

Internet Pitfalls

What *Not* to do When Communicating with Students on the Internet

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Faculty who are employing e-mail communications with students for the first time for course administration purposes often have a surprising learning curve ahead of them. In this article, distance learning columnist Judith V. Boettcher shares her experiences in discovering effective ways to communicate with students online.

In the middle of a beautiful Sunday afternoon, I found myself staring moodily at my computer screen and the contents of my Eudora InMail Box wondering why I had ever decided to require my students to send their project descriptions to me by e-mail. I had already been trying to sort my e-mail into some semblance of order for two hours—missing a perfectly wonderful opportunity to be outside. At this point, I had still not found the project description from five of my 29 graduate students!

Every one of my students, it seemed, that had sent in their project description, had managed to create a different name for the subject heading of their mail files. These same students later in the semester sent their completed projects to me in every imaginable file format. They also sent files to me—I later learned—with obscure, difficult to eradicate viruses. At the beginning of the course, I had a number of students—about 6-8—who were quite inexperienced in the use of technology, which added additional spice to this mix.

To my surprise, I soon added myself to that “inexperienced” list. I learned that I really knew very little about managing course delivery over the Web and communicating with students in many numbers in this new teaching and learning environment. What follows reflects what I learned from facing the perils of faculty-student communications online—in the

form of a list of things not to do when communicating with your students over the Web.

1. Don't expect all students to be successfully reading and participating in your “class discussion list” in the first week of the semester.

The processes for setting up class discussion lists and for ensuring that all students having e-mail access have not been fully automated in most higher education institutions. A lag of one to two weeks is not unusual. There are always likely to be a few students who for one reason or another will not be “up and running” with the technology. In the planning of the course, then, some backup strategies usually need to be identified. With distance learning students, some of the best alternatives include having the students support each other with access to the content information. For solving technology access problems, a lag of two weeks is usually sufficient. Help sources include the institution's help desk as well as encouraging students to contact the local ISP (Internet Service Provider)—if they are using an external ISP.

2. Don't be vague about the names of assignments.

If you want your students to “hand-in” assignments electronically, be very specific about what should go in the subject line of a message. In fact, you may want to develop a simple algo-

rithm for naming these files. The algorithm might have three parts, such as Assignment 1: Theoretical Principles: Student Full Name; or Assignment 2: Design for Learning, Student Full Name. Or for a project sequence, you might want to develop a subject, such as Project Prospectus or Project Summary or Course Summary Paper. To make certain the assignment name students are to use is always accessible, this information can be directly available from the course calendar on the Web.

The first part of the title makes it easy to use the filter feature of many e-mail programs, automatically filing the assignment e-mails into the special assignment mailbox. The second part of the algorithm—the content part—makes it easy to sort by subject once the messages are in the mailbox. And hopefully keeps the learning objective front and center.

You may wonder why am I suggesting that the students include their full name in the subject heading. The e-mail id that students may have may not be anything remotely resembling their real name, and they may not be using the “signature block” feature available on many e-mail packages. Having students include their name in the subject heading is actually an updated version of the ancient plea—put your names on your papers. When we had real paper, we often had the student's handwriting to clue us into the identity of a student.

3. Don't be available to your students all the time.

Many dedicated and committed faculty truly enjoy teaching and want to be available to their students and commune with their students meaningfully in this new medium. Additionally, as we move some of our teaching and learning to this new environment, we are constantly reminded that the power of the technology enables us to be available anytime, anywhere—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Consequently, many students come to expect faculty members to be “right there” with answers and responses to e-mail questions. Well,

Continued on page 50

Continued from page 46

we are becoming more aware of how fast the technologies are moving and how slow our bodies and minds are adjusting to these technologies. So, just because it is possible to be available 24-7, does not mean we have to be—or that we should be—available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This is a case where it is important to manage expectations from the very beginning. Here are some samples of how you might want to manage response expectations:

- Set up a framework for turnaround time for response from an e-mail. Usually, saying that you will attempt to always respond within 24 hours is considered reasonable.
- Announce that there will be times when the 24-hour response time will be suspended. This includes weekends, announced vacations and conferences, and unexpected emergencies. You also agree to announce to the students when this response time will be suspended. It is not always easy to access the network from anywhere and anytime. At this time, even when we see WWW addresses everywhere, even on restaurant doors, only about 15 percent of the population is hooked up to the Internet.
- If you choose, you can set times at which the 24-hour response time will be even shorter, particularly just prior to deadlines, etc.
- Set up a contract with the students that when they send an e-mail with a question or comment that you feel is of general interest and value to the class that you will respond with a general note to the entire class. Responses to these questions can become the basis for additional course guidelines.
- You may want to remind your students that your faculty role includes more than teaching responsibilities.

4. Do not assume that electronic mail is received or read in any specific time frame.

Internet communication—written Internet communication—is a new medium. It is not as fast as a telephone conversation or a fax, nor as slow as the postal service. When we send electronic mail, it moves in dis-

crete packets over one's local net, through numerous gateways and other networks before it is actually received by the addressee.

You have heard of letters being mislaid in post offices, or warehouses, and finally delivered after 20, 30, or 40 years. E-mail can be similarly delayed or totally destroyed. So, do not assume that your mail will go fast, or go at all, or that it is successfully received and read by the addressee. This is why sometimes it is wise to ask for a confirmation e-mail in return on time-sensitive or critical mail.

5. Don't structure the communication flow in a course so that you are the gateway for all communications. This will save you time and create a better learning environment.

Part of the power of the Internet communication technologies is that students and faculty can become a true learning community. In such a community dialogue and communication flows in all directions. Some faculty set up online problems, dilemmas, and seminars in which the students themselves launch, lead, manage, and summarize a discussion or solve a problem.

The faculty role in some parts of a course is not to lecture, but to monitor and mentor student discussions or problem solving. In these cases, faculty may choose to compose a response, analyze the content, and provide feedback on a weekly basis to ensure that the students stay on track with the development of the content and ideas. In this way, students dialogue with each other and test and hone their ideas with their peers.

These techniques should help to manage the amount of time faculty invest in the communication with students online. We know how important it is, as students are responding favorably to this mode of communication with faculty and in fact, generally feeling closer to their faculty who use it.

6. Don't forget to structure feedback on evaluation of the students' progress and learning.

Although we all want to believe that students are taking courses because

DISTANCE LEARNING

they are intensely interested in learning the course content, it is a reality that the students are also there to earn a grade. So, students want timely and personal feedback on the work that they do.

Al Oosterhof, a faculty member at Florida State University, has developed an excellent method of providing timely feedback with the use of Excel and Word. Dr. Oosterhof has written a paper on his method; a draft of this paper is available at <http://www.cren.net/community/email.html>.

7. Don't put anything in your student correspondence that you would not want to see on the front page of a local or national newspaper.

There are still many legal battles brewing about ownership and privacy of messages in the workplace, and by extension, in any institution. There are also many perspectives about the wisdom and difficulty of deleting computer files. So it is best to assume that at

any time, course content, including e-mail messages and other course materials, could become public in a broad sense of the term.

To borrow a quote from the newly opened Newseum in Washington, DC., "If you don't want to read about it in the newspaper, don't do it."

8. Do not go unprotected from viruses.

If you do choose to run your machine unprotected from viruses, be certain to be extra vigilant about the attachments coming in to your machine from students and others. Do not open or execute any suspicious files.

Other Thoughts and Resources

A number of helpful resources are emerging to assist in improving electronic communications.

Learning Networks, by Linda Harasim, Starr Roxanne Hiltz, Lucio Teles, and Murray Turoff, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press. (1995). Harasim's experiences can help guide both the

design and delivery of Internet courses. Her book provides in-depth coverage of issues of faculty time management and student evaluation.

A new book (Educational Technology Publications, 1997) worth investigating is *Web-Based Instruction*, edited by Badrul H. Khan from the University of Texas. The book covers all significant aspects of the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of instruction on the World Wide Web. Information on this book is available at:

<http://www.utb.edu/~khanb/wbitc.html>.

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