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Crisis Communications during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Case Study of Faculty's Pedagogy, Strategy, and Frame of Mind

Sohyoun Shin, K. Damon Aiken, Stephanie A. Hamel

California State University, Chico, CA, USA

Objectives: The purpose of this work is to uncover how university faculty engaged in communications with their students during the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research design is exploratory and seeks to evaluate specific approaches, coping strategies, and frames of mind.

Methods: A qualitative case study method was used. The unique nature and setting of our study during the COVID-19 pandemic required the use of qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one depth interviews (within a California, U.S. business school).

Results: This work encapsulates how the faculty define crisis communications and thus identifies practices in place. It reveals the importance of communication openness, regularity, and frequency. Additionally, various nurturing and action-facilitating coping strategies are uncovered. By categorizing the results according to five major frames of mind, the work provides perspective relative to how faculty mindsets influence their crisis communications. These findings lay the groundwork for future studies of this important topic.

Conclusions: Faculty's communications during a crisis are not only paramount in successfully navigating course objectives, but they are also critically important to students' overarching social and emotional health. The results of this work lead to pragmatic guidelines for faculty as well as specific recommendations for university administrators. Faculty can start with self-reflection and self-education. They should strive to be prepared for the next crisis, understand their optimal strategies, and realize how their frames of mind influence communication practices. University administrators should work to develop and implement training programs, they are recommended to prepare guidelines for various crises, and they need to write and share post-crisis reports.

Key Words: Faculty's Crisis Communication, the COVID-19 Pandemic, Qualitative Case Study, Pedagogy, Frame of Mind

Introduction

The crisis caused by the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) had far-reaching effects on the entire field of higher education. Thousands of campuses worldwide were closed in March 2020, and a significant number of colleges shifted into emergency remote teaching models. The urgent and rapid transition to online instruction modes did not allow for proper planning. Faculty had to deliver lessons, accomplish course learning goals, and help students advance academically; however, they often did

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Corresponding author: Sohyoun Shin
Marketing Department, College of Business, California State University, Chico, CA 95929, USA
Tel: +1-530-898-5895, **E-mail:** sshin3@csuchico.edu

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not have adequate training or guidance in order to support the multitude of student needs. Many faculty had only 1–2 weeks to complete the shift to online learning. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) claim that 6–9 months of preparation time is needed to build a high-quality online course. Most universities were not able to deliver well-planned online courses, nor were they able to effectively communicate with their students. Issues such as insufficient correspondence, poor interactions, or even a complete lack of information between instructors and students can lead to serious disruptions in students' learning and greatly affect students' overall wellbeing. Thus, effective crisis communications become paramount in successfully navigating course objectives and guiding students through these troubled times.

While most extant scholarly research relates to tragedies affecting local communities for a definite time period (such as Hurricane Katrina, see Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007), it is essential to investigate crisis communications during the global pandemic. This work is a qualitative case study conducted during the pandemic within a mid-sized business college in California, USA. We explore how experienced instructors handle the challenges at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic from a crisis communication perspective as well as through an instructional strategy lens. Results lead to directly applicable advice for other university instructors.

This research is guided by the fundamental question, *How do business college faculty engage in communications with their students during a crisis?* This study has four main objectives. First, interviews with instructors explore similarities and differences in their thoughts and approaches to crisis communications. Second, we examine faculty's coping strategies used for students to initially adjust to the sudden changes brought on at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, we investigate faculty's frames of mind and strive to understand how certain mindsets aided in communicating with their students and achieving course learning objectives. Fourth, we offer recommendations to college faculty and administrators based on the findings.

Theoretical Framework

Crisis, Crisis Communications, and Higher Education

Crisis is defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 19). An organizational crisis is defined as "an event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive" (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017, p. 1661). Any organizational crisis can create difficulties in achieving an organization's goals. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, crisis management and disaster plans have flourished among corporations. These plans have focused on organizational leaders' actions and communications in an attempt to minimize harm during a crisis as well as to reestablish order following a crisis (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Bundy et al., 2017; Kahn, Barton, & Fellows, 2013).

Crisis communication is defined as "the strategic use of words and actions to manage information and meaning" (Coombs, 2018, p. 42). Purworini, Kuswarno, Hadisiwi, and Rahmat (2017) characterize crisis communication as a process of sharing information related to crisis condition in order to reduce the negative impact of a crisis. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) emphasize a leadership role in crisis communication; noting "the term 'crisis communication' is associated more with emergency management and the need to inform and alert the public about an event. In this case, crisis communication might refer to the community leaders' efforts to inform the public" (p. 4).

Despite developments in recent literature, crisis communication research has mainly investigated profit-making organizations. Other important areas are left unexplored. Crisis communications in higher education, especially at a functional level between college faculty and students, have been largely neglected. Natural disasters such as wildfires and virus outbreaks have a great impact on communities, including schools and colleges (Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001). Thus, natural disasters are a silent, unexpected and disruptive event to all of the stakeholders in higher education—school administrators, college instructors and students. These disruptive events interfere with pedagogical plans and create challenges in accomplishing educational objectives. More importantly, students' wellbeing can be hindered and may result in a long-term negative impact on their socio-emotional development.

Robert and Lajtha (2002) emphasize that crises are occurring more frequently. In addition, there are global incidences of multiple crises striking concurrently and without identifiable closure. Liu, Blankson, and Brooks (2015) assert that emergency and crisis training in institutions of higher education is largely lacking, while they have ironically found that university members' knowledge of crises and self-efficacy in responding efficiently to crisis events are positively correlated. We contend that the lack of research in crisis communication in higher education is a preventable form of human-induced crisis. In essence, research in this area will not only fill a knowledge gap, but it will facilitate accomplishing educational and social goals during times of crisis. Studies regarding how college faculty engage in crisis

communication with their students will provide instructors with confidence and capability in crisis communications.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Campus Closure

The occurrence of more cases of disease than expected in a given area or among a specific group of people over a particular period of time is labeled an "Epidemic" (Avera Writers, 2020). When an epidemic occurs worldwide and affects a large number of people, it becomes a "Pandemic." The World Health Organization (WHO) considered COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 about three months after the first warning sign was observed by its office in the People's Republic of China (World Health Organization, 2020). Previously, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission categorized instances as cases of "viral pneumonia." When the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the number of confirmed cases surpassed 100,000 globally, and the WHO issued a statement calling for action to stop, control, delay and reduce the impact of the virus.

The rising cases of COVID-19 immediately caused campus closures around the world. Within weeks, 186 countries closed their schools to the general population as part of social distancing measures (Müller & Goldenberg, 2020). In the U.S., Smalley (2020) reported that more than 1,300 colleges and universities in all 50 states cancelled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction. Among the 2,958 institutions surveyed, only 114 planned to deliver in-person classes during the fall semester of 2020, while 44% of institutions developed fully or primarily online instruction and 21% used a hybrid model (College Crisis Initiative, 2020).

California State University, Chico, this qualitative case study's venue, is a mid-sized university that sits in a rural area of northern California. It announced the cancelation of all in-person classes on Friday, March 13, 2020. Faculty were asked to quickly transition to online education or "alternative formats" (Hutchinson, 2020). Detailed guidelines, instructional strategies, and communication approaches were scarcely offered. For example, the university's website encouraged students to "communicate directly with their professors or department chairs if they have specific questions or concerns related to projects, presentations, exams, coursework, etc."; however, faculty received only brief suggestions from the educational leadership of the university that instructors were encouraged to stay flexible, forgiving, and yet resilient.

Sensemaking in a Time of Crisis

Weick (1995) described the battered child syndrome as one of the events in which sensemaking was tested to the extreme. This particular example was used to understand the situation that people encounter an event whose occurrence is so implausible. A pattern of injuries to a child was not well explained or understood by the reasons of the injuries provided by the parents, and this syndrome remained a professional blind spot until the term — battered child syndrome — was finally named after these repeated events, and the public awareness was raised. After this syndrome was labeled and understood, public reactions were prompt. All 50 states established laws requiring suspected cases to be reported. The entire process of this syndrome, from discovery to analysis to solution, was a tragic but appropriate example of sensemaking.

Sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In agreement, Maitlis and Christianson (2014) define sensemaking as "the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (p. 57). Often sensemaking goes beyond interpretation. It includes how people retrospectively make sense of past events and then respond to events in the future.

During the early time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, organizational members including business college faculty members in this particular study, encountered moments of ambiguity. These moments were even dynamically uncertain, as normal interactions and established routines were disrupted and were to be reassessed on an ongoing basis. Christianson and Barton (2021) claim that "the pandemic offers the unique opportunity to study sensemaking within a context that is enormously complex, novel, and rapidly changing" (p. 572). While brief suggestions and advice are available from the leadership of the particular case study business school, individual instructors have interacted with their school environments to create meaning and then enable and constrain their subsequent behaviors and actions. Thus, this case study explores their modified and/or newly adopted pedagogies, coping strategies, and frames of mind.

Methods

Participants and Interview Protocols

According to Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir, and Waseem (2019), the qualitative case study method enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of intricate phenomena within some specific context. A case study can be based on a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon (a single-case study) or on several cases (a multi-case study). McCombes (2023) contends that a case study research design usually involves qualitative methods.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research and the as-yet-unstudied topic, one-to-one, semi-structured depth

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interviews were selected as most appropriate. This research design is best suited to understand the emotions, beliefs, actions, and experiences of people, but still provide freedom in answer length and in interviewer follow-up questions. Unlike unstructured interviews which can be skewed toward the interests of the interviewer, during semi-structured interviews respondents answer the predetermined questions and stay focused on the interview topics (Gray, 2019).

Thus, this qualitative case study was conducted at a mid-sized university in northern California, in this case California State University, Chico (student population approximately 14,000, with roughly 1,900 in the College of Business). The work includes the results of in-depth interviews with five college faculty members (ranging in experience from 10 to 30+ years; see Appendix 1) in business-relevant subject fields. At the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, an initial set of three background questions, nineteen main questions, and two closing questions was sent through email with a copy of the informed consent to 32 qualified candidates who were instructors at California State University, Chico. The questions were pilot-tested with two instructors, fine-tuned, and emailed ahead of the actual interviews in an effort to preview the topic areas and give interviewees additional time to contemplate their answers. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, a virtual platform for video and audio conferencing. One of the authors interviewed all five interviewees, and the average interview length was approximately one hour. Verbal consent was received by each of the interviewees and their entire interviews were recorded. The standard set of questions was used for each interview, but the different personal thoughts and experiences of each interviewee were probed through follow-up questions.

By using Zoom's audio transcript generating function, an original transcript for each interview was attained. Editing, correction, and proofreading were done for each interview transcript manually by one of the authors, and the second author reviewed and confirmed the final transcripts. This procedure produced a large amount of data—50 single-spaced pages from the five participants. Notes taken by the interviewer were also reviewed and documented. Brief data coding on important verbal cues of the recorded transcripts and written notes were done as an initial debriefing for this study. Interpretations, assessments and discovery in this initial study depended on this coding book and documented notes of interactions with the five faculty interviewees.

Results

How College Faculty Define "Crises"

All five interviewees had a hard time defining and describing the term "crises." Overall, they were all aware of crises at an individual student-level first, as all have encountered students' personal challenges such as health issues and family emergencies. Furthermore, interviewees illustrated characteristics of crises such as natural disasters including earthquakes, droughts, and wildfires that threaten life, property, and the community. Lastly, all five interviewees mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific example of a crisis.

Three of the five faculty interviewees (FI1, FI2, and FI3) identified a crisis as any situation of students' mental or emotional distress from personal relationships or family matters, and/or physical issues like injuries from an accident. Accordingly, students fall behind the scheduled lessons and assignments. These problems eventually require faculty support and accommodations. Among the three, FI1 mentioned students need makeups for assignments and/or tests for any compelling reason. FI1 seemed to apply the concept of "crises" in an inclusive fashion to any interruptions or disturbances which delay or prohibit students from gaining academic achievement. FI4, who has over 30+ years of teaching experience in higher education, accepted that these challenges on students' sides could be considered as crises by others, but expressed FI4's own opinion that these issues are part of student college life and thus "nothing like a real crisis." Nevertheless, FI4 admitted that the impact of students' hardship can be long-lasting, even resulting in class failure. This suggests that college instructors may understand crises as any circumstance of external/internal forces causing interruption in students' learning and socio-emotional development, therefore requiring special attention and accommodation. This particular finding is important as the current literature in crisis management and/or crisis communication from organizational perspective may not work as a reference for crisis communications for faculty in higher education.

Faculty's Doubts and Fears in Communications

Müller and Goldenberg (2020) posited that teachers are subject to additional pressures in times of crises because of their professional roles in supporting students. Educators are often the first to respond to students' socio-emotional needs in challenging situations and are regularly involved in delivering interventions in these contexts, often without adequate support or training (Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011; Zhang et al., 2016). Teachers' mental health in the context of crises has been less cared for and less investigated.

In this instance, all five interviewees expressed that they felt pressure and concern related to communications during the crisis. Among them, FI1 cautiously presented a fear in crisis communications for and with students. FI1 was worried about

the worst case of the crisis itself, and a possible failure in communications. FI1 displayed a serious doubt that FI1 may not able to handle it properly and timely. FI1 was losing confidence in crisis communications as well as course management. Meanwhile, FI5 expressed hardship and mental pressure. FI5 experienced complaints and dissatisfaction from students, although FI5 gave flexible deadlines in completing assignments. FI5 seemed disappointed that students were demanding and impatient, while FI5 tried valiantly to carry on with teaching responsibilities (noting that all the while, there was little guidance from administration).

There are two areas of concern. First, college instructors seem to encounter secondary traumatic stress (STS, also called compassion fatigue; Figley, 1995). All interviewees showed signs of feeling mentally exhausted, anxious, and isolated. Second, a lack of (or low level of) capability and confidence of college instructors in crisis communications can be problematic. Insufficient correspondence and/or poor interactions between college instructors and their students during this challenging time can lead to a serious disruption in students' learning and greatly effect students' overall wellbeing. All five instructors were found to be aware of these two major issues and were willing to take relevant trainings to improve their crisis communications.

The Regularity of Faculty's Crisis Communications

All five interviewees specified policies in a written form of their course syllabi related to special circumstances when students were not able to attend lessons or turn in scheduled assignments. FI4 and FI5 included "no makeup exams" policies in their syllabi in stronger tones like "without exceptions," while the other three (FI1, FI2, and FI3) specified the procedures for students to request exam makeups (e.g., time, communication methods, and eligible conditions to receive makeups). These three said they made frequent regular online and in-person class announcements related to how they address students' special accommodations. Still, all five instructors understood the importance of crisis communications related to students' personal problems (e.g., students' health issues, personal challenges, and/or family emergencies), while each expressed very different levels of willingness to accommodate.

One of the instructors, FI2, commented that FI2 quickly adjusted the amount and schedules of course assignments in consideration of the impact of COVID-19. FI2 produced and posted an announcement video on the course platform reflecting on information regarding the pandemic and showing FI2's intent to keep up constant communications and student support. FI2 distributed an updated course syllabus within a few days. FI2 still invited dialogues at the personal level for any further adjustments. FI1, FI2, and FI3 expressed their strong desires of crisis communications in a broader area as well as more topic-focused with their students directly, possibly in their classroom or on Zoom, while FI4 and FI5 emphasized the importance of centralized and thus clear and consistent crisis communications by authorities. All interviewees directed their students to refer to university communications and alerts (e.g., official emails, updates published on the school website, official social media postings). All five agreed that regular crisis communications became more important than ever. They all showed disappointment and regret that there rarely was an opportunity to learn about faculty's roles and tasks in crisis communication; however, they explicitly acknowledged efforts of central administration and student advising during the challenging time.

Chick (2013) found that students presented dissatisfaction when faculty did not mention the crisis (the 9/11 attack in this case), but expressed gratitude when faculty acknowledged that something awful had occurred. Perhaps, college instructors are recommended to have a planned conversation to provide basic and essential information related to the crisis itself in the classroom, and assure that there will be continuous efforts to support students' learning.

Faculty's Coping Strategies

There are two overarching categories of coping strategies—action-facilitating supports and nurturing supports (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). Action-facilitating supports are about collecting and providing information and addressing the problem directly; and, thus helping receivers properly perform tasks and favors (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). There are two elements of action-facilitating supports, namely: (1) tangible instrumental, which includes offers of practical assistance to improve people's daily tasks; and (2), informational, which involves the provision of advice or facts. Meanwhile, nurturing supports focus on comforting the person, providing companionship, and helping them build self-esteem (Crowley, High, & Thomas, 2019). As part of nurturing, (1) esteem support involves efforts to bolster a support receiver's self-concept and make them feel valued and competent, while (2) emotional support includes expressions of affection and care as well as efforts to understand what another person is feeling (du Pré, 2016).

All five interviewees used at least one of the coping strategies. For action-facilitating supports, four out of the five provided a revised course plan with a reduced number (or reduced scope) of assignments and rescheduled due dates. All these changes and adjustments were verbally explained, and a written revised course syllabus was provided. Only FI4 did not bring much change in the course plan; however, FI4 still explained how FI4 would continue teaching and how this would relate to students'

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assignments for the rest of the semester. Additionally, FI1 precisely explained why certain assignments were deleted or kept in relation to course learning goals and expected outcomes. FI1 stayed extremely resilient and flexible regarding students' attendance and assignments. Both FI1 and FI3 cordially invited students on Zoom for any questions at any time.

FI3 shared the case that motivated her/him to provide more action-facilitating supports for the students. One student disagreed with a given grade on an assignment and sent a long complaint email. FI3 spent a good amount of time with the student individually on Zoom explaining the rubrics applied and where the student's work fell short in assessments. From this experience, FI3 created and shared a Cloud site online with various samples of assignments and detailed rubrics with the students. Historically, FI3 rarely shared sample works with the students. Yet in this case, by providing more resources and clearly communicating the expectations, FI3 practically supported students' completion of their tasks for the course.

For nurturing supports, all five faculty provided emotional support to their students by expressing their care to the students getting through this challenging time, although to very different degrees. FI1 and F13 got more emotionally involved with their students than others. FI1 loudly expressed FI1's care and love for the students in the classroom and greatly praised their advancements. FI1 promised that everything would be fine and that FI1 would do anything to help them.

Meanwhile FI2 encouraged students to evaluate the difficulties they faced and strategically calculate their time and effort in order to plan their studies and thus succeed at school. FI2 strongly believed in students and was confident that students were capable enough to accomplish more than what they planned, which showed that FI2 was utilizing esteem supports for students. FI1 shared an episode that one of the students sent a rude email complaining that the student was failing due to lack of care from the instructor. FI1 did not take it personally, but saw it as a signal that the student was in trouble. FI1 reached out to the student, and found out the student was panicking, over-anxious, and not eating and thus caused serious concerns from the family. FI1 spent two hours on Zoom and went over everything to ensure the student was doing fine in the class academically. For this student visit, FI1 used all coping strategies—tangible instrumental, informational, emotional and esteem supports—to the fullest extent in order to help the student release anxiety and effectively guide the student (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected significant statements

"A crisis to me is any situation that is urgent and unusual and could interfere students' learning and any condition students and/or faculty need additional supports… I always try to make an open environment that students can share their problems with me and seek supports. However, I also have a concern that deep involvement in students' life may not be my role, and try to define my role in teaching and helping students." (FI1)
"I broadcasted my communication simultaneously in parallel to my students in the classroom and through online channel in my last in-person class meeting at the start of the Pandemic. While the school was not yet sure about campus shutdown, I kept consistent and frequent communications with students about what we were doing to find out what to do and made sure the course learning will be there. I kept them in touch." (FI2)
"Some students are in deep trouble and cannot catch up by themselves. I invite them in my office and personally work on the assignments with the students together, although I say I do not repeat my lecture when a class is missed in my course syllabus. However, I am not sure how to communicate about certain problems, as students sometimes shut down all contact channels and disappear." (FI3)
"I have a very vivid memory on the day of the Camp Fire and happened to have an exam that day. I had a student come to me saying her parents were in the affected area. I told her forget about school. Take care of your parents… When students have problems usually interfering tests, my policy is let's skip this test and put an extra weight on the final exam." (FI4)
"In general, I think it is important for universities to communicate with the students during a crisis because students are sometimes in their own world, not paying attention…. Institutions of higher education are responsible for those students under their care… Students are stressed out about the school, and due to their age group, they might not be always tuned to everything going on in the world…. College is its own ecosystem and the school has an obligation to communicate important things going on, not only in the State, but also nationally or even sometimes internationally…" (FI5)

Frames of Mind Found from the Faculty Interviewees

While commonalities arose between interviewees in terms of their actions and processes surrounding crisis communications, their mindsets appeared to be quite distinct. Funk (2001) suggested that one's mindset can be referred to as one's frame of mind, worldview, philosophy, outlook on life, ideology, or even religion. Frame is used to convey senses of being oriented to or advancing toward some goals as the phrase "frames of mind" suggests (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000). Five frames of mind are discussed below with regards to how interviewees' actions and styles varied.

Sharedness of Mental Model, Teaming, and Crisis Bonding

A mental model is an explanation of someone's thought process about how something works in the real world (Clear, n.d.). As shared among members, the mental model guides the members' perceptions and behaviors. Boos (2007) emphasized the functionality of mental models for coping with the complexity of reality and sharedness as a prerequisite of group performance. In addition, teaming calls for developing both affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) skills (Seppala, 2012). In accordance with these concepts, crisis bonding may have occurred between students and their instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

FI1 in particular showed deep empathy towards students. FI1 shifted roles at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic from course instructor to team collaborator. FI1 positioned her/himself as an internal member of the class, not an external person out of the student group. As FI1 made extra effort to help panicking students, FI1's mindset in crisis communication exhibited the essence of the sharedness of mental model and teaming. This mindset of FI1 in crisis communication overall guided FI1's reference of thoughts and behaviors, and helped FI1 manage and overcome a crisis with students.

Military Strategy and Communication

Echevarria (2017) explained that "military strategy is the practice of reducing an adversary's physical capacity and willingness to fight, and continuing to do so until one's aim is achieved" (p. 1). Thus, the principle task of the military strategist consists in countering the strengths and exploiting the weakness of an opponent in ways that make accomplishing one's purpose ever more likely. When the COVID-19 vaccine was first administered, Governor of New York Andrew M. Cuomo said, "I believe this is the weapon that will end the war" (Guarino, Cha, Wood, & Witte, 2020).

FI2 showed several elements of military strategy and military communications when she/he communicated with students, especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown. FI2 asked for consistent and open information sharing to be knowledgeable about each of the student's situations. FI2 also rapidly adjusted her/his teaching plan and conveyed the purposes of changes instantly. Most importantly, FI2's perspective toward crisis management was planning and actioning at the same time, as the battlefield often requires sudden adjustments. From this perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic was a matter of victory versus defeat.

Resource-Based Perspective

The resource-based view of the firm was first introduced by Barney (1991) and is a managerial framework used to determine how the strategic resources of a firm can exploited to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Zahra (2021) reconfirms the role of a firm's tangible and intangible resources, which are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable, in best positioning a firm to develop capabilities leading to superior performance over time.

The mindset of FI3 is related to resource provision. FI3 created a separate online Cloud site at the start of the crisis. FI3 openly shared enormous resources including final work samples for various assignments, as well as rubrics and guidelines to students. By distributing resources which were valuable and rare, FI3 tried to address the hardship and anxiety of the students. While FI3 seldom shared information and/or data about COVID-19 with students directly, her/his resource approach guided frames of thought and helped students move forward.

Crisis Mindset and Crisis-Resistant Curriculum

Bernstein and Rakowitz (2012) asserted that "a crisis mindset requires being ready for battle 24-7, 365 days a year. It requires the ability to think of the worst-case scenario while simultaneously suggesting numerous solutions" (p. 5).

With over 30 years of teaching in higher education, FI4 seemed to embed her/his own long-learned methods into the course curriculum. FI4's course design sounds to be crisis-resistant, if not crisis-proof. FI4's frame of mind is the essence of the crisis mindset. She/he seemed to maintain a list of possible scenarios which could hinder students' learning. FI4 had contingency plans that were similar to the military mindset, but she/he was not always on alert for simultaneous suggestions. FI4 had several unique practices instead. With the lowest-scores-dropped policy, students could miss online practices and still score the full assigned points. With grade replacement, if students missed one of the midterm exams, then grade from the comprehensive final would replace its grade. FI4 even provided an open-end answer box for each of the multiple-choice questions on the tests, encouraging students to critically think about

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the question and write their own reasons their chosen answer choice should be the correct answer. FI4 awarded partial points for students' plausible elaborations when even the checked choice was incorrect. FI4 tried many different ways and finally created a collection of the approaches. FI4 kept this crisis-resistant curriculum throughout the pandemic, with very minor adjustments.

Rigid Thinking and Stick-to-the-Original-Plan Mindset

According to Leroux (2020), rigid thinkers prefer that things predictably happen the same way, day after day. This is a similar construct to the preference for consistency noted by Cialdini, Trost, and Newsom (1995). There is a large subset of people that have a strongly felt need to not deviate from plans and to maintain consistency in schedules.

FI5 argued that it started to confuse students too much, when almost all other instructors were constantly adjusting their lesson plans and assignments. By sticking to the original plan of a well-set and proven curriculum, FI5 asserted that students could advance their learning with less interruption and confusion. FI5 stated that she/he deeply understood students' mental and physical hardships. Nevertheless, FI5 said that brining significant changes in curriculum and/or arranging alternatives would lower standards and eventually provide less learning. Students would find excuses to avoid lessons and assignments. FI5 sounded quite rigid, as she/he was strict and unwilling to bend the rules. FI5 strongly believed in the long-term benefits of pursuing the original curriculum, as students would focus on learning, overcome obstacles and difficulties, and finally achieve their goals. By getting through the difficult time diligently, students would learn not only subject knowledge but also the value of perseverance and courage.

Discussion

Each of the five major findings of this work contributes to the study of crisis communication and further leads the field towards pragmatic recommendations. First, this study recognizes the importance of crisis communication at a faculty-student level. College instructors view crises as any circumstance of external/internal forces causing interruption in students' learning and socio-emotional development. This expanded notion requires special attention and accommodation. Moreover, this research gap should be addressed with future studies, especially with large-scale quantitative works. Our results suggest that prompt and appropriate adjustments in crisis communications may correlate with more effective learning. Therefore, we recommend that educational leadership give crisis communication priority in strategic planning. University administrators should work to develop and implement training programs, they are recommended to prepare guidelines for various crises, and they need to write and share post-crisis reports.

Second, the current work uncovers the importance of acknowledging and addressing our doubts and fears during crises. All of the interviewees expressed worry and concern related to communications with students during the pandemic. A good number of students reportedly complained of mental pressures, hardships, and dissatisfaction. These pressures can lead to low levels of confidence, diminished capabilities, and STS (or compassion fatigue, Figley, 1995). During any disturbing event, whether it is a personal accident or a global pandemic, both students and faculty can feel intense shock and confusion; and, they might be overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. They may feel physically and emotionally drained, finding it difficult to manage everyday life. Thus, we recognize the crucial need for administrative preparedness as well as the urgency of university-wide counseling and mental health services.

Third, results of this work find that frequency and regularity of communications are of utmost importance. Interviewees reported that increased frequency of communications appeared to be positively correlated with increases in student success. Regular, open communications helped students to overcome academic as well as personal issues. While not all interviewees provided students with special accommodations, they did all appear to note that regularity of crisis communications aided in achieving course learning goals. In this case, we recommend implementing pre-set, scheduled communications with students.

Fourth, this work highlights the fact that various coping strategies are an integral part of effective crisis communications. All interviewees reported using one or more coping strategies. Whether nurturing or action-facilitating coping strategies, these coping strategies become "tools in the toolbox" upon which instructors can draw. Faculty can start with self-reflection and self-education. They should determine which coping strategies best fit with their personalities and work styles. University administration should consider offering seminars or workshops on various coping strategies, as there might be an optimal mix of nurturing with action-facilitating supports.

Fifth, interviewed faculty appeared to maintain and effectively utilize frames of mind. Each interviewee seemed to have their own mindset, influenced by personal worldviews and ideologies, which guided their crisis communications. With limited guidance from school leadership and administration, faculty's frames of mind had a profound impact on individual strategies. We recommend that faculty be trained to understand frames of mind, that they be able to capitalize on their own strengths.

They should strive to be prepared for the next crisis, understand their optimal strategies, and how their frames of mind influence communication practices. Thus, we recommend education leadership provide information and training.

Finally, future research should investigate the theoretical and the practical aspects of crisis communication in higher education. Researchers should further explore the motivations and emotions that emerge during times of crisis. Perhaps the field needs an overarching theory explaining communications in times of fear, doubt, and pressure. Further, researchers may want to investigate the most fitting coping strategies and frames of mind, and spell out which strategies and frames are "best-fitting" in different crisis settings through empirical studies with larger data sets. Practically speaking, future research must strive to understand optimal levels of communication, the precise extent to which faculty should discuss crises in the classroom, and the most advantageous levels of flexibility. We need to discover the best possible protocols for class meetings and curricula. This research agenda would undoubtedly benefit all parties when it comes to the next crisis.

Conclusion

Through a qualitative case study, we investigated business faculty's crisis communications with their students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. We discovered how the faculty defined the meaning of crisis communications and engaged in necessary actions during this difficult time. Each of the faculty developed their own pedagogies to support their students' learning and wellbeing, offered various coping strategies, and formed unique frames of mind, which essentially guided them to academic survival through the pandemic. This study invites further research on crisis communications in higher education, especially at the level of faculty-students, and it also offers guidelines and recommendations for faculty and university administrators.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interviewee profiles

Faculty Interviewee #1 (FI1):
- Tenured full-time faculty with Ph.D. and 14 years of teaching experience in higher education.
- Teaching Management classes. Most students were seniors at the time of interview.

Faculty Interviewee #2 (FI2):
- Tenured full-time faculty with Ph.D. and 10 years of teaching experience in higher education.
- Teaching Management Information System classes. Students were sophomores, juniors and seniors at the time of interview.

Faculty Interviewee #3 (FI3):
- Tenured full-time faculty with Masters in Visual Communications and 13 years of teaching experience in higher education.
- Teaching Communication classes. Most students were juniors and seniors at the time of interview.

Faculty Interviewee #4 (FI4):
- Tenured full-time faculty with Ph.D. and 30+ years of teaching experience in higher education.
- Teaching Accounting classes. Most students were seniors at the time of interview.

Faculty Interviewee #5 (FI5):
- Tenured full-time faculty with Ph.D. and 10 years of teaching experience in higher education.
- Teaching Finance classes. Students were juniors, seniors and graduates at the time of interview.

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