South Dakota State University

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Y R U Not Responding Email Communication
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Instructors interact with their students within and outside of the classroom through various communication contexts every day. The significance of these student/faculty interactions is illustrated through the vast amount of research on student/faculty communication, which has revealed that student/faculty exchanges are critical to successful student achievement and development (Halawah, 2006; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). A vast amount of research has focused on student-instructor communication within the classroom; however, far less research has analyzed student-instructor communication outside of the classroom (Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005). In particular, through our students’ email messages to us, we have found that the development of out-of-class communication deserves additional attention – especially in terms of email message construction. Thus, we created this transformational classroom activity which focused on the development of out-of-class communication, specifically through student-to-faculty email messages.

Out-of-class communication is defined as communication between faculty and students that occurs outside of the classroom (Fusani, 1994). Out-of-class communication includes informal/formal conversations before or after class, spontaneous meetings, telephone conversations, or computer mediated communication (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003). Student-to-faculty email communication is the most often used form of out-of-class communication (Williams & Frymier, 2007). Unfortunately, when students send poorly...
crafted or inarticulate email messages to faculty, their likeability and credibility with those faculty decreases (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009). The implications of poor email communication extend beyond the classroom. At Fortune 1000 companies, 92 percent of employees agreed that email remains a vital tool for workplace communication and collaboration; however, 64 percent reported having sent or received poorly-worded emails that led to mistakes or misunderstandings that threatened to strain workplace relationships (Blake, 2013).

To improve student communication through email, we developed a teaching activity that positively transformed students’ perceptions of student-to-faculty email creation and ultimately future email message creation in students’ professional lives. This activity was designed to teach students that emails are arguments judged by receivers, who use the messages to draw conclusions about the senders’ credibility and appropriateness. Based upon a sample of our previous student emails, we created four sample emails to show a range of communication skills, from highly ineffective (Email One) to highly effective (Email Four; see Appendix A). As authors of the study, we acted as a Delphi panel (Yousuf, 2007) to converge upon expert agreement regarding the credibility, message development, and task and relationship balance communicated within a sampling of actual emails from our experiences as instructors. We first considered our most notable examples of recent student emails, removed all student-identifying information, and printed the emails for a discussion regarding the merits and weaknesses of the personal and professional communication within each example. We then isolated characteristics that made these emails particularly effective or ineffective. As an expert panel, we selected the emails that best represented the activity goals as the four classroom examples in Appendix A. These activity goals were:

1. to understand the impact of email communication on credibility and relationship development;
2. to be able to think critically about the construct of message development through self-presentation and message impact on receivers; and
3. to understand how to balance task and relationship dimensions of communication.

This classroom exercise goes beyond just teaching communication. We have been approached by faculty in other disciplines because this is an activity with universal appeal in secondary and post-secondary education. In every discipline or major, students need to be able to effectively communicate via email with their instructors. Specifically, the exercise can be used in a variety of communication and writing courses, including: interpersonal communication, public speaking, argumentation and debate, intercultural communication, organizational communication, business and professional communication, and small group communication.

Rationale for the Activity

The scope and depth of research focused on in-class communication has been comprehensive and significant (Nussbaum, 1992). However, research on out-of-class communication has been less exhaustive (Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005). This seems unexpected as Kuh (1995) showed that “out-of-class experiences influence student learning and personal development” (p. 124). Since then, the investigation of out-of-class communication and its role within the educational context has become more relevant and prominent within instructional communication research. According to Bolkan and Holmgren (2012), “Computer-mediated communication, specifically via email, has recently become a significant component of out-of-class communication” (p. 254). Despite the increase in student-to-faculty email use, through observation of our student email messages, we have seen that some students are not aware of the significance and impact of their email message construction.

The importance of properly constructed student-to-faculty email messages has been identified in recent research. Stephens, Houser, and Cowan (2009) noted that a student’s poorly written email message can influence an instructor’s perception of that student’s credibility and decrease the likelihood that the instructor will comply with that student’s requests. Also, Bolkan and Holmgren (2012) suggested that the student email interaction influences the instructor’s opinions of the student. Additionally, they found that “students may positively impact their learning environments by stimulating positive affect for themselves through the use of polite communication” (p. 266).

The significance of improving student-to-faculty email communication is further justified by Young,
Kelsey, & Lancaster (2011), who wrote that email can influence teacher-student relationships and bonding outside of the classroom. Additionally, Bruss (2009) explained that email correspondence is vital to good teaching but is often left unaddressed, much to the detriment of the interpersonal communication between teachers and students. While Bruss (2009) developed a teaching activity for graduate teaching assistants to learn how to improve their email communication with their students, our classroom activity is directed toward students’ own assessment of their email communication and how to improve their email communication with their faculty and in future interactions once they leave the university.

The development of this classroom exercise was influenced by adult education scholar, Jack Mezirow (2000), whose psychocritical approach described learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 5). Through this educational approach, changes in students’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors occur during a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 2000). The psychocritical approach of transformational learning has four primary factors. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) defined these components as “experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action” (p. 134). Thus, our activity asked the students to consider their previous experiences with email communication, to critically reflect upon those experiences individually and as a group, to engage in a classroom discussion about these experiences, and to take action and transform the way that they communicate with their instructors outside of the classroom through an assignment at the end of the semester. As a result, this exercise seeks to improve the quality of email messages between students and faculty and prompts students to consider their own email communication beyond the classroom.

**Description of the Activity**

This single class activity should be completed in roughly 40 minutes of a 50-minute class period. Before completing this activity, students should have read a book chapter or online article on electronic communication, such as Chapter 16 in Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters (2004) or WikiHow (2013). Their specific reading goal is to understand the various characteristics and purposes of email. The activity begins by having students individually respond to a series of questions which ask the students to critically reflect on their use of electronic communication and email messages in their lives. Instructors ask students the following questions:

- Why do we need to think about electronic messages differently than conventional oral or written communication?
- How do you feel, or how would you respond, to an email with all caps, typographical errors, or informal style?
- How do your choice of email address and the emails you send communicate your sense of self?
- How do they convey credibility?
- How does social status affect how you construct your email messages? What are some ways that email can build or harm relationships?

Students break into small groups to share their responses; however, if the class is small in size, the instructor could choose to use general class discussion. After discussing these questions, students analyze four sample emails that display a variety of poor and excellent choices in email communication (see Appendix A). Students read and analyze these four emails with the instructor. Email One illustrates poor message design. Email Two uses a hostile tone and fails to build a relationship between the student and the instructor. Email Three shows poor credibility due to typos, spelling errors, and a failure to use the appropriate credentials for the instructor. Email Four is an example of an excellent email, where the student communicates appropriate balance between task and relational dimensions, uses a respectful tone and clear message design, and presents herself as a credible author. To analyze each email, the instructor asks students to answer the following questions in general class discussion:

- Imagine if you received this message in a face-to-face context rather than through email. How would you respond to the message in an interpersonal context?
- What does this email communicate regarding the sender’s credibility?
- How would the email affect your relationship with the sender?
After evaluating Email Four, the instructor asks students to answer the following question:

- How, if at all, does your perception change, knowing that these emails were based on actual emails sent from students to their instructors?

Debriefing

Through answering class discussion questions and studying sample emails, students have the opportunity to reflect on email communication and its significance in daily life. Students are given an opportunity to connect the previous reading, and their knowledge and experiences, to practical examples of ineffective and effective email communication. In order to connect communication concepts to analyzing email communication beyond the classroom, the instructor poses the following questions to the entire class in debriefing the activity:

- Now, after seeing emails two and three, consider these emails in a business context. If the recipient of the email is your boss, manager, or supervisor, how would you balance task and relational dimensions in improving these email messages?
- Now, imagine you are the boss receiving these emails. How would your perception of the senders change as a result of these messages?
- After seeing these examples, what factors might influence your decision in channel selection (to use email, versus a phone call or face-to-face communication)? What new considerations might affect how you write your next email to your boss or instructor?

Appraisal and Assessment

When this class activity was used in argumentation and debate and interpersonal communication classes, students were surprised at how much their emails communicate about themselves and their credibility. The instructor can easily appraise the success of this activity through an analysis of the debriefing questions and students’ responses and reflection upon this activity in general class discussion. The easiest way to determine whether or not students have actually experienced transformative learning as a result of this activity would be to assess their understanding of the importance of sending professional emails to instructors through an assignment used at the end of the semester. This assignment could ask students to use what they have learned from the activity to type a sample email to one of their professors, requesting clarification regarding a graded assignment or concerning a question on an assignment. Using students’ sample emails, the instructor could then assess the activity goals (see Appendix B).

In teaching this activity in an argumentation and debate class, students did show their transformative learning as a result of this activity, in an unsolicited fashion. One student emailed the instructor in argumentation and debate after the semester ended, noting the long-term benefits of this activity through drawing attention to the writing of that email itself:

“Dear [Instructor’s name], I hope this email finds you well and warm! (See, I learned something about email etiquette from you!!) I just wanted to send you a quick thank you note for this past semester...Thank you! [Student name].” Another student in the argumentation and debate class indicated that he began to assess his instructors’ emails in other classes, and especially in an online communication course. This student was able to identify and implement different strategies in his email communication to his instructor. These strategies included the following: appropriate channel selection with choosing when to send an email and when to call the instructor, balancing task and relationship dimensions in the content of his emails to frame his messages positively in order to enhance the relationship between himself and the instructor, and crafting a professional signature in his emails that highlighted his majors and contact information, which enhanced his overall credibility as a student.

The activity has some limitations, however. One limitation involves a discussion of context. Although our activity is geared toward improving student communication with instructors and other professionals via email, time does not allow for a more in-depth discussion of how email communication would differ depending on other receivers, or on contexts outside of a professional setting. Also, many millennial students now indicate that they rarely use email, or only for academic purposes. Some students might have a difficult time realizing the importance of changing or adapting their email communication style if they do not have much experience in writing or communicating in that particular medium.

Many students who take communication courses are looking at possible careers in business settings.
Assessing these emails in a business context helped students to consider the importance of this medium of communication once they leave the university. To vary the exercise to make it more focused on a business context, the instructor could create or choose email communication examples from an international business setting. Using emails between two individuals who have different cultural backgrounds or language barriers would help students to more directly explore intercultural communication differences and possible areas of miscommunication or conflict in considering status differentials in a different culture.

Email communication is an important medium for students to master, especially as they prepare to serve as business and communication professionals outside of the university. This teaching activity is one step toward increasing students’ awareness of their credibility and self-presentation, of balancing task and relationship dimensions of communication, and of understanding the impact of email communication through message development. Through transformative learning, students will be better prepared to re-read and reconsider that email to another professional or their supervising manager, before they hit “send.”

References and Suggested Readings


Appendix A

Email One:
Subject: *left blank*
I found the projects list, but I can’t find where the reading are assigned?

Email Two:
Subject: final grade appeal – READ ASAP
I know that it has not been 24 hours, but I am not sure when grades are due, and I needed to talk to you now. I want to appeal my grade. I am not in town, so you need to read my appeal now, since I cannot come talk to you myself. I am guessing you recieve many emails expressing concerns about grades! You need to be clearer about you’re expectations.
Jake

Email Three:
Subject: extra points
Mrs. Jones,
I hope this email finds you well. I was just wondering if we got any extra points for the check mark we got on the great speaches work sheet? I was wondering this because I am like 1% away from having an A in the class.

Thanks for your time,
Natalie

Email Four:
Subject: Blog Assignment
Dear Rachel,
I was wondering if I could set up a time to meet with you to discuss the upcoming blog assignment. I appreciate the work that went into the assignment description, but I could really use some additional explanation. If it isn’t too much trouble, I would like to bring in a copy of what I have so far to find out whether or not I am on the right track. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
Charity Leahy
Graduate Assistant
Department of Communication Studies
charity.leahy@university.edu
Assignment: In order to assess your understanding and comprehension of the activity goals, you will craft a sample email to one of your instructors. Using the elements of properly constructed email communication, type a sample email to one of your professors asking for clarification regarding a graded assignment or concerning a question on an assignment. Please print the email and turn this in directly to your instructor. Based on your sample email, the activity goals will be assessed through the rubric below.

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<tr>
<th>Email Elements</th>
<th>Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Credibility/Style</strong></td>
<td>The subject and content of the email convey credibility through use of language which communicates appropriate tone, appropriate emotion through word choice and arrangement, readable font size and style, and use of correct punctuation and grammar.</td>
<td>The subject and content of the email use language which communicates inappropriate tone or emotion. Examples of this would include capitalizing entire words or phrases, using typos, or having incorrect punctuation and grammar.</td>
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<td><strong>2. Message Development</strong></td>
<td>The email contains an appropriate subject heading, begins with a formal greeting (including the appropriate credentials), uses complete sentences, and contains an appropriate closing salutation with your full name and contact information.</td>
<td>The email is missing one or more of the following message design elements: appropriate subject heading, formal greeting, complete sentences, closing salutation, full name and contact information.</td>
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<td><strong>3. Balancing Task/Relationship Dimensions</strong></td>
<td>The content of the email contains sentences or phrases which build a positive relationship between the sender and the receiver while still clearly communicating the task at hand. This would include statements like “I appreciate the work you have done” or “thank you for your time.”</td>
<td>The content of the email contains sentences or phrases which prohibit relationship development between the sender and the receiver, or focus only on tasks instead of building a positive relationship. This would include statements like “You need to be clearer” or “please respond immediately.”</td>
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