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COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: the facts before, during and post-pandemic

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Communication (from the Latin *communicare*) is a dynamic process that has evolved since humans began living together in small groups and communities. From ancient times to the present day, communication has been the basic tool needed to integrate individuals into society.

A long way has been crossed from the signs and symbols of cave art to the present day, in which the Internet enables mass communication. Nowadays, people can come together and interact through different platforms and digital communication.

The different types of communication (textual, audio, visual, oral) have the same primary purpose: to transmit or share information, experiences, and knowledge.

Another important role of communication is to leave a record for the future for generations to come. Marks of a civilization's existence that would be unknown or would disappear were it not for the records left behind.

Communication may sound like a simple process. However, its complexity lies in using conventional signs and symbols that are known and mutually understandable. In addition, emotions, feelings, social and cultural context, area of knowledge, language, and the medium adopted impact communication.

The communicational process can be done one-to-one; one-to-many, or many-to-many. It involves at least a sender, a receiver, and a message that flows from a starting point to an endpoint where it is decoded. What matters in effective communication are the

relationships and good engagement it establishes between the fellows on both ends of the "line".

Formality and informality are two relevant aspects of verbal or written communication. While formal language is determined by a set of conventions, principles, and protocols required by quality writing, informal language is simpler, abbreviated, and less restricted to grammar rules, morphology, and syntax. The use of formal or informal communication depends on the degree of relationship and closeness between the interlocutors: authorities, employers, business contacts, friends, family members, and so on.

In the digital era, communication has become faster, more flexible, and more dynamic. Distance and time do not hinder communication anymore. Anyone from anywhere in

the globe can arrange meetings and communicate at any time, seven days/twenty-four hours, using a computer or a cell phone connected to the Internet. Time and space acquire new meanings and dimensions. Frontiers and time delimitations dissipate.

Real-time synchronous communication and asynchronous communication disconnected from time and space (i.e., carried out when the individuals involved in the conversation have time and availability) gain relevance.

Online communication was prominent during the pandemic when people were kept indoors. As a result, synchronous and asynchronous communication gained more relevance. It became a valuable means of communication in different areas of life. Businesses, students, and teachers' connections and contacts generally occurred via synchronous and/or asynchronous communication using various media types. The preference for one type over the other relies on the need for prompt, quick response (synchronous

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mode) or analysis, reflection, and argumentation (asynchronous mode).

Social media, such as Whatsapp, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, have also become a popular way of informal communication. Which gave rise to the "cute" language of emoticons and emojis to express feelings and emotions. However, the use of these graphic representations may lead to some concerns: (1) Is communication effective with emoticons and emojis? (2) Is the meaning of the emoticons and emojis equally understood by all who use them? (3) Do emoticons and emojis lead to real communication, or are they just a mirror of today's society eager for quick and superficial responses? Unfortunately, the answers are not yet definite.

Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the language of emojis, emoticons, and video gifs is a way to capture the audience, as these graphic representations are pretty popular today.

In this discussion about communication, it is important to remember that communication is constantly evolving/moving, just like society. Communication has been a basic human need since ancient times with the first encounters between individuals. One consideration to point out is that communicating well requires learning and practicing. And where is the best place to learn to refine communication? Of course, it is in schools with the teachers.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers had to teach students the differences between formal and informal communication, how to approach different receivers, and how to avoid ambiguity, noise and misconceptions in communication. In other words, how to effectively convey the message.

However, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic, the world shook. A huge range of uncertainties and fear dominated humanity. "Stay home and keep safe" became the motto. Schools closed. Teachers and students felt lost. The old-school practices and procedures collapsed, leaving a vacuum in the air. The common questions were: What to do? How to do it?.

Going online was the only solution for businesses in general. Nonetheless, in Education, teachers and students had to learn together in new online environments, adapting communicational interfaces to the new reality. A reality that dealt with emotions,

disenchantment, losses, routine changes, social isolation, and fear of the future.

During the pandemic and now, in the post-pandemic period, communication represents a fundamental tool to shelter and integrate groups from any field. Whether online or offline, communication, as stated earlier, is a natural necessity of human society.

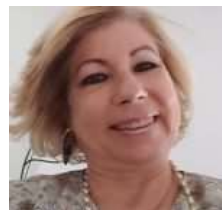
Although used somehow by teachers and students, digital communication still requires the exploitation of good practices, especially by teachers who have only ventured into virtual environments due to the pandemic. Questions about the use of social media and the informal language of emoticons, emojis, and the applicability of gifs in teaching still need answers.

As technology advances, new virtual and immersive environments and forms of digital social integration emerge. One example of what is coming is the Metaverse – a 3D virtual environment that allows users to socialize, collaborate, learn, and interact using an avatar.

Still, in embryonic development, the Metaverse also seems to be a new bet for Education. Thus, teachers should be prepared to guide the students to communicate in this new environment that mixes real and virtual lives. But further studies and reflections are necessary before thinking about Metaverse, its possibilities, challenges, and viability.



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This article is a result of the authors' ascertainment and analysis, without compulsory reflecting CEST's opinion.