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Communicating COVID-19: A Linguistic and Discursive  
Approach across Contexts and Media

Comunicare il COVID-19: un approccio linguistico  
e discorsivo a media e contesti

*Edited by / A cura di*

*Maria Cristina Paganoni and Joanna Osiejewicz*

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# Making Sense of the Response to COVID-19 in Higher Education

## A Case Study of Crisis Communication in Two Universities

*Giuseppe Palumbo and Ann Hill Duin\**

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought extreme challenges and disruption to higher education, resulting in hurried adoption of online teaching. From the point of view of crisis communication, the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced in HE institutions represents an interesting case, because crisis management and communication were primarily, if not exclusively, directed at internal stakeholders (essentially, students and staff). We present a case study that compares and contrasts the COVID-related responses of two different universities: the University of Minnesota, in the U.S., and the University of Trieste, in Italy. In particular, we look at the sets of documents issued by the leadership of these universities over a period of 23 months between February 2020 (the start of the health crisis) and December 2021. The analysis of the documents revealed that unexpected spaces of freedom empowered instructors. We identify four discursive traits associated with these spaces: definitional change, code glossing, and the use of engagement markers and permissives. However, this empowerment changed over time, as universities became eager to go back to “normal” and reinstate restrictions from pre-pandemic times.

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*Keywords:* COVID-19; crisis communication; higher education; institutional communication; instructional direction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a major impact on both individuals and communities all over the world. The spread of the virus resulted in a public health crisis of unprecedented scope, unfolding at a pace that forced governments to adopt and revise policies and guidelines with a speed rarely seen before. As in other sectors of public life, in Higher Education (HE) the COVID-19 pandemic can be characterized as an extreme “environmental jolt” (Meyer 1982) that brought about major challenges and disruption. Although the intensity and duration of the disruption varied from country to country and – within national borders – from one area to another, the impact of the pandemic was always wide-ranging and affected all aspects of university life and organization. At the onset of the pandemic, the two of us were collaborating as part of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Partnership (TAPP) program, with students from the University of Minnesota (UMN) serving as project managers of teams of University of Trieste (UT) students practicing translation (Duin and Palumbo 2021). Over four previous collaborations, and as part of this fifth one, we regularly re-adjusted and re-tuned the project to cater to groups of students from programs with different educational focuses (Palumbo and Duin 2021). The beginning of the pandemic overlapped directly with the start of our fifth TAPP collaborative project. Students immediately asked about the well-being of their overseas collaborators; as each project is totally online, no changes were made based on the ensuing pandemic. This maintenance of project direction stood in direct contrast to the disruptions underway at each of our institutions.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION

In this section, we initially illustrate some of the ways in which the pandemic is likely to have caused disruptions and led to rapid changes in the life of *all* HE institutions and then (2.1) move on to characterize crisis communication by the institutions through the lens of institutional theory.

*Teaching and instruction* – With the interruption of in-person teaching, most universities turned to a massive and, in most cases, hurried adoption of online teaching. In most countries, after all teaching moved fully online following strict lockdown rules for the population at large, various modes of hybrid teaching were adopted, typically combining the instructor's physical presence in a classroom with remote connection by all or a subset of students. The shift to online learning posed new issues and challenges. Instructors who were not already familiar with online teaching had to revise their course materials or learn how to use new tools and platforms almost overnight. Student engagement during online or hybrid classes emerged as a specific issue, and new questions arose such as how to monitor class attendance in a situation in which class resources (if not the lectures and classes themselves) were often made available “asynchronously” in digital or video formats, so that students could access them in their own time. The availability of course materials in digital format also posed new, unprecedented questions in terms of copyright, as instructors were faced with the challenge of protecting both their own copyrights and the rights of others whose resources they used.

*Assessment and examinations* – The move to fully online or hybrid instruction forced teaching staff to revise their assessment methods, sometimes radically. This introduced a host of new questions and issues related to fairness and equality of treatment, both synchronically (what if not all students taking an exam can count on up-to-date devices and easy access to high-speed internet?) and over time (how fair is an exam if different sections of students take it in different conditions within the same academic year?).

*Ceremonial events* – In many universities, events such as academic year commencement and graduation ceremonies were initially suspended or postponed. As the pandemic continued, such events took place exclusively online or in hybrid forms, e.g., with some participants on site and others connected remotely.

*Administration* – In order to ensure continuity of service, universities had to make a quick switch to remote working for part of their administrative staff and, in some areas and periods of the pandemic, for the entire administrative staff. New procedures had to be rapidly put in place to adjust for the demands and limitations of remote working.

*IT services and infrastructure* – The move to fully virtual instruction (or even just hybrid modes) and to remote working for administrative staff both placed an unprecedented burden on university IT services. Most institutions had to quickly adopt new technology or scale up existing resources. Many universities adopted, or extended the use of, cloud-based platforms for a variety of purposes: not only educational, but also administrative, financial, and operational. IT staff were often given the additional task of creating instructional resources and providing support for both teaching and administrative staff, who were faced with new tools such as email and communication platforms, online learning management systems, and online exam systems.

### 2.1. *Crisis communication by HE institutions through the lens of institutional theory*

Universities had to make quick decisions on how to carry on their activities and adapt them to the reality of the pandemic and the emergency measures introduced for the population at large. It is significant that the number of HE institutions that opted for interrupting all activities when lockdown measures were first introduced in March and April of 2020 is very small. The vast majority of colleges and universities decided to transition to online instruction (Marsicano *et al.* 2020), usually after a hiatus of only a few weeks after the introduction of lockdown measures.

The uniform response by HE institutions to continue with their activities even in the midst of the health crisis can be explained by reference to concepts elucidated by the institutional theory approach in organizational communication (Lammers and Barbour 2006; Lammers and Garcia 2017), notably in relation to institutions' attempts at sustaining their own legitimacy in the face of external environmental forces. Institutional theory examines the ways in which rules and requirements are elaborated so that organizations receive support and legitimacy from society at large (Lammers and Garcia 2017). In particular, legitimacy serves as a key symbolic resource for organizations. In established fields or areas of institutional life, organizations can be seen to become similar to each other according to a process of "isomorphism" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), meaning that in order to gain legitimacy and social acceptance organizations embrace beliefs and adopt regulative and normative policies that are prevalent in other, similar organizations. Faced with a massive external environmental jolt such as

COVID-19, HE institutions decided to embrace change as a means of sustaining legitimacy – a notable decision in light of the fact that, as noted by Lammers and Barbour (2006, 364), “institutions are characterized by low rates of change”, and “exhibit a fixed and enduring quality, especially as relevant to local organizing”. Describing the quick adoption of online instruction as a response to the pandemic in HE institutions worldwide, Strielkowski (2020) has noted “how innovations in academia and higher education that would have normally taken several years due to the various contradictory administrative regulations are now introduced promptly in a matter of days”.

From the perspective of institutional theory, “[t]he existence of formally written rules, laws, regulations, guidelines, and contracts is a defining feature of institutions [...]. Such texts are the material manifestation of accumulated knowledge about how to solve problems and conduct relationships in an increasingly complex world” (Lammers and Barbour 2006). The change introduced by HE institutions during the pandemic, uncharacteristic in its rapid pace, was essentially enforced through the publication and dissemination of regulatory texts of various kinds, such as institutional messages, protocols and guidelines. Coordination efforts and discussions of available options on how to face the emergency also took place, often informally, through email (Lovell *et al.* 2022) and online meetings. For newly introduced policies to take effect, however, written documents of various kinds having binding effect were preferred: as noted by Lammers and Barbour (2006, 365), “[t]he prevailing manifestation of institutions relevant to organizational communication is formality. Institutions reside in beliefs that are reflected in behavior; the beliefs are nearly always explicitly stated in formally recorded knowledge”.

From the point of view of crisis communication, the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced in HE institutions represents an interesting case, because crisis management and communication were primarily, if not exclusively, directed at internal stakeholders (essentially, students and staff). As noted by Yeomans and Bowman (2021, 197), the crisis communication literature generally prioritizes communication with external stakeholders and looks at the ways in which communication is aimed at protecting organizational reputation. During the COVID-19 health crisis, and especially in the early stages of the emergency, HE institutions had the overriding aim of convincing internal stakeholders to accept change at an unprecedented pace (which, in turn, was perceived as a means for sustaining legitimacy in the eyes of external

stakeholders). Organizational leaders found themselves in the position of having to help staff, and students, make sense of the crisis through effective internal communication. The notion of “sensemaking” (originally proposed by Weick 1993) has been used in organizational studies to refer to the ways in which organizational leaders make sense of crises and develop meaning for others. In Yeomans and Bowman (2021, 198), who study internal crisis management in UK universities during the COVID-19 health crisis, sensemaking is presented as a set of discursive practices which, in essence, are “about people negotiating meaning and seeking plausibility to understand ambiguous and confusing events”.

The idea of “negotiation” as part of sensemaking efforts is central in our study as well. In the sets of documents we have selected for analysis, we search for discursive instances of negotiation taking place between two HE institutions and one particular subset of their employees, i.e. instructors, on how to enact change so that the emergency situation brought about by the health crisis can be managed without compromising the institutions’ attempt to sustain their legitimacy.

### 3. AIMS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

We present a case study that compares and contrasts the COVID-related responses of two different universities: the University of Minnesota in the U.S. and the University of Trieste in Italy. In particular, we look at the sets of documents issued by the leadership of these universities over a period of 23 months between February 2020 (the start of the COVID-19 health crisis) and January 2022. This period covers the early, initial phase of the emergency, in which uncertainty about the crisis and the disruption caused to normal university functioning were at their highest, and a later phase, in which the institutional response to the crisis had set in motion new organizational routines aimed at minimizing the disruptive impact of the crisis and adapting to a “new normal”.

In very general terms, the COVID-related communication produced by the two universities over the analyzed period had two essential aims: to disseminate government-issued legislation, and to illustrate organizational re-arrangements responding to that legislation. COVID-related communication also touched on health and safety aspects, but the two universities put different emphasis on these aspects. At UMN, the vast majority of messages came from the University President. Nearly every



message included a focus on wellbeing, updates, and preparation for each stage of the pandemic. The greatest amount of communication came in March 2020 (40 messages). These messages focused on: suspended study abroad; canceled travel; suspension of in-person instruction (March 11); confirmed COVID-19 cases (March 13); remote work and alternative instruction; commencement postponements; policy updates; health, safety and fighting bias; housing and dining credits; MN “stay at home” order (March 25); updates to emergency declarations; and physical and mental health resources. Communication by the university included information about the COVID situation for staff and students, with a dashboard for specific numbers of cases. At UT, most of the communication related to the health crisis concerned organizational aspects. The university issued a dedicated COVID “protocol” detailing measures on: access to university facilities; workplace health and safety; organization of work (e.g. in terms of remote work); academic activities. The protocol was complemented with more specific guidelines on: teaching; examinations; online meetings. The President of the University sent brief emails to the whole academic community mainly in order to announce the publication of new, updated versions of the above documents. Communication by the university always refrained from giving specific details about the COVID situation for staff and students (e.g., about the number of tests and confirmed cases). *Table 1* sums up the response to the emergency at each institution in terms of materials and focus.

*Table 1. – UT and UMN responses to the pandemic.*

	UNIVERSITY OF TRIESTE	UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Communication focus	Health & safety; regulation (teaching and exams)	Initially on health & safety; moved to regulation
Documents	Protocols, Guidelines	Messages (archive), Dashboard
How binding? Empowering?	Administratively driven; some decisions left to units/individuals	Administratively driven; some decisions left to units/individuals
General discourse approach	Focus on information and direction (legal-like; procedure-oriented)	Marked presence of interactional elements (community-oriented)

The documents we analyzed are those used by the two universities to coordinate the reorganization effort in the face of the emergency. The

two institutions did not employ exactly the same kinds of documents: UMN issued messages on overall protocols from the President's office, with open access to all messages (<https://safe-campus.umn.edu/return-campus/covid-19-updates>). Guidelines related to teaching were summarized in these messages, with additional detail and links included in messages from the Provost. The general-purpose "protocol" issued by UT, which was regularly updated, and the successive versions of more specific guidelines were published on a dedicated section of the institutional website (<https://www.units.it/ateneo/emergenza-covid-19-indicazioni-e-aggiornamenti>). *Table 2* provides, for each institution, a list of the documents we have scrutinized.

Of initial note is a marked difference in average length between the documents in each set. This is because all of the UMN documents are self-contained email messages, while the UT texts were documents circulated as email attachments. Our focus in the analysis was the identification of the passages where the above-mentioned "negotiation" between organizational leaders and the addressees (i.e. teaching staff) could be seen to take place. In normal circumstances, we would expect the type of documents we analyze to contain mostly instances of obligation ("oughts") and prohibition ("ought not's"). Because of the very particular nature of the situation these documents were produced in (i.e. a fast-evolving crisis), we intend to see whether the documents also contain spaces where addressees are given more leeway than they normally would in terms of what is prohibited or permitted. Our assumption of greater leeway than usual comes from a first, impressionistic reading and from our own past experience as recipients of similar institutional documents, in which the emphasis tended to be on "dos and don't's". This provided backing for the hypothesis that the materials under analysis would present larger than usual spaces of "negotiation", to be intended as the manifestation of a willingness to rediscuss established practices or the offer of spaces of freedom. Our analysis can be thus seen as an attempt at replying to the following questions:

1. Are there spaces of negotiation in the documents produced by HE institutions to coordinate their response to the COVID-19 emergency?
2. Do these spaces exhibit specific discourse and language traits?

In particular, we assumed that the discursive passages containing spaces of negotiation might contain distinctive traits setting them apart from the passages exhibiting an openly informative or directional nature.

Table 2. – List of documents submitted to analysis, per institution<sup>1</sup>

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA	UNIVERSITY OF TRIESTE
1. Suspension of in-person instruction from the President • published: March 11, 2020 • length: 637 words	1. <i>Protocollo condiviso di regolamentazione delle misure per il contrasto e il contenimento della diffusione del COVID-19 negli ambienti dell'Università di Trieste</i> • published: May 12, 2020 and continuously updated • length: 7930 words (first version); 12300 words (version of November 8, 2021)
2. Instructional guidance from the Provost • published: March 11, 2020 • length: 623 words	2. <i>Misure relative alla didattica</i> • published: March 10, 2020 • length: 1010 words
3. Alternative formats for Summer 2020 from the President • published: April 6, 2020 • length: 588 words	3. <i>Misure relative alla didattica (aggiornamento)</i> • published: March 17, 2020 • length: 2150 words
4. Plans for Fall 2020 from the President • published: April 28, 2020 • length: 668 words	4. <i>Indicazioni per lo svolgimento degli esami online</i> • published: May 27, 2020 • length: 5440 words
5. Instructor autonomy for course modality from the Provost • published June 5, 2020 • length: 687 words	5. <i>Linee guida per l'erogazione della didattica del I semestre 2020-2021</i> • published: October 2, 2020 • length: 1930 words
6. Plans for Fall, update from the President • published: June 5, 2020 • length: 725 words	6. <i>Linee guida per lo svolgimento delle lezioni del II semestre 2020-2021</i> • published: March 15, 2020 • length: 480 words
7. Preparing for Fall 2020 instruction from the Provost • published: June 11, 2020 • length: 1211 words	7. <i>Linee guida sulle modalità didattiche degli insegnamenti</i> • published: July 22, 2021 • length: 2510 words
8. Plans for Spring 2021 from the President • published: December 7, 2020 • length: 729 words	8. <i>Linee guida sulla didattica per l'anno accademico 2021-2022</i> • published: July 22, 2021 • length: 1250 words
9. Course modality message from the Provost to all Deans • published: September 10, 2021 • length: 146 words	9. <i>Linee guida per lo svolgimento degli esami di profitto (aggiornamento)</i> • published: September 02, 2021 • length: 940 words
10. Plans for Spring 2022 from the Provost • published: January 6, 2022 • length: 706 words	

<sup>1</sup> Document numbers will be used for referencing the examples discussed in section 4.

We hypothesized that negotiation might take the form of either a re-definition of established terms (e.g. “What counts as ‘attendance’ in online instruction?”) or a definition of new terms (e.g. “What is ‘asynchronous instruction?’”). Definitions, we assumed further, are accompanied either by exemplification and explanations or by markers of engagement aimed at readers. Finally, we assumed that the documents would contain passages in which readers were explicitly given permission to make decisions or opt for alternative courses of action.

We searched the literature on discourse analysis and speech act theory for labels capable of encapsulating the above traits. Eventually we came up with the following list of elements to guide our analysis: definitional changes and introduction of new terminology; “code glosses”; use of “engagement markers”; and “permissives”. More specifically:

- A **definitional change** (our label) takes place when an established term is redefined, for instance in order to reflect changed (or changing) conditions in a given situation; **introduction of new terminology** may refer to either new coinages (e.g. *hy-flex* in “hy-flex instruction”) or the use of existing words with new, specialized meanings (e.g. *hybrid*, as in “hybrid classes”).
- **“Code glosses”** (Hyland 2005, 52) rephrase, explain and elaborate what has been said; they are introduced by phrases such as *this is called, for example, this can be defined as*. They are part of Hyland’s (2005) “interactive resources”, i.e. features that organize information in ways that readers find coherent and convincing.
- **“Engagement markers”** (Hyland 2005, 53-54) are devices that explicitly address readers to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants; these devices focus on reader participation with two main purposes (Hyland 2005, 54): (1) to meet “readers’ expectations of inclusion and disciplinary solidarity”, addressing them with pronouns (*you, your, inclusive we*) and interjections (*you may notice*); (2) to pull readers “into the discourse at critical points, predicting possible objections and guiding them to particular interpretations” – functions performed by questions, directives (imperatives, such as *consider, note*, and obligation modals: *should, must, have to*) and references to shared knowledge.
- **“Permissives”** is a label taken from speech act theory. It refers to expressions used “to grant a request for permission or to remove some antecedent restriction against the action in question” (Bach and Harnish 1979, 49).

For the analysis, we coded the documents with instances of the above-illustrated elements. Our analysis is qualitative; it started from the

identification of a core concept or category (discursive spaces of negotiation) and then evolved to become “top-down” as we shared and discussed our theoretical backgrounds and orientations.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. Introduction of new terms and re-definition of existing terms

In the analyzed documents, significant space was devoted to the introduction of new terms and the redefinition of established notions. In most cases, this was done in relation to attempts at reconfiguring instruction and moving all activities fully or partially online. For UMN, instances of definitional changes or the introduction of new terms mainly occurred in messages (from the President or the Provost) concerning reorganization or planning activities. For UT, most instances came in the guidelines. *Table 3* lists, in alphabetical order, new terms appearing in the documents of both institutions.

*Table 3. – Terminology introduced in the documents.*

UMN	UT
<i>asynchronous/synchronous (instruction)</i>	<i>didattica erogativa</i>
<i>alternative instruction</i>	<i>didattica inclusiva</i>
<i>class/course modality</i>	<i>didattica interattiva</i>
<i>distanced instruction</i>	<i>lezioni in presenza</i>
<i>hybrid classes</i>	<i>lezioni a distanza</i>
<i>hy-flex (teaching/courses)</i>	<i>modalità sincrona/asincrona</i>
<i>in-person instruction</i>	
<i>multi-modal classes</i>	
<i>on-campus instruction</i>	

A word of caveat: the terms in *Table 3* may not all be completely new coinages. Some of them will have been known to those engaged in online teaching activities prior to the pandemic. This is the case for terms such as *multi-modal classes* and *synchronous* or *asynchronous instruction* in UMN texts and *modalità sincrona* or *asincrona* in the UT texts. These terms have now – as a consequence of the pandemic – become familiar to a much wider audience of instructors (and, in many cases, students). The new coinages include terms such as *alternative instruc-*

tion, *distanced instruction* and *hy-flex* for UMN and *didattica erogativa* and *didattica interattiva* for UT.

The word *modality* (as in *class* or *course modality*) in the UMN texts is an interesting case. It can be considered a new term in the sense that it is used with a meaning (i.e. “a mode, or a particular form or variety of sth.”) that it is not normally associated with<sup>2</sup>. Internet searches reveal that the term was (sometimes) used prior to the pandemic mainly in relation to MOOCs. It may now have become another ‘mainstream’ term to describe online learning options.

Most of the terms in *Table 3* refer to various forms of online instruction presented as alternatives to in-person teaching. In both the UMN and the UT documents, however, the term “online” is only rarely used and is often replaced by synonymous words or phrases such as “digital”, “distanced” and “remotely” (in English) and “a distanza” and “in remoto” in Italian. The avoidance of the word “online” might not be casual. Rather, it could be the result of a deliberate rhetorical move having a twofold aim: first, making clear that the adoption of online instruction is an emergency measure; second, and perhaps more importantly, reinforcing the image of the institution and setting it clearly apart from new competitors in the HE education arena that operate exclusively online. The Foreword in the UT general-purpose COVID protocol includes an explicit and significant passage in this respect:

- (1) I corsi o gli esami online non sono l’Università che vogliamo, e certamente non sono l’Università a cui pensiamo come modello per il futuro. [...] L’Università di Trieste non è e non si trasformerà in una università telematica: è avendo in mente quanto sopra, che aggiorniamo questo documento, come transizione cioè alla vita di accademia universitaria, nel senso più completo e nobile del termine. (UT doc. 1)

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<sup>2</sup> The four senses listed for “modality” in the online Merriam-Webster do not include this meaning. Here is how the term “course modality” is defined by another U.S. HE institution (DePaul University): “Course modality refers to how a course is offered by the instructor. For many years there was only one option available: On-campus instruction. As the field and practice of distance education and online learning has matured, the number of course modalities has increased as well” (<https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/course-design/Pages/course-modalities.aspx>). Sacramento State University has a webpage with the heading “Course Modality” which becomes “course instruction mode” when used, repeatedly, in the main body of text (<https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/course-modality.html#instruction-modes-modality>) (webpages visited June 25, 2022).

#### 4.2. Code glosses

The new terms presented in *Table 3* are often couched in code glosses meant to clarify and expand on their meaning or to provide exemplification. Here is an example from UMN, taken from a message issued very early in the crisis (March 2020), at a time when all activities had been suspended:

- (2) Please note that we are asking you to determine and deploy **alternative instruction**. You are empowered to decide what is most appropriate and workable for your courses, your instructional responsibilities, and your teaching style. It is not the case that all instruction must now be moved into a fully online format. You might, e.g., ask students to complete assignments that they can then email to you. You can work through lecture captures, Zoom meetings, etc. (UMN doc. 2; emphasis added)

The passage is representative of the extreme freedom given to individuals' choices, as the leadership is anxious for students to prepare for the resumption of instruction.

In June 2020, the President of UMN introduced the term, “multi-modal classes” along with alternative formats; and the Provost's follow-up message referred to

- (3) a **portfolio of modalities** as determined by faculty preferences, unit and college needs, and classroom capacity. [...] Some classes will be offered as **online or hybrid**, allowing students to fill out their schedules with **in-person or distanced instruction, or a combination**. (UMN doc. 7; emphasis added)

In the process of establishing itself as a key term, “modality” still needed to be glossed with specific examples at this stage.

Several similar examples of code glosses are contained in the UT documents. In fact, one particular document (no. 7) reads like one very long explanation (or an extended code gloss) of the different instruction modes available to teaching staff besides in-person instruction. The document also contains diagrams and references to concept definitions from national legislation on HE instruction. Here is an excerpt:

- (4) saranno adottate le seguenti definizioni che comprendono le modalità di didattica telematica:
  - **didattica erogativa**: corrisponde alle lezioni a distanza di tipo **asincrono**;

- **didattica interattiva**: concorre a definire la didattica digitale integrata e comprende tutte le forme “**blended**” di didattica.

Entrambe queste modalità concorrono a progettare una didattica che si tende a definire “**umentata**” ad intendere un potenziamento delle possibilità di apprendimento. (UT doc. 7; emphasis added)

The example is interesting for at least two reasons. First, two terms that readers are likely to be unfamiliar with (“didattica erogativa”; “didattica interattiva”) are defined through recourse to other terms (“asincrono”; “didattica digitale integrata”; “forme ‘blended’”) – which, incidentally, may be considered to undermine the effectiveness of the definitions. Second, a new term (“didattica ‘umentata’”) encapsulating the other two is proposed, with an apparent attempt at putting a positive spin on them. This makes the last sentence in the quoted passage function simultaneously as a code gloss and an engagement marker: the alternative instruction modes rendered necessary by the health crisis are not detracting from the student’s experience but are, rather, “augmenting” it.

#### 4.3. *Engagement markers*

The marked presence of engagement markers, often including elements of an openly emotional character, is a distinctive feature of the UMN documents. Engagement markers were present in every message sent from the UMN President, Provost, and all other administrators throughout the pandemic. On 11 March 2020, the President shared that

- (5) While we do not have all of the answers at this moment, **please know** that we are working around the clock to find answers and solutions. (UMN doc. 1; emphasis added)

and the Provost wrote:

- (6) I write with additional guidance that I hope will be helpful as **you** respond to today’s decision to suspend in-person instruction. I want to thank **you** for **your** continued flexibility and creative thinking, but I also want to acknowledge the **extreme stress** that faculty, staff, and students are under. These are **difficult circumstances**, and it will help **all of us** if we all simply try **our** best to remain patient with and kind to **one another**. (UMN doc. 2; emphasis added)

In April 2020, the President encouraged faculty to

- (7) **find** time over the weekend to **maintain** and build up **your endurance** in ways that work best for **you**. **Please take** advantage of the resources



available to support you if you find yourself or **your** loved ones needing support. (UMN doc. 3; emphasis added)

In June 2020, she emphasized the importance of transparency:

- (8) I realize that **you** have many questions and there is still **uncertainty** about what lies ahead. We will continue to be transparent about our intentions and plans, and we will seek input and provide **you** with further details as soon as they become available. (UMN doc. 6; emphasis added)

Also in June, the Provost, while working to engage faculty with academic technology, used a plethora of terms that actually made instruction more confusing:

- (9) please work with your unit head to **identify the modality that would best suit your course, whether fully in-person, fully online (synchronous or asynchronous), hybrid, or via new modalities such as hy-flex**. The modality of the course should be clearly indicated in the Class Schedule so that students can make informed choices about their course selection. (UMN doc. 5; emphasis added)

Throughout the pandemic, the UMN President consistently used engagement markers to include faculty and recognize their many challenges. By so doing, she largely remained “above the fray” and was the strongest issuer of encouragement:

- (10) I hope this message finds **you** well in the final days of what has been one of the most challenging, unusual, and exhausting semesters than **any of us** has ever experienced. As a community, **we** have met the challenge up to this point, and while I know **your exhaustion** is real, **we** are prepared for the future. (UMN doc. 4; emphasis added)

It took until January 2022 for a similar statement of encouragement from the Provost:

- (11) I am confident that **our continued and shared commitment** to providing our students with a rich, in-person learning experience that also enhances safety will ensure **our success** this coming spring semester. (UMN doc. 10; emphasis added)

The UT documents consistently adopt a much more neutral tone, with an insisted focus on information and direction. A rare exception is the already quoted passage in example (1) (section 4.1). Discursive spaces of negotiation and freedom in the UT documents are mainly characterized by the use of “permissives”.

#### 4.4. *Permissives*

“Permissives” is a label we borrowed from speech act theory to indicate expressions and phrases used to grant a request for permission or remove a restriction against an action. Our hypothesis was that documents produced to describe both emergency measures and alternative courses of action would contain a significant number of such elements. Tracing the use of permissives over the time period covered by the analyzed documents can be taken as indication of the degrees of discretion that instructors were given in terms of how to re-organize their activities: the emerging picture is one of sudden, maximal flexibility and freedom in the first months of the emergency (March to September 2020) followed by a gradual (and often uncertain) return to pre-pandemic arrangements.

In the UT documents, permissives are concentrated in the guidelines. These passages from UT documents 3 and 4 are representative of the extreme initial freedom as to how to re-organize instruction and exams:

- (12) sono consentiti strumenti telematici per lo svolgimento delle prove orali degli esami di profitto come per le lezioni. (UT doc. 3)
- (13) Lo strumento adottato dall’ateneo per le lezioni a distanza è MS Teams [...]. Altri strumenti per l’erogazione di didattica a distanza sono temporaneamente consentiti. (UT doc. 4)
- (14) Gli esami possono essere svolti solo in modalità a distanza [...]. L’esame può essere svolto in forma orale o in forma scritta. (UT doc. 4)

Notice how, in both (13) and (14), an initial restriction is followed by permission to act discretionally: in (13), one specific platform is indicated as the institutional choice for online instruction, but permission is then granted to use alternatives; in (14), a restriction regarding exams (which “can only take place online”) is followed by permission to use the desired format (written or oral).

Example (15) contains an extended passage that is representative of the uncertainties related to attempts at going back to in-person instruction at a time when Italy was struck by the “second wave” of the pandemic (October 2020).

- (15) **È consentito** ai docenti, in accordo con il CdS di riferimento, di adottare modalità di “didattica inclusiva” che consistono nell’ammettere, durante le lezioni in presenza, il collegamento in remoto a determinate categorie di studenti che si trovano, in modo stabile o temporaneo

in condizioni particolari che comportano l'impossibilità a seguire le lezioni in presenza, quali: **studenti affetti da particolari disabilità; studenti lavoratori; studenti atleti; studenti "adulti" (cioè non neo-diplomati) o studenti genitori; studenti detenuti.** (UT doc. 8; emphasis added)

This passage gives degree programmes permission to allow certain categories of students to attend remotely classes that were otherwise given in person. These categories include: students with disabilities; working students; athletes; "adult" students or students with children; students serving prison sentences. This turned out to be a very controversial passage, as it was not clear whether this "permission" was, in actual fact, a requirement (that is, could individual instructors refuse to allow online attendance to students belonging to the listed categories?). Furthermore, some of the categories were of difficult interpretation (who really qualifies as an "adult" student?). Also, note how the categories listed have no apparent link to COVID. The (unstated) assumption seems to be that for these types of students attendance might have been made more difficult than usual by the pandemic situation – regardless of them falling ill or testing positive to the virus.

At UMN, both the University President and Provost issued, ever since March 2020, messages containing permissive elements that – in characteristic fashion – often combine with elements meant to express solidarity and construct rapport with the audience:

- (16) Moreover, if you have colleagues in your unit who want to offer tailored advice and assistance, please be encouraged to take advantage of that. We will be most successful if this is a collective effort. (UMN doc. 2)

Every message from then on from the President mentions health and well being:

- (17) Please remember to be healthy, safe, and well so you can maintain your endurance. Though it's impossible to know exactly what lies ahead, you continue to prove that together, we will overcome whatever presents itself. (UMN doc. 3)

Moreover, during this same time frame, George Floyd was murdered, with all of Minnesota flung into a tumultuous time. The President gave permission to be a catalyst for change:

- (18) The events of the last three months, and in particular of the last 11 days, have only reinforced the role that we can play, not just as an

institution of higher education, but as one of America's leading research universities advancing the communities we serve. Our land-grant heritage is a commitment, lived every day, to ensure that our work benefits Minnesotans and facilitates a just society. Now, more than ever, we must come together to fulfill that commitment and be a catalyst for change. (UMN doc. 6)

Later, in December, she wrote:

- (19) My sincerest appreciation for all that you have done, are doing, and will do in the weeks and months ahead to help us emerge stronger. I am honored to walk with you, support you, and join in this journey. (UMN doc. 8)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We might be led to instinctively assume that most of the communication about the response to COVID in HE had to do with restrictions on the ways that “normal” university business had been carried out before. The analysis of the documents issued by our universities has revealed, however, that sudden, probably unexpected, spaces of freedom opened up.

Most of us were at the receiving end of the communication on COVID by our universities. But contrary to what happens in other situations, we were very active and engaged readers of the documents that our institutions issued. We were given spaces of freedom, especially in the first phases of the emergency, and in some cases we were explicitly told to feel “empowered”. This insistence on empowerment – we note in passing – seems to have changed over time, as universities have become eager to go back to “normal” and reinstate restrictions from pre-pandemic times.

In line with the idea of “institutional isomorphism”, our analysis has shown that two universities operating in very different national environments reacted similarly to the pandemic in terms of their fundamental concern: sustaining legitimacy with respect to the community at large. In both institutions, rapid change was embraced as a means of sustaining legitimacy, which opened up (at least temporarily) spaces of unprecedented freedom for some stakeholders (notably, instructors). Our analysis has identified some discursive traits associated with these spaces of freedom – places in text where institutional leaders explicitly or implicitly expressed their willingness to negotiate, and allow, change.

These discursive traits can be seen as textual realizations of the sense-making efforts the institutions were engaged in. Some differences could be observed, but these relate essentially to the particular general tone each institution decided to adopt: more informative and procedural in the case of UT; more interactional and community-oriented in the case of UMN.

During the pandemic, change affected all aspects of HE instruction: from attendance and instruction modes to examination formats. How much of this change is going to remain after the pandemic is an open question. Some actors and stakeholders will push for some innovations to be allowed permanently. Other stakeholders (and university leadership) may remain more cautious, so that long-established institutions maintain a distinct profile from that of newcomers operating exclusively online. The negotiation started by the pandemic is likely to continue.

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