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# The Paradox of Closeness and Distance in a Family Science Interactive Video Conferencing Seminar: Lessons for Teaching in a Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

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**ABSTRACT.** Technological advances have created a myriad of possibilities for university teaching, administration, and research. In particular, the internet makes it possible for teaching and meetings to occur when faculty and students are in different locations, and the use of such technologies has seen an unprecedented upsurge since the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we explore a Family Science graduate seminar taught by an instructor 5000 miles away from the students (n= 7) and a teaching assistant (TA) who were in the same classroom. Using a feminist pedagogical framework, we examined students, the TA, and the instructor's reactions, emotions, and experiences during a 15-week interactive video conferencing (IVC) seminar. Focusing on discussions in the context of IVC, we share benefits and challenges and offer recommendations for using IVC. This paper contributes to the timely dialogue about discussions and emotions in teaching synchronously online and explores the possibilities and limitations of IVC teaching.

Keywords: graduate teaching, pedagogy, virtual teaching, virtual meetings

**The Paradox of Closeness and Distance in a Family Science Interactive Video Conferencing Seminar: Lessons for Teaching in a Time of COVID-19 and Beyond**

Globalization and continued growth and sophistication of access to the internet have introduced a multitude of possibilities in which universities can deliver courses and engage in other academic-relevant tasks when administrators, faculty, and students are away from the physical campus (Hyndman et al., 2016). Although most universities already offered online courses, COVID-19 caused an unprecedented use of online teaching worldwide (Rapanta et al., 2020). Like most fields, before the COVID-19 pandemic, many family science programs in the United States had already implemented teaching, research, and administrative opportunities through virtual space (Law et al., 2018; Piercy & Lee, 2006). For example, Tobias and Huff (2016) documented at least 38 online graduate degree options related to family science options at 25 different universities in the United States.

An important distinction among online courses is whether a course includes synchronous interaction (i.e., real-time) or asynchronous interaction (i.e., *not* real-time; Regan et al., 2012). In the wider literature and within the discipline of family science, before COVID-19, most research had focused on *a*synchronous teaching (e.g., Tobias & Huff, 2016), although there were important exceptions (e.g., Law et al., 2018). With the increased dependability of internet connections and innovative (and low-cost) software, more universities were offering synchronous courses (Szeto, 2014). In response to COVID-19, increasing numbers of faculty were asked to quickly move their teaching online (Rapanta et al., 2020) while maintaining the valuable real-time interactions of the live classroom. One way to promote real-time interaction is through Interactive Videoconferencing (IVC). Using webcams and audio equipment, IVC allows users from two or more sites to see each other, engage in discussions, and view PowerPoints and other materials-in real-time (Law et al., 2018). In addition to teaching, IVC has been widely used for job interviews, training, meetings, workshops, research, and so forth, and the usage increased dramatically after COVID-19. For example, approximately 10 million people participated in meetings on Zoom (popular IVC software) in 2019, and more than 300 million people had participated in ZOOM meetings by April 2020 (Wiederhold, 2020).

There is a growing body of literature examining synchronous online teaching. Within family science, for example, Hyndman et al. (2016) explored family science instructors' use of technology in their teaching (including online courses), focusing on the prevalence and motivation for using technology. Tobias and Huff (2016) examined online family science practicums, identifying the prevalence of such options and how online technology helps facilitate the delivery of course content, faculty/student/peer communication, and remote facilitation and supervision. Law et al. (2018) examined an experiential family life education (FLE) course using IVC, focusing on students' satisfaction with the course, participants satisfaction with the FLE workshop, and both groups' experience using the IVC format. The results indicated that "students felt experiential learning delivered over IVC was an effective forum for preparing to become family life educators…" and that "couples who received the workshop also supported that effective learning had taken place as students were proficient in delivering the workshop" (p.34).

Several synchronous online articles within the wider literature provide guidelines and tips for instructors. Recommendations include providing ground rules, having practice sessions with students, giving students material before an activity, requiring students to write reflections and maintain a "critique log" (Park & Bonk, 2007, p. 315), involving students in every class (De Bourgh, 2003), and having a co-instructor to help discussions (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). Other work underscores the conditions of synchronous online courses. For example, scholars have found that students typically need to experience two synchronous class sessions before feeling comfortable (Chen et al., 2005).

Additionally, technical difficulties can decrease the learning experience (McBrien et al., 2009). To counter feelings of uncertainty and technological glitches, scholars emphasized providing students with structured assignments (McBrien et al., 2009). More recently, Boa (2020), drawing on a traditional case study, argued for five high-impact principles for online education:

> (a) high relevance between online instructional design and student learning, (b) effective delivery on online instructional information, (c) adequate support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students; (d) high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student's learning, and (e) a contingency plan to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms (p. 113).

Although the aforementioned are important strategies, attention to oral/verbal discussions in synchronous online learning remains largely overlooked in the literature.

The existing literature predominantly focuses on students' experiences/impressions of online courses and tends to overlook instructors' and facilitators' (TA's) experiences. Regan et al. (2012) offer an important exception. They examined six faculty members' experiences of virtual teaching, five of whom used synchronous teaching. They found that instructors experienced more negative than positive emotions and dealt with "feeling restricted, stressed, devalued" as well as "validated and rejuvenated" (Regan et al., 2012, p. 211). Szeto's (2014) study also discussed the instructor's experiences in a blended synchronous course (i.e., some students had face-to-face, or F2F, interactions with the instructor, while others participated online). Szeto (2014) found that the instructor had to adjust their teaching pace for clarity, use repeated probing, make more use of facial expressions and other social cues, and ensure that their teaching performance "was as real as possible on the screen" (p. 4252). Online students in Szeto's (2014) study reported experiencing clear explanations and ease of understanding of the topics, while the F2F students indicated feeling bored because the instructor gave more attention to remote students. Instructor attention and responding to students' engagement is important in any course, whether online or F2F.

**The Present Study**

Although nearly all universities use virtual teaching, the authors are unaware of a family science graduate seminar using Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) before the COVID-19 pandemic. The course examined in the present study was an IVC graduate qualitative methods course conducted in the fall semester of 2011 with students and TA in one location and the instructor in another. To address gaps in the literature, we used our seminar as a case study, drew on feminist pedagogy (Allen, 2009), and considered the following questions: a) To what extent is it possible to engage in meaningful discussions using IVC? b) What practices support discussions using IVC? (c) What practices hinder discussions using IVC? The students, TA, and instructor engaged in multiple course reflections throughout the semester. Reflecting on the course as it was occurring is a unique way to understand teaching using IVC. Most literature is based on students' accounts at the *end or after* the course (e.g., Piercy & Lee, 2006) or accounts from instructors *after* the course (e.g., Szeto, 2014). Although based on a particular experience, our reflections have implications well beyond our seminar. Our case study focuses on emotions and the challenges and benefits of a seminar using IVC.

*Feminist Pedagogy*

Central to the IVC seminar in the present case study was the application of feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy encourages a liberatory environment based on the instructors and students as active subjects who engage with each other and the course content while continuously reflecting on their

contributions and their relationship with the content and others in the classroom and beyond (Allen, 2009). In the discipline of family science, it has long been argued that feminist pedagogy is beneficial for F2F teaching (see Allen, 1988; Allen, 2009; Blaisure & Koivener, 2003). Extending this argument, we propose that feminist pedagogy is also highly useful for online teaching and especially for IVC teaching, which allows for extensive interaction. Feminist pedagogy is especially suited for IVC courses because of its unique emphasis on cooperative interaction, reduction of hierarchy, engagement in critical reflexivity (i.e., examining one's professional and personal biases, approaches, and emotions), a focus on process, and atmosphere of respectful exchanges (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). In the case of our seminar, the instructor encouraged frequent and substantive reflections through monitoring sheets and prompts on Blackboard. Both the instructor and the TA for the course kept running notes of their reflections over the course of the semester.

## Method

The course was a three-credit hour doctoral-level qualitative methods course scheduled to meet once a week for two hours and 50 minutes for 15 weeks. Using Microsoft Lync software, doctoral students in the Human Development and Family Science program (n=7) and the TA were in the same classroom viewing the instructor on a 42-inch flat-screen television equipped with a web camera, providing the instructor a view of the students and TA seated at a table. On a few occasions, there were guest speakers - one was face-to-face, and the other used IVC.

Prior to teaching through IVC, the instructor had taught the course six times F2F. The IVC course included a graduate student TA who served as the facilitator. Students were given in-monitoring sheets with questions such as: *how was your experience in class today?* and *do you have any practical tips for the instructor, TA, or other students to help with the format of the course?* These sheets provided space for students to reflect on the class format. The TA and the instructor wrote ongoing reflections about their experiences participating in and leading discussions. When anonymity was needed, the TA collected and summarized feedback.

All assignments and activities assigned in the F2F format were assigned in the IVC course. Due to her previous experience teaching the F2F course, the instructor, the first author of this publication, anticipated having discussions and brief lectures for the entire class (i.e., two hours and 50 minutes). She quickly learned that her ability to focus diminished after two hours in the IVC format. In response, she eliminated breaks and ended the discussion after two hours and 15 minutes. To supplement the additional class time, the instructor posted questions on Blackboard for students to respond to within 24 hours. Another modification was to provide class outlines that identified major points from readings.

The instructor compiled her and the TA's reflections and students' responses from their monitoring sheets and course evaluations. The first author and a scholar not involved in the course analyzed the material by reading and re-reading multiple times, engaging in the constant-comparative method (Glaser, 1965), whereby each substantive idea was noted and compared with all previous ideas until no new ideas appeared in the material. The researchers linked similar ideas and searched for common threads running throughout the reflections (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Through this process, they developed the overarching theme of the paradox of closeness and distance, whereby the instructor, the students, and the TA felt simultaneously close *and* distant.

## Findings

The conditions of the space—both physical and virtual-- influenced all participants. The classroom space, which was smaller than that of a typical seminar classroom, encouraged students'

engagement with one another. Being in the same physical space and sitting around a table, students were obligated to look at and interact with one another. They also could see each other and themselves on the screen. Viewing themselves on the screen coupled with the class format questions created a hyper-awareness of each other and the classroom environment. The closeness/distance paradox was reflected in the instructor's relationships with the students, class discussions, and the instructor and TA's relationship. We share each of these subthemes below. Where possible, we share direct excerpts from reflections.

**Feelings of Closeness and Distance Among the Instructor and Students**

Throughout the seminar, the instructor and the students simultaneously felt distant and close. Ironically, at times, the instructor, in contrast to the synchronous aspect of the course, felt closer to the students via the asynchronous format. The asynchronous format provided a space for more personalized sharing and back and forth between individual students and the professor. During discussions, the instructor more frequently felt distant and isolated. She was unaware of the subtle dynamics of the students because she was not able to see students' nuanced body language, and she missed quiet comments from the students. At times, she felt like she was talking to a wall due to her inability to perceive cues of body language and facial expressions that are readily available when one speaks to others in the same room. After the first class, the instructor learned via students' written reflections that she had passed over some students' comments. To remedy this, students and the TA began to use brightly colored paper to capture the instructor's attention. The instructor also used colored paper to signal that she could not hear or wanted to speak.

Following feminist principles of transparency and dampening the hierarchy (e.g., Webb et al., 2002), the instructor shared some of her feelings of distance with the students. When she identified feeling isolated, she intentionally tried to keep it light and humorous and directly asked for exaggerated body language and reactions from the students and that the students speak loudly. The explicit request for showing body language and speaking louder was successful, at least for a little while afterward.

The instructor felt closer to students via *a*synchronous aspects of the course (e.g., emails and written responses to student questions and comments). She gained information about class dynamics and more context about students. A few students took advantage of the chance to offer individual feedback by providing the instructor with information beyond their reactions/experiences of the course format. For example, one student explained, "I was tired and had a stressful night last night, so it was worse. I wish this was not the case for the week I was the discussion leader."

Moreover, Blackboard reflections helped the instructor judge each individual student's engagement with the course material. Students also indicated they liked answering questions on Blackboard and the subsequent instructor feedback. The feedback helped them feel connected to the instructor and the material and helped them gauge their command of the material. As one student explained, the feedback helped bolster confidence that the students were on the "right track."

An additional way that the asynchronous aspects of the course helped the instructor manage the physical distance was through email communication with students. On a few occasions, students told the instructor how the course impacted other aspects of their lives (e.g., family relationships). After a class discussion that became particularly intense, one student emailed the instructor a picture with a sign saying "Team Boelen" (referring to one of the authors of the articles discussed). The student wrote in the email: "Just thought you will be interested in knowing that our discussion transcended class time. :)" The gesture from the student, including their smiley face emoji, helped the instructor feel less distant.

Overall, students indicated that the relationship with the professor was satisfactory, and her university-administered evaluations for the asynchronous course were as high as they typically are in the F2F format. The physical distance was not as much of a barrier as some students had anticipated it might be. For example, one student wrote: "The class was very challenging, but it was also very interesting and generated much thought and discussion. The synchronous experience did not take away from the class in any way."

Several students appreciated the responsiveness of the TA and the instructor. One student commented:

I entered this class focusing on how I would feel the distance. I can say that at the beginning, I was predisposed and focused my attention on how to adjust to the "distance" with the instructor. This feeling changed drastically over time. I feel very connected to the course, the instructor, and my classmates. From the courses that I have taken in graduate school, I think this is the one that has generated more passionate discussions. It felt like when we were participating, we were truly connected with what we were saying instead of just saying something to have participation points. I am aware that the kind of material covered in this course is suitable for this kind of reflection, but I also wonder how the synchronous teaching facilitated this interaction dynamics.

Two students indicated they would have preferred F2F because the IVC format suppressed their interaction with the instructor. One student reflected:

…for some time, there has been something that I have felt but not been able to properly articulate … As I think of the word 'distance' it's possible that's what I have been feeling. Distance in the sense that there is that barrier between teacher and student. Even though you may forget about it sometimes, there is always in the subconscious the knowledge that we are not altogether. There is always the monitor (internet) that links us. As such, that level of intimacy that comes from a regular class setting is lost.

For the instructor, barriers set up by the internet resulted in an unexpected benefit of maintaining personal and professional boundaries, especially in terms of time. Setting boundaries was easier due to the time difference and the conditions inherent in virtual teaching. Compared to her F2F courses, interactions outside of class between students and the instructor focused only on content. The same pattern was true in her role supervising the TA.

The instructor was especially intentional when grading and emailing students in the virtual course. She was more thoughtful about how her comments would be received and took extra care to write affirming comments in graded assignments. Her default was an encouraging orientation for the virtual course; in contrast, her default in previous courses focused more on areas needing improvement. Knowing that the student was 5000 miles away when they read her comments compelled her to write in more affirming ways. It is possible that the instructor was a more validating instructor when teaching the IVC course than she had been when she taught F2F. Also, as a result of the distance, the instructor worked to provide advance notice of assignments, with clearer directions, additional written reminders of due dates, and helpful tips for completion.

**Paradox of Closeness and Distance During Discussions**

A heated discussion that occurred halfway through the seminar offers a poignant illustration in which closeness was fostered among students, and distance was fostered for the instructor. We closely examine this example because it helps illuminate particular conditions of discussions in IVC, and this is especially the case for an IVC format with students in one space and the instructor in another.

Students were assigned two provocative articles about validity in qualitative research (Boelen, 1992; Wolcott, 1990). In a brief lecture at the beginning of class, the instructor emphasized overarching questions raised about the validity of the articles. The instructor then asked students to share their reactions. The ensuing discussion was lively and lengthy. An assertive student (referred to as student A) began the discussion by stating that she strongly disagreed with nearly everything from one article. Another assertive student (student B) challenged student A's premises, and the debate moved from there, with two other students adding comments. The debate seemed to last for several minutes without input from the instructor. The instructor tried to join the discussion several times, but her verbal attempts and colored paper signal to join went unnoticed. The students and the TA were looking at each other and not at the screen. After what felt like a long time period, the TA intervened with the students and asked the instructor if she wanted to say anything. The instructor asked to hear from students who had not yet spoken. One quiet student spoke, and then the discussion returned to the same pattern –dominated by student A with responses from student B and a few other students. All students eventually made comments after more prompting from the instructor.

The TA redirected the discussion a few times and brought the discussion back to a quiet student. The TA also terminated the discussion. The instructor tried to regain control, and after she gave summarizing remarks, student A shared more comments. The TA finally said something to the effect that we needed to move on and that from knowing student A outside of class, she will probably keep arguing (student A agreed). Laughter ensued, and the instructor moved to the next topic.

Because the instructor was removed from the discussion for a longer period of time than usual, and she felt unsettled about this, she was curious about how the students and the TA experienced the discussion and were concerned about students who did not talk much. She emailed students asking them to share their impressions. The instructor wrote in her reflection notes:

> … I was hoping to understand what the students thought about the IVC aspect of the discussion. A few students immediately responded and did not mention the IVC context. It seems like they were fine, and the focus on me was minimal! This is *not* a bad thing and actually might be positive – the students were talking to each other…They are fine, it is me who is struggling the most…

Several students indicated that the discussion was beneficial. In the excerpts below, students point to the ways in which they felt the IVC format enhanced the discussion by encouraging greater freedom of expression than in F2F seminars.

> I think this was a vibrant discussion. I wonder if the IVC teaching allowed this participation to be so spontaneous. When I compare this discussion with others in seminars, I think this was a much deeper discussion. I also think the fact that our moderator, Dr. X, was not physically present allowed us to feel more spontaneous... When the moderator is present, you might feel that you need to time/pace yourself to her/his reactions. In other words, in a F2F class, we have more close access to the moderator's non-verbal language. Thus, you can feel like you are "structuring" your responses according to her/his reactions.

In the student's comments above, it is important to note that the instructor is perceived to be a moderator, which raises the question of whether or not a student would perceive a F2F instructor as a moderator. The student also evaluated the depth of the discussion and how the discussion occurred (i.e., "spontaneous") and was less constrained by the instructor's body language, which allowed students greater freedom of expression. Another student also commented on their increased comfort because of the distance from the instructor:

> … I felt more comfortable and flexible in the IVC class for discussion *because the instructor seemed far away from us [emphasis added]*. We were not saying something to the teacher; we were more like debating with our friends. It was a very interesting experience.

In a similar vein, another student reflected on their expressions and behaviors during the discussion:

> I think the fact that you [the instructor] were not present did affect the interaction. I may have been a little more reserved if you were present, and I think that you may have tried to calm us down a little bit if you were there. I do not think that it had a huge impact though because another student and I have had disagreements before and get a little loud in our office when we do.

A few students were not as comfortable with the heated discussion. In the excerpts below, students raised questions about how the IVC created conditions for students to take control and how this may compromise understanding.

> I don't know how different the same class/same topic would have been with a professor actually present. Usually, students who got into it aren't so loud in other courses … so I imagine they would have tampered down a bit. Professor behind a screen, pupil, can be louder…

 In this comment, the student points to how distance ("professor behind a screen") creates an environment whereby students feel comfortable being "loud" (which can be read as unruly). Another student commented about the instructor's lack of control.

> It is really a hot discussion. It is difficult for one to convince the …other. This is not a planned discussion question. As we never had a discussion like this before, I was a little surprised when the discussion lasted for such long time. Even though the discussion happened in the class, I feel like this was a discussion in the student office. Maybe it is because, during the discussion, it is difficult for the instructor to interrupt to lead the discussion. I feel it would be better to have an instructor in the class to lead the discussion…

In the response above, the student expressed concern that the instructor did not have control. The discussion, if not directed by the instructor, could last too long. The TA also expressed reservations about the discussion.

Although she thought the discussion went well, the TA articulated concern about the content. Below, she interweaves content and process, reflecting on how the process with students in control might have hindered learning. She also commented on her ongoing tension about interrupting.

> I thought the discussion went really well... I was glad that everyone at least spoke once and that students who do not usually speak had good points to make when they did. It was hard to know when to cut people off and allow Dr. X to comment. It felt like a few students were taking over the discussion.…. It is much harder to have heated discussion in this medium because it is harder to interrupt and to guide the discussion and some people get too much air time. Also, I am worried that some main points in one article were not touched on.

**Instructor as Omnipresent and Not Present**

The instructor agreed with the TA that a heated discussion was more difficult to manage in the IVC format. The instructor's reactions to the "hot discussion" showcased her isolation and sense of powerlessness. Her reflections also highlight her increased awareness of physical constraints. She wrote in her reflections:

I tried to get through the computer screen to inject comments in the debate. I felt like an outsider, like someone peering in a window and not getting in. I was unable to "get in." I kept moving my face closer to the screen…at one point, my face took over the entire screen. Being on a flatscreen TV at that moment, I felt flattened. Two-dimensional. The students were animated and three-dimensional to each other but not me. They were dynamic and could jump in the conversation easily. They looked at each other and not at me. I am "above" them on the screen – they have to tilt their heads to see me. I don't like my obstructed vision. I can't see the nuance of their facial expressions or hear quiet comments. I feel omnipresent (because I am above them watching and hearing them) and not present (because they don't seem to realize I am here, and they didn't respond when I tried to interject). I felt like a reluctant voyeur because I couldn't get in – I didn't want to be a voyeur, but I couldn't get in.

In addition to practical concerns regarding her inability to be part of the discussion, the instructor struggled with emotional reactions. She reflected: "I am always exhausted afterward, but this class was more tiring. My stomach hurt: Was I not protecting students who are not as assertive as student A?" This further sparked questions about to what extent her role was to protect students. What were the limits of protection or evoking responses from students in the IVC during the discussion? The IVC format put the instructor in a position whereby she had to rely heavily on the TA to help monitor dynamics. It should be noted that although our seminar context magnified this issue, it is still the case that TAs monitor student responses, chats, and other aspects of an IVC course, even if all participants are in separate spaces.

**The Paradox of Closeness and Distance of the Teaching Assistant**

The TA's ability to garner control during discussions and to effectively terminate the heated discussion conveyed her prominent role in the IVC seminar. Due to her physical presence in the room with the students, the TA was the main circuit through which the course ran. She was the central controller for technology and assisted with guest speakers and students unable to physically be present in the classroom. Additionally, most non-technological logistical operations were also under the TA's purview (e.g., unlocking the classroom, printing handouts, setting up activities, helping the instructor monitor the use of class time, etc.).

In one of her reflections, the TA likened her role to a 911 operator, alluding to demands on her to connect all parties, to walk the parties through a series of steps to use the technology, all the while remaining calm and working to keep others calm—which can engender both feelings of closeness and distance from both parties. Inherent in the role of 911 operators is a high level of stress, intensity, and focus on time and urgency. These elements were present, at times, for the TA. Moreover, 911 operators are required to function at a high level of alertness. The TA wrote in her reflections that she always had to be "on" – mentally present. Her attention was divided among technology, students, the instructor, and classroom management.

Another component of a meaningful discussion in IVC format is the TA's role as a translator. She translated body language from students to the instructor and worked to increase communication (and thus, decrease the emotional distance) between students and the instructor. She interpreted, repeated, and clarified information. She decided when to interrupt students, when to share, and when to check in with the instructor. In addition, the situation was accompanied by emotionally-taxing responsibilities. Below she reflects on her fatigue and sense of responsibility:

I am very tired after each time we meet. I think the students need for everything to be very clear and that they are very vocal when things are not, it makes me anxious. After we finish on

Mondays, it is very hard for me to do much of anything the rest of the day. I am always very mentally and physically tired. I feel that I must be on the whole time we are in class, even though I am not really doing anything. It is getting a little better each time, but I still feel very responsible for their experiences in the classroom.

It is important to point out that the TA indicated that one of the reasons she agreed to be the TA for the class was because of her ongoing and close relationship with the instructor. She would have had more pause had she been asked to TA for another instructor she did not know as well. Overall, students seemed to feel close to the TA, and their evaluations of the TA were indicative of the central role she performed, noting how helpful she was with the "entire coordination," including "the video-audio operation," "making the class go smoothly during class activities," "making sure everything was working correctly" and the comfort of "knowing that she was there should anything go wrong." Students commented on her helpful role as a peer facilitator: "she also contributed to the class by using her knowledge to help us understand what was being discussed." Students indicated how they appreciated it when she repeated the comments. The TA "tried to interpret our comments to the instructor" and "repeated the instructor's key points," and she "could illustrate points by both the instructor and the students well or summary for clarity." Two suggestions were made for improvement: one was for the TA to be "…more familiar with the equipment…" and the other was that "Sometimes when trying to moderate, she interrupted the discussion from students."

## Discussion

Experiences shared in this manuscript contribute to the timely dialogue about the use of IVC in teaching, meetings, and workshops (Law et al., 2018), especially when we think about the evolution of online pedagogy after the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the urgent need, there remains a "lack of a common, widely understood, pedagogical framework for online teaching and learning" (Rapanta et al., 2020), and this may especially be the case for online *synchronous* teaching courses. In response, drawing on a feminist pedagogical framing, in this manuscript, we punctuated important issues for conducting discussions using IVC and highlighted the affective reactions of students, the instructor, and the TA. Through a feminist layering of multiple accounts, we focused on constraints and freedoms accompanying discussions using IVC.

Using the closeness/distant paradox as a framing device for IVC functions as a way to think carefully about this format, foregrounding the most obvious concern of the virtual classroom– the physical distance between the instructor and the students. The paradox acknowledges the conditions of IVC, encouraging a realistic assessment of discussions and possible emotions accompanying the discussions. The paradox is multi-dimensional, attending to the physical distance between instructor and students, the physical classroom setting whereby the students were in close proximity, emotions of connection and isolation, as well physical and symbolic boundaries. Although the context whereby the instructor is in one space and the TA and students are all together in another space was likely rare during the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that ideas from the present case study still have useful applications for IVC courses with students, TAs, and the instructor in separate spaces. Moreover, with growing globalization, the likelihood that faculty members may have off-campus point-of-duty stations is growing. Additionally, based on our observations at our large public university, it is becoming more common for instructors to invite guest speakers to present in their classrooms via IVC.

**Discussions in IVC Format: Increased Student Empowerment**

In the case of the present study, the IVC format integrated with feminist pedagogy promoted greater freedom of expression and student ownership of discussions. Students felt less scrutiny than in other seminars because the instructor was not physically in the room (sometimes, they forgot she was there!). This encouraged connection to each other, the TA, and the material. In contrast, the instructor felt heightened scrutiny, especially early in the course. Her feelings of magnified scrutiny stemmed from her body display (e.g., having her face displayed up close on a large monitor while also seeing herself on her laptop) as well as having her content knowledge and teaching practices under increased examination (due to the presence of the TA and the increased sharing of written notes --i.e., outlines). The higher scrutiny, along with feminist reflexivity, encouraged the instructor to think more carefully about her role, the ways she provided feedback, and the importance of offering detailed directions for assignments and giving assignments far in advance. She also had to face her compromised ability to monitor classroom dynamics closely and learned to rely on her TA.

**TA's Critical Role: 911 Operator**

As other scholars have pointed out, facilitators are integral to synchronous teaching, and for successful implementation, facilitators need to be aligned with the instructor (Piercy & Lee, 2006). Although this has been identified, most literature offers a limited discussion of the TA's role as a facilitator. Our paper further showcases the integral role the facilitator plays as the main circuit by detailing the requirements and experiences of the TA, as well as the students' and instructor's impressions of the TA. The TA was an emotional and content translator, an internet switchboard operator, and the eyes, ears, and arms of the instructor. Because the TA's role in an IVC seminar is distinct from typical TA roles, it might be useful to create a new title. For example, is the virtual TA more akin to a peer instructor or moderator? What consequences would there be if the TA and the instructor did not have rapport and if the TA had little content knowledge? It is important to delineate the tasks required of the position, which helps showcase the variety of skills and professionalism required. Moreover, it is important to identify the precariousness of the role, including being required to interrupt and translate. Knowing how integral and demanding the role is, more discussion is needed in the literature.

**The Role of the Instructor: Distant *and* Close Simultaneously**

The IVC discussions and her engagement with feminist reflexivity encouraged the instructor to reconsider her role as instructor. She had to accept that she would need the TA to translate, monitor, shift, and terminate discussions. Indeed, one student described the instructor as a "moderator," raising questions about how central the instructor is in discussions. Thinking of the instructor as a "moderator" raises issues about hierarchy and the ways hierarchical teaching may be dampened. In research using focus groups, the hierarchy between researcher and participants is reduced due to the structure (i.e., multiple participants sharing something in common, one researcher), and this reduced hierarchy is inherently feminist (Wilkinson, 1999). How do similar dynamics occur in IVC? How might the shifting hierarchy improve students' learning? In addition to raising these feminist pedagogical questions, we also discussed instructors' emotions and stressors accompanying IVC, which other scholars have argued is increasingly important (Regan et al., 2012).

Acknowledging an instructor's vulnerability is a feminist practice (Sharp et al., 2007). In the case of the present study, the instructor acknowledged her isolation both with her students and in this manuscript. Drawing attention to the likelihood of isolation for instructors encourages instructors to prepare and enact strategies to dampen this and, at the same time, helps instructors realize that the

isolation may actually increase cohesion among students. At the same time, though, it is important to be mindful that the IVC format may increase *other* students' feelings of isolation. In our case, the use of monitoring sheets and having the TA comment on the affective atmosphere were strategies that helped mitigate student isolation.

We recommend that the instructor of an IVC course acknowledge and accept the following limitations: (a) the instructor will have compromised control in immediate, real-time interaction, (b) dialogue will (at times) be stifled, (c) some students will be less comfortable sharing oral responses. Despite these limitations, it is also important to acknowledge that some students thrive in a virtual setting. Recognizing limitations and benefits can help instructors enact strategies to encourage more student engagement (e.g., call on students every class; DeBourgh, 2003) and ask them to actually raise their hands or use the "raise hand" function on zoom or use their colored paper if they agree with statements and so forth. Instructors can also provide the TA with main talking points and share discussion questions and/or use Blackboard (or other software) to elicit responses prior to class.

## Implications and Recommendations

Our paper offers several practical implications for IVC. We delineated concerns (Table 1.1), benefits (Table 1.2), and recommendations (Table 1.3) and offer these as a resource for planning a course, meetings, workshops, or larger discussions using IVC. Most of these suggestions can be applied, whether or not all participants are in the same physical space. As previously mentioned, the most likely IVC during the COVID was all participants in different spaces (using ZOOM or other software.) (See Appendix A)

Additionally, it is important to consider equipment modifications to enhance the instructor's ability to be part of the discussions. A large monitor for the instructor would allow greater visibility and, thus, a greater ability to detect nuanced responses and read students' facial expressions and body language. We offer these ideas and the recommendations in the table as ways to suggest improvements but not to negate the fact that some students and the instructor will likely feel that the instructor is not fully present.

## Concluding Thoughts

Based on our case study and the likelihood that most instructors will teach a synchronous online discussion-based class in the future, we strongly encourage family science scholars to consider the feminist pedagogy framework and engage in the practice of reflexivity in their teaching. The role of ongoing, intentional reflection shapes teaching in meaningful ways. As our case study indicated, feminist pedagogical practices helped the instructor identify and understand her emotional reactions, stay (more) attuned with her students and TA, and ensured a positive teaching environment for the TA and students.

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## Appendix A

### Interactive Video Conferencing Concerns, Benefits, and Advice

The following tables offer a description of major challenges with web conferencing, the advantages and benefits of web conferencing, and practical advice for students (audience), teaching assistants (moderators), and instructors (leader).

**Table 1.1**

*Concerns with Interactive Video Conferencing*

| Student (Audience) | Teaching Assistant (Moderator) | Instructor (Leader) |
|---|---|---|
| **Communication**<br>• Will I be able to have quality discussions?<br>• How do I adequately participate?<br>• How do I adequately communicate with the instructor?<br>• Will the instructor be able to understand me? *<br><br>**Learning and Community**<br>• Will the format of the class compromise my learning?<br>• Will I get to know the instructor as well as I would in a traditional course?<br><br>**Distractions**<br>• How can I stay alert & focused the entire class time?<br>• Will delays be distracting?<br>• Will the synchronous method be distracting?<br><br>**Emotions**<br>• What if I become frustrated and/or impatient with the format?<br>• How should I manage anxiety associated with the format and my concerns about learning? | **Communication**<br>• Will I know when to interrupt students so the instructor can speak?<br>• How will I interrupt the instructor?<br>• Can I translate adequately?<br><br>**Multitasking/Technology**<br>• Will the technology work?<br>• Can I handle intense monitoring of the instructor, students, & equipment at the same time?<br>• If the technology fails, will I be able to successfully execute the backup plans?<br><br>**Fatigue**<br>• Will I be fatigued?<br>• Can I stay alert the entire time?<br>• What if I zone out and miss an important message for the instructor?<br><br>**Emotions**<br>• Will I be frustrated with the students' impatience with the technology?<br>• If conversations get heated, how far do I let them go before I intervene?<br>• How can I avoid being rude when interrupting? | **Communication**<br>• Will I talk too much?<br>• When and how to best intervene/interrupt a student?<br>• What do I do when I can't get their attention?<br>• What If I can't hear soft-spoken students?<br>• How to teach effectively with a compromised ability to read students' body language?<br><br>**Fatigue**<br>• How long can I sustain a discussion before getting tired?<br><br>**Emotions**<br>• How will I manage my emotions?<br>• How will I manage others' emotions?<br>• How will I deal with feelings of isolation and being an outsider?<br>• Can I stay calm and not panic if the technology does not work? |

*\*This was especially a concern for an international student with English as her second language.*

**Table 1.2**

*Benefits of Using Interactive Video Conferencing*

| Student (Audience) | Teaching Assistant (Moderator) | Instructor (Leader) |
|---|---|---|
| **Technology**<br>• Increased comfort & confidence in technology<br>• Use teleconferencing for own course – invite guest speakers<br><br>**Recourses**<br>• Gained more feedback & insight from the instructor than in the traditional course [outlines, blackboard reaction question feedback-personal]<br><br>**Flexibility/Responsiveness**<br>• acceptance of the delay in response to emails<br>• working ahead due to time difference<br>• Increased comfort with possibilities of technological problems | **Technology**<br>• Increased knowledge, skills, & confidence in using technology<br>• Opened up possibilities of using technology for my own class and my teaching and learning center job<br>• Better sense of the advantages & disadvantages of technology<br><br>**Learning**<br>• Enhanced Professional development, both working with a professor closely and working with graduate students in a new role<br>• Increased exposure to information presented in the class | **Technology**<br>• Learned new features of the Blackboard software<br>• Increased confidence in technology<br>• Became more environmentally conscious (did not print out near as many sheets as normal)<br><br>**Boundaries/Roles**<br>• Easier to maintain boundaries – the format of the class made interactions more substantive by the rigid boundaries in place<br>• More oriented to affirming comments in written work<br>• Encouraged critical reflections of role as an instructor: E.g., can I be more of a moderator in my graduate courses? |

**Table 1.3**

*Advice for Using Interactive Video Conferencing*

| Student (Audience) | Teaching (Moderator) | Instructor (Leader) |
|---|---|---|
| **Attitude**<br>• Be open-minded<br>• Be flexible<br>• Maintain a positive attitude<br>• Reflect on the benefits of participating in a synchronous web-based course/ meeting<br>• Consider the instructors'/ leader's emotions<br><br>**Participation**<br>• Read ahead of time (come prepared)<br>• Participate<br>• Exaggerate body language<br>• Talk louder than usual<br>• Avoid side conversations<br>• If it is not time to interrupt, write down questions/ comments and share later<br>• Offer feedback when solicited | **Logistics**<br>• Have 1 or 2 practice sessions before the meeting, class, etc.<br>• Ask for the structure of the meeting/course, etc.<br>• Have a backup plan ready<br>• Have a signal to interrupt (e.g., colored sheets)<br>• Use IM pop-up box<br><br>**Attitude**<br>• Don't panic!<br>• Get comfortable with interrupting people<br><br>**Preparation**<br>• Be sure you already have a rapport with the instructor (leader)<br>• Take classes on technology features<br>• Practice ahead of time with all speakers<br>• Realize people may not know basic information<br>• Be aware that it is taxing – always being alert & monitoring on multiple levels<br><br>**Feedback**<br>• Role clarity may not happen until later in the semester<br>• Seek clarification when needed | **Logistics**<br>• Have 1 or 2 practice sessions before the meeting, class – be sure all technology is working<br>• Have structured outline, questions, etc. and send to moderator WELL ahead of time<br>• Do not schedule meetings/sessions for longer than 2 or 2.5 hours<br>• Have a back-up plan ready<br>• Have a signal to interrupt<br>• Use IM pop up box<br><br>**Attitude**<br>• Don't be afraid to try new things (e.g., group work)<br>• Maintain a good attitude<br>• Be responsive & open to student and TA feedback (& solicit it often)<br>• Don't panic! Try to remain calm. Students react to your anxiety.<br><br>**Feedback**<br>• Remind students the utility of the course beyond the content<br>• Write reflections immediately after classes.<br>• Give students immediate/quick feedback via Blackboard<br><br>**Preparation**<br>• Over prepare<br>• Be very selective when choosing moderator<br>• Use both synchronous & asynchronous teaching |