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(In)flexibility during uncertainty? Conceptualizing instructor strictness during a global pandemic

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In an essay featured in *Inside Higher Ed*, Dever and Justice (2020) called for university faculty to utilize empathy when teaching uncertain, frightened students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors offered specific strategies for doing so, suggesting that “strict deadlines aren’t going to cut it” (para. 24). It is likely that many instructors relate to Dr. Steven Krause, a professor at Eastern Michigan University, who is quoted admitting that during this unprecedented time, he is rethinking “the value of being such a hard-ass instead of trying to be like an empathetic human” when it comes to grading, policies, and due dates (Flaherty, 2020, para. 3). Indeed, many students are confronting issues outside the classroom that affect their ability to learn and succeed, including, but not limited to, health issues, Internet access problems, job stressors, and/or caregiving responsibilities. In turn, as faculty, the idea of being less *strict* and more *flexible* during the pandemic seems to be widely encouraged and practiced.

The idea of strictness has long been used by students and instructors within the classroom lexicon (e.g., Poplin et al., 2011), even before pandemic pedagogy. Yet, the fields of instructional communication and education seem void of a coherent conceptualization of this ever-present term (Kendall & Schussler, 2012). If educators continue to alter or abolish course policies and procedures in response to the rapid transition to online learning or the impending health crisis, more needs to be understood about the role of strictness in the instructional process. What short- and long-term effects does strictness have on student learning and behavior? How are adjustments to otherwise strict policies and procedures perceived by students? What effect does strictness have on the instructor–student relationship? To answer important questions like these, we believe this communication concept warrants a clear definition so its impact can be effectively measured, assessed, and interpreted.

Although individuals might think strictness is embodied solely through infamous villains like Madam Trunchbull, a review of literature highlights some generally accepted notions about what it means for an instructor to be strict. First, strict instructors keep reins tight. An allusion to controlling a horse by keeping a tight grip on the reins, this idiom suggests strict instructors monitor students closely. In fact, the Latin root of this word, *strictus*, literally means to “draw tight” (Strictus, 2020). Second, strict instructors have high standards. While this unsurprisingly pertains to classroom grading (Larseingue

et al., 2012), strict instructors may also have high standards for classroom behavior (e.g., remaining silent; Kendall & Schussler, 2013). Third, strictness is communicated in messages instructors send regarding their adherence to classroom policies (i.e., guidelines put in place to regulate instruction) and procedures (i.e., processes through which power/grades are dispersed). Descriptions of instructor strictness almost always make some explicit connection to how rules are implemented and consistently enforced within the classroom without flexibility (Den Brok & Brekelmans, 2001). In this way, strictness has direct ties to the concept of classroom justice (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). However, justice captures value judgments of course policies and procedures, while strictness simply describes their (in)flexibility. Taken together, strictness can be conceptualized as *the perceived inflexibility of an instructor based on their unwavering adherence to instructional policies and procedures*.

Within instructional scholarship, exploring this concept presents opportunities for both research and practice, even beyond the pandemic. In terms of research, empirical evidence for the effects of instructor strictness do not currently exist. Now is the ideal time for *Communication Education* scholars to explore its influence on student behaviors, attitudes, and learning to determine what effect this (in)flexibility is having on students. Additionally, more needs to be understood about how strictness relates to perceptions of other instructor characteristics like caring or credibility. This line of research could also answer practical questions concerning the impacts of remaining strict in tumultuous times like the present, whether students want their instructors to be strict, or the ethical implications of strictness. Clearly, perceptions and effects of strictness are highly situational, so researchers need to consider where and how strictness—or a lack thereof—may be in students' best interests.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a clamoring of voices making broad, sweeping generalizations concerning what students need and want in terms of strictness. The efficacy of these calls needs to be questioned without more credible evidence and scholarship examining the construct.

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