

MANAGING ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Advantages of Electronic Communication

Probably the greatest advantage of electronic communication is that it can increase interaction between faculty and students. Whereas instructors have traditionally limited interaction to class time, office hours, and those special times when they are willing to make an appointment, electronic communication allows for asynchronous communication on a much more frequent basis that has been the case in the past. Students can now send Email and respond to discussion board postings on a daily or weekly basis. Faculty can check their messages frequently, gauge student progress and adjust their teaching well before a midterm, final, or some sort of major assignment is to be completed by the students.

These tools can also assist student - student interaction. Students can Email questions to each other or engage in discussion or debate through a listserv or discussion board.

Electronic communication can help students overcome the fear or discomfort of having to confront instructors face to face. Whereas a student might avoid office hours all together (because they are afraid, they have to commute and it takes time, schedules are mismatched, and so on), electronic communication can give a student direct access to an instructor from the convenience of their dorm, apartment, or house. Of course, the same goes for the instructor.

These tools can allow for different types of correspondence. An instructor can communicate one to one with a student via Email, or the students themselves can communicate one to one. Instructors and students can communicate one to many. Where a listserv is put to use, a single message can be sent simultaneously to multiple recipients. An instructor might make an announcement about homework or a student might invite other students to a study session. Finally, instructors can allow for many-to-many communication, as is the case with a discussion board where everyone can see all of the postings.

Clearly there are advantages to using electronic communication tools in teaching. However, as with many tools there are disadvantages. With this variety of available communication technologies it is becoming increasingly difficult for instructors to manage their interactions with students. We are starting to hear common complaints from instructors about these new tools. They include the following:

- I receive too many Emails from students to be able to answer them all.
- With messages from students mixed in with listserv Email, SPAM and everything else, I find it hard to keep track of my communication with students.
- Students expect immediate or frequent feedback through electronic means and I simply can't keep up.
- Students post to my discussion board every day. I can't spend all my time on the discussion board monitoring the postings of students.
- Students use electronic communication as a means to avoid coming to office hours.
- Students ask difficult or involved questions that require too much work to answer using a discussion board or email.
- Students bombard me with emails the day before their midterm/final exam.

Recognizing that these are legitimate problems for instructors, we offer some tips for managing two of the most commonly used electronic communication tools: Email and Discussion Boards.

General Principles

Electronic communication tools like so many others are incredibly flexible. Email, discussion board postings, instant messages, and live chat can be conducted at any time during the day or night. Without some ground rules set out

in advance, students will generate their own expectations for how these tools can and should be used. Often students lack the understanding of how busy a life an instructor leads. It is likely, then, that their expectations for the instructor will vary radically from what is reasonable from the instructor's point of view. Therefore, it is a good idea to set out the ground rules for using these tools on the first day of class. Most likely they should be included in the syllabus for a lab or lecture. Some suggestions for designing guidelines for each one of the tools are listed below.

Email

Email is probably the most popular form of electronic communication. Through Email, we can communicate one-on-one, one to many, or many to many. Not only does it allow us to exchange text messages but we can also attach files of various formats to our messages. Often, students that are a bit shy or are downright afraid of attending office hours will use Email as an alternative form of communication. While Email does not offer anonymity, it does provide a degree of social and physical distance between the student and instructor. Below are some questions and issues to consider when laying out the ground rules for using Email in your course.

What sorts of questions you will answer by Email?

Students often have questions on a wide variety of topics. Are you willing to address anything and everything through Email? If not, you should identify some limits for students to follow.

- Will you answer deep philosophical questions?
- Will you engage in debates with students?
- Will you limit Email for simple short questions and administrative questions?
- Will you schedule appointments through Email?

Of course, you can always use your reply to invite a student to office hours to discuss a question.

Will you allow students to submit homework by Email?

Students often assume you will accept homework by Email and that you can read whatever file format they choose to send. Again, it is a good idea to set some limits.

- Are you willing to accept any assignments through Email?
- Will you accept attachments through Email or must all student work be included in the body of the Email?
- What format of attachments can you read? Can you read Word for the MAC? Can you read Lotus files? Can you read Apple Works?

When and how often will you answer Email?

Left alone, students will assume that they will receive immediate feedback through electronic communication. Some will send an Email and then check frequently for a reply over the next 2 or 3 hours. Others will wait until the night before an exam and then start sending questions. Just because messages can be sent at any time does not mean that you constantly needs to be reading and responding to Email. Set some limits on when and how often you will read and respond to Email about your course.

- How often will you check and answer Email about your course? Everyday? Every other day? Twice a week?
- Are there specific days and times during which you will read and reply to Email? What are they?
- Will students always get a reply from you through Email?

How will you manage the volume of Email you receive?

The sheer volume of Email instructors receive can be overwhelming. Sorting through lists of Email to find those that come from students can be a time consuming task. Complicating this task of sorting through Email is the fact that students can be quite creative with what they type in the subject field of their Email. Some will include no subject whatsoever. Therefore, it might be a good idea

to give your students a pre-defined list of Email subjects to use when communicating by Email. These subject headings might look like the following:

geog4-test question
geog4-homework question
geog4-grade question
geog4-lecture question
geog4-administrative question
geog4-make an appointment

Note that for each one of the subjects, the text is in lower case, and an abbreviated course name is included as the beginning of the subject (in the examples above we used geog4 for Geography 4). This makes it easy for the student to type and you to understand.

By using these pre-defined subject headings you can then use the sort function in your Email package to sort your Email by subject. You will immediately have your course Email and topics sorted in an easy to identify list, and they will be separated out from all the other sorts of Email you receive. The use of pre-defined subject headings can be especially helpful when an instructor is teaching more than one course during a given quarter.

In addition to using pre-defined subjects, you can also use 'filters' or 'rules' to sort your Email. Both terms refer to the same function. In simple terms, through a filter or rule you can tell your Email software to examine each message that arrives for a set of criteria (such as a specific subject or email address). If the message meets the criteria the software will move the message to a folder you specify or even to a trash folder. In this way you could have your Email software automatically separate out Emails about your course from other messages you receive.

Do you want students to flag Email for importance?

The 'importance' function in Email can become annoying if you allow students to determine how to use it on their own. Essentially this function allows users to attach a level of importance to their Email messages. Where high levels of importance are applied (and depending on your Email software) the message will be forced to the top of your list, or some marker (such as a red exclamation point in

MS Outlook) will appear next to the message. Do you want students to use this function? If not, make it clear to them.

What about Email etiquette?

Students will have different expectations about how casual or formal their Email messages need to be. In some cases you will get well written letters from students, in others you may get single words or phrases. Still others will fill up their messages with winks and smiley faces, and other "emoticons". Suggest to your students that they have a read through UCLA's Email Etiquette report.

Discussion Boards

As with Email, instructors can also be overwhelmed by the number of posts to a discussion board. Complicating this is the fact that not all discussion boards work alike. Some will allow you to sort the messages posted to the board, others don't. Some will time-stamp messages, others won't. Some will allow threads, others won't. Thus your ability to manage your discussion board will, in large part, be determined by the particular software you use. Nevertheless we offer some suggestions below.

Encouraging Students To Use A Discussion Board

Unlike Email, students must actively think about the discussion board and visit a web page to use it (with Email most likely they will be using one account so course materials will come to them even when they are interested in personal Email). Therefore, it is likely you will have to motivate students to visit and use the discussion board. Here are some suggestions:

- Have students submit brief writing assignments to the discussion board.
- Once the assignments are posted, ask students to comment on each other's work through posting comments on the discussion board.
- The instructor can post weekly question(s) to the discussion board and ask students to respond.

Managing The Organization Of A Discussion Board

Most discussion boards will support threads. Threads are simply groups of related messages, which are posted as a series of successively indented replies. The trouble you may run into is that students will not follow the thread when they post their questions or comments. Instead of posting replies, they post new messages that then begin new threads. Thus your discussion board could end up with several threads that all refer to the same topic. This can result in a rather messy looking discussion board and one that is difficult to navigate.

Simply explain the concept of threads to students and ask that they follow the existing structure of the board. If there is already a thread on a particular topic, there is no need to start another on the same topic. Of course this means the students will have to read through the discussion board first to see what is already there before they post a new message.

Create Pre-defined Threads

If there are, say, 5 major themes or issues in your course, begin the quarter with 5 postings that simply highlight the topic of the thread. Students can then post within one of the 5 threads. Of course, you could always add new threads later on in the course.

Monitoring Individual Student Postings

Some instructors question whether they should be constantly monitoring students' postings to see if the information provided is correct or if discussions are proceeding in a civilized manner. Is constant monitoring necessary? The answer to this question will depend on the goals you establish.

If you choose to allow the discussion board to be free form, that is you do not lay out criteria for how it is to be used, there is the possibility that the postings may take a sour tone or that students will post factually incorrect information. There are no set rules for how to deal with these problems.

If you make a discussion board available but does not want to monitor it for accuracy of information, you should make this clear to students. In other words, tell students explicitly that information posted to the discussion board

should be approached with a "buyer beware" attitude. Further, if they do encounter factual information, double-check the information. If you want to insure that discussions are civilized then it would be a good idea to layout discussion board etiquette before hand. If you do choose to monitor the discussion board you should make it clear to students how you will oversee the board.

- Will you post corrections to inaccurate information?
- Will you remove posts that report false information?
- When and how often will you review material posted to the board?

Since it is nearly impossible for you to review a post as soon as it goes up, students should be cautious about information they gather from a discussion board even if the instructor is monitoring the board.

Answering Questions and Participating in a Discussion

Similar to Email, students will look for a reply to their post as soon as it goes up on the discussion board. Some will continuously check for a reply. As with Email, it is a good idea to set aside specific times when you will visit the discussion board and answer questions or participate in discussions. Here are some questions to consider:

- How often will you visit the discussion board? Everyday? Every other day? Twice a week? Let students know so they don't sit around waiting and they don't develop the idea that you are not interested in their concerns since you did not respond immediately to their post. Include this information in your syllabus.
- Are there specific days and times during which you will visit the discussion board and answer questions?

Creative Uses of Discussion Boards

UCLA's Social Science Computing Network
The UCLA Social Science Computing Network (SSCNET) has posted a number of examples of

how course web pages (including discussion boards) have been used on campus. Use the links below to view their example pages:

Examples 1

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/classweb/action.htm>

Examples 2

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/classweb/examples.htm>

The History Department at UCLA has posted some basic guidelines for incorporating discussion boards in undergraduate courses. (www.sscnet.ucla.edu/classweb/powerpt/tutorials/history/Tips on Using Bulletin Boards.htm)

The Written Word Versus Conversation

It would seem on the surface that a discussion board is a surrogate for face-to-face interactions. Students can start threads and post replies much as we would do in a conversation. However, the discussion board (and other sorts of text based interaction such as Email) doesn't allow for the sorts of non-verbal communication that often attend discussions. Thus it is critical that students choose their words carefully when using text-based interaction.

Without the various sorts of non-verbal communication that attends conversation, students may misinterpret the spirit or intent of words written on a page. A joke might be mistaken as a serious comment; people attempt to 'read between the lines' and so on. This can very quickly lead students away from intelligent conversation to exchanges of harsh and mean messages otherwise known as 'flames.' Of course this is also possible in a face-to-face conversation, but with two people present it is much easier to ask questions, evaluate intent, and solve problems on the spot.

Since the technologies listed above are asynchronous, it is possible that people may have to wait several days to be able to respond or get a response. Thus a student's imagination may kick in and their anger / frustration / discontent over a particular message may fester and grow. Or, the lack of a response from an instructor might signal disinterest on the instructor's part to the student.

On the other hand, well-crafted messages can sometimes avoid the vague signals and mistaken interpretations that sometimes attend face-to-face interaction.

It is a good idea, then, to suggest to students that they take their time and consciously consider what they are writing and how it might be interpreted, rather than casually throwing up responses in a quick and dirty fashion. ☒

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