What Can We Do About Student E-mails?

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You likely begin each workday by checking your professional e-mail account. The paper you assigned in your senior seminar course is due today, and you are expecting to receive some e-mails from students regarding this assignment. You relax into your desk chair with a cup of coffee and begin reading the new messages in your inbox. You feel a bit of a sinking sensation in your stomach as you read this:

I'm in my dorm's computer lab working on assignment 4. Someone who was half asleep/possibly drunk just stumbled through the room, caught their foot on the cord, and unplugged my computer. Of course, everything that I had done has completely evaporated. I'm still astounded that it even happened. How can you NOT see the cord laying against the wall? Better yet, how do you manage to catch your foot in the cord that is AGAINST THE WALL. Ha, sorry... I'm ranting now. I just don't think I have the heart to re-do my paper tonight. I'm so sad that it is all gone. L I was so close to being done... and now it's 3am and I have a headache. May I please have a few more days to complete it? Gah, I'm having horrible luck this week. I really hope it turns around soon.

We simultaneously received this e-mail from a student in a class we were teaching together, and we were both at a loss for how to respond. We found ourselves discussing not only how to respond in a way that was professional, helpful, and fair to this student, but also how frequently we receive inappropriate content in student e-mails. So we would like to share some of our thoughts on how to respond in a professional manner to this particular e-mail as well as to other types of problematic e-mails from students.

Professor-Student E-mail Communication

E-mail has become the most widely used instructional technology (Brunner, Yates, & Adams, 2008; Jones, 2002; Kistantas & Chow, 2007), and it is being used primarily for course task-related purposes (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005; Sheer & Fung, 2007). Students in traditional, hybrid, and fully online courses were found to prefer seeking help from professors via e-mail (Kitsantas & Chow, 2007). E-mail use among individual students, however, is quite variable. Some students use e-mail with professors quite a bit, while others send very few messages (Atamian & DeMoville, 1998). Some studies suggest that e-mail communication seems to be driven more by faculty (Sheer & Fung, 2007), while others have found that students send faculty twice as many e-mails as faculty send students. Female faculty members have been found to receive more student e-mails (Duran et al., 2005) and to be more likely to receive inappropriate content in e-mails from students (Brunner et al., 2008).

In many ways, the increased use of e-mail over the past decade is positive. E-mail creates a paper trail to help both parties remember the content of a discussion and allows a uniform message to be sent to a large group. In addition, e-mails can be sent in real time, right when a problem or solution to a problem arises. It also allows for a well-thought response that minimizes emotional reactions (Bushweller, 2005).

Reticent students are more likely to communicate with their professors via e-mail than they are to communicate face-to-face. Part-time instructors, who can be difficult to reach, can become more accessible via e-mail (Haworth, 1999).

E-mail communication with students also comes with potential liabilities and frustrations for faculty (Brink, 2001). Course evaluations were found to be affected by perceptions of faculty e-mail helpfulness and promptness (Sheer & Fung, 2007). Low levels of emotional content in e-mail, a standard characteristic of professional e-mail, was found to frustrate student e-mail users (Kato, Kato, & Akahori, 2008). Additionally, e-mail can contain more hostile comments (Dyer, Green, Pitts, & Millward, 1995) and can be uninhibited compared to face-to-face communication (Garton & Wellman, 1995). It should be noted that only about four percent of the e-mails students are sending are being sent to professors (Gatz & Hirt, 2000). Professor-student e-mail, therefore, is likely a student's first exposure to professional e-mail. Thus, students need instruction and modeling on professional e-mail etiquette (Brunner et al., 2008).

Asynchrony, Depersonalization, and Immediacy of the Message

There must be some unique factors that can explain some of the rudeness and disclosures that only seem to come from students via e-mail. The answer to these questions goes along with the unique factors e-mail brings to student-instructor interaction. The first factor is the *asynchronous* nature of e-mail. Because e-mail is a one-way form of communication, instructors
cannot help students modify their message through comments or nonverbal cues. These components of verbal interaction typically prevent students from going too far with self-disclosure or provide them with feedback that they should wrap up their comments (Hollingshead, McGrath, & O'Conner, 1993).

The second factor is *depersonalization*. E-mail does not require a student to see the instructor, so the typical face-to-face social interaction norms are suspended. Without norms to rely upon, students may write from within their stream of consciousness, in which words are not carefully considered (Hiltz & Turoff, 1986).

Asynchrony and depersonalization are compounded by a third factor, which is the *immediacy* upon which a message is sent. An e-mail can be sent within seconds of a student becoming frustrated. Communicating while emotions are running high tends to make these messages less thoughtful, so they're more likely to come across as rude and demanding (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986).

Varieties of Student E-mail

As instructors, we need to understand the role that asynchrony, depersonalization, and immediacy play in the content of our students' e-mails. To that end, we have classified various types of inappropriate student e-mails, and we have included an example of each type from e-mails that we received in the past academic year.

Passing the Buck: The student has gotten to a place in which they no longer want to commit the resources necessary to complete a task. Their solution is to cede the responsibility to the instructor.

Last week United Airlines lost my bag and the book for this class was in there... As of now I have no way

of doing my home work because I cannot find anybody to let me borrow their book and I cannot afford a new book. I am pretty much stressed because at this rate of me not doing my homework because I do not have textbooks, I'm going to flunk out of every class. What should I do?

Hail Mary: The student is way past the point at which makeup assignments and exams can help their grade. So they send an e-mail, usually in the last couple weeks of the semester, to plead their case for the instructor to grant the miracle of a passing grade.

I wanted to begin by telling you that you are a really great instructor. You are one of the best instructors that I have had while I have been at XXX. I have really enjoyed the class, and I have learned a lot this semester. Unfortunately, my grade does not reflect how much I have learned. I was wondering if there was any way that I can pass this class this semester?

If I had a Time Machine: This request is made by students who would like to make up assignments without a late penalty, and would like the instructor to pretend that the assignment was completed at the assigned time.

For some reason I didn't know we had outside activities to do in this class nor did I realize that there were online quizzes to take. Can you please fill me in on what I need to do? I am lost.

Trivialization of a Course Requirement: The student deems their inability to complete a course requirement as an "inconvenience," thus suggesting that you ignore the requirement.

Mine [textbook] is on backorder. The bookstore said that since my order was placed last weekend they had to fill my book order after everyone else's. I cannot walk into the bookstore to purchase the book because I would lose money. I am sorry for the inconvenience.

Too Much Information (TMI): A student decides that the instructor needs to know the most detailed intimate portrait of their lives to justify their request.

I am home today with a migraine headache, a sore throat, congestion, a cough, and a little bit of a fever. I have been drinking a lot of orange juice and take cold medicine so that I could come to class today and take the test. I went to the health clinic and they told me that I might be getting the flu. I am just really feeling really achy, and I have so much congestion that it is kind of gross to sit next to me. So, I think that I better stay home today. Can I make up the test tomorrow?

I Want It Now!: Students assume that all grading is done by computers and that their assignments, papers, and/or exams should be graded within hours of being handed in. This message was sent within hours of a discussion forum ending:

I was looking over the scores for discussion posts and other assignments and notice that I have no score recorded for the Schools discussion forum. I am wondering why I have no scores recorded because I did complete the forum posts. Please respond promptly.

I Need You, I Really Need You: The student needs the instructor to assure them that they are reading the instructions correctly for class assignments.

I was wondering if what's on the study guide is everything we need to know for the final or if I should be studying my notes and the book for what's not on there as well. Please let me know.

Blame the Professor: The student blames the professor for various shortcomings that have caused the student to do poorly.

I also just taken the test 4 today and finished it. I would greatly appreciate if you take my attempt into consideration. I really hope this C doesn't hurt my chances of keeping my XXXXX Scholarship and going to graduate school.

We Only Learn When I Am There: A student sends the instructor an e-mail after missing a class to ask if anything important happened that day.

I accidently slept through all of my classes today, I was just emailing you to make sure I didn't miss anything important.

We Are Best Buddies: The content of this type of e-mail implies a level of intimacy that you do not share with this student.

As much as I would love to be in your class tomorrow morning at 9:30 am, I also have the opportunity to be asleep in my own bed back home five hours away. I know I've missed class three times already, but I was wondering if there is any possibility of you looking the other way and not counting it against me if I left today instead of tomorrow to spend time with my lovely mother and sister and dog, CoCo. Thank you for considering this.

From the Man in the Back of the Class,

XXXX XXX ?

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You Decide: The student has a choice to make, and they e-mail you to let you make the choice for them. Thus, you bear the burden of the choice.

I went to the clinic on campus yesterday and had to go back again today because I wasn't getting better, and I have the flu. I attached the excuse that the Dr. wrote for me. I don't want to miss a lot in class, but if I am going to miss out on a lot then I will attend class, although the Dr. said I couldn't attend class for the rest of this week.

Strategies for Maintaining Your Sanity via E-mail

We have all received these e-mails. So how should we address these types of communications? Here is a brief list of strategies for managing e-mail communications with students and some example responses.

Direct Instruction: We should include formal instruction on the characteristics of a professional e-mail in our courses. Such instruction could include showing students professional and unprofessional

examples of the same e-mail communication as well as outlining requirements for e-mails to the professor, such as a requirement that first and last names should be included in any e-mail.

Model Professionalism: Consider student-instructor e-mail an opportunity for students to learn proper communication techniques and for you to model professional e-mail etiquette.

XXXXXXX,

You may choose to go home instead of coming to class tomorrow. However, I will be counting absences as always. Please keep in mind that this will result in a 5 point deduction from your attendance grade.

I hope that you have a nice weekend.

Gentle Corrections for Egregious E-mails: Sometimes an e-mail may rise to the level at which a correction for the inappropriate e-mail content is in order.

In response to a recent e-mail in which the student had written IMPORTANT ADVISING! in the subject line and had sent the e-mail with highest importance:

XXXXXXX,

I realize that you are concerned about getting registered. I have no intention of holding up this process for you, so I would like to get a meeting set up with you this week to discuss your schedule.

I would like to point out a couple of things to you about e-mail. In the work world, we limit the use of the highest importance stamp for only a handful of extremely critical e-mails. It is similar to dialing 911 when there is a true emergency. Also, using all capital letters in an e-mail is the equivalent to screaming at someone, so you should not write in all capital letters in an e-mail.

Let me know a date and time that you are available for an advising meeting this week.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXX

Encourage Student Ownership: Instead of giving students the answers to their questions, tell them

where they can go to find the answers to their questions.

The assignment due dates are on the syllabus. Our Blackboard site contains the study guide for the test. Please review both of these. If it is not on the study guide, then it will not be on the test.

Professors Have Finite Capacity: Let students know when they can expect feedback and why the professor is unable to give the feedback in a quicker manner. Placing such limitations on the syllabus can also be helpful.

I grade forum posts once a day during the workweek because my evenings and weekends are times that I spend with my family. If your post is made after my daily grading during the workweek or on the weekend, I will get to it during my next weekday grading session.

Refer Out: This approach is typically used when the issues have risen to a university level and can no longer be handled at the classroom level.

The University has a process by which students can request a withdrawal from courses due to extenuating circumstances after the drop period has ended. You can find the policy and the forms for submitting such a request at the link below.

Put It In Perspective: Explain that a poor assignment grade is a small percentage of the overall grade and that there are plenty of opportunities to correct course throughout the rest of the semester.

Keep in mind that they are worth a total of 30 points out of 850 in the entire class. You can still do fine in the class.

Be Empathetic: Indicate that you understand how they feel, even though you are not going to change your decision.

No. I am not going to grade your assignment because you turned it in after the deadline and you did not negotiate a new deadline with me. I know that this is frustrating. You can still make a passing grade in the class.

Refer To The Syllabus: This approach is very useful because relying on policy is often an easy defense for instructors.

Please re-read the course policy on attendance in the syllabus.

End With Happy Note: This generally applies to all situations because the tone of a response can be considerably softened with a positive note.

I hope that you have a nice weekend.

Enjoy the sunshine today.

***Take a Short Pause*:** By taking a deep breath and delaying a response for an hour or more, instructors can answer a message in a more objective matter and avoid escalating an issue.

***They Will Ask Twice*:** While we do not advocate ignoring an e-mail outright as a matter of course, there are those rare times when no response is actually the best response. Some time might motivate students to address the issue on their own. If you receive a second e-mail, then you must respond.

Conclusion

E-mail communication with students is here to stay. Because of the asynchrony, depersonalization, and immediacy inherent in e-mail, we all experience our share of unprofessional student e-mail. It is important for us as faculty to understand that students are new to the world of professional e-mail and that they are likely to send e-mails with inappropriate content. As the recipients of these e-mails, we can minimize negative consequences by modeling professional e-mail etiquette and by having a set of strategies available to help us respond appropriately when unacceptable e-mail content comes our way.