your consent to participate in this research is implied when you start the survey and answer any or all of the questions. You also affirm that you are 18 years or older if you start this survey.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Alyssa Cummings by email at [acummings@ewu.edu](mailto:acummings@ewu.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study or any complaints you wish to make, please contact Charlene Alspach, Executive Director, Grant & Research Development, 509-359-7971 or [calspach@ewu.edu](mailto:calspach@ewu.edu).

Click the "Next" button (below) to get started with the survey. By clicking the "Next" button you have given your consent to participate. You are also confirming that you are 18 years of age or older. If you'd like to leave the survey at any time, just exit out of the browser.

Thank you for your time and participation!

## VITA

Author: Alyssa G. Cummings

Place of Birth: Chehalis, Washington

Undergraduate Schools Attended: Spokane Community College  
Spokane Falls Community College  
Centralia Community College  
Eastern Washington University

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Arts, 2019, Eastern Washington University

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