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ESSAY

E-mail Dependency

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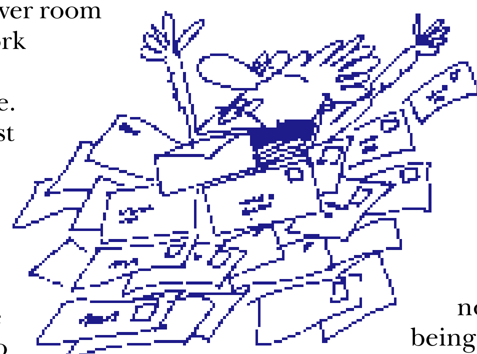
Not too long ago one of our servers hiccuped and our department was without e-mail for a short period of time. As soon as it happened there was an immediate rush to the server room to see if our network administrator was already on the case. Five or six of us just stood around this one person, peering over his shoulder, as if our mere presence would provide the support needed to get the server back online. It's a funny scene, but the reason most of us continued to lurk was because we felt, and in many ways were, handicapped without e-mail. "Should I go home?" one wisecracker asked.

For those who have it, e-mail is a necessity. In addition to its ability to help us stay productive, it satisfies our need to feel involved. It gives us access and provides us with a sense of connection to the world. Indeed, many of us now have several different e-mail accounts, some for work, some for personal business. In a relatively short time many of us have developed an unsettling dependence on this ability to talk to one another electronically.

If you've already become e-mail dependent, at this point you're thinking "No kidding." And if you haven't, you're probably waving a copy of the recent Stanford University study, suggesting that, via e-mail, we've invented yet another way to remain "a lonely crowd."



I'm concerned about this idea of dependency. It may not be as crippling as a drug dependency, but it's not as benign as being dependent on electric lights either.

The Case for Dependency

E-mail is a routine for most of us. It's the first thing we check when we come to work and the last thing we shut down when we leave. Not surprisingly, it's just the same for students. As a computer lab manager, I notice that the primary concern when they sit down at one of the workstations is to get that e-mail open and see what's happening in their world. Quite often, the e-mail application stays open in the background while the student works on a paper or browses other parts of the Web. This practice makes it easy to cast off the one task to check the electronic line for messages. We call this "fishing for e-mail."

This behavior isn't extraordinary given the influences promoting the use of this technology. Each student receives an e-mail account when they enroll at the University. It's a requirement. Today's graduate needs to be computer literate to function in the workplace. In fact, some schools are making this literacy a core part of their curriculum.

From the University's perspective, e-mail is a great administrative tool for making announcements to the student body, streamlining much of the bureaucracy, and for opening doors to the opportunities provided by distance learning.

Faculty endorse e-mail as well, for many of the same reasons and because of its potential for creating educational forums for student voices and ideas.

Finally, there are people like me: "pushers" of a harmless sort (I hope) who midwife the campus through a constant rebirth into the world of cyberspace. Instructional and Information Technology specialists (ITs), like me, work to make the technology accessible, easy and seamless so everyone—administrators, faculty and students—can do the managing, teaching and learning they need to do without having the technology "get in the way."

Self Control and Teaching Each Other

Now this is where the alarm goes off in my head: "dependency." If we've developed this undeniable need to use e-mail and we're relying on it to help us achieve our educational goals, how can we adequately address its limitations? We want e-mail to remain invisible and inconsequential, but is it? Is it merely a reformation of paper, envelopes and stamps or is it the "demon rum" of the Information Age?

If it's the latter, can we use it without accepting some responsibility for teaching students (and faculty for that matter) how to use it responsibly? Perhaps we should (sometimes at least) think of it as liquid nitrogen or prussic acid—useful, even necessary, but requiring careful handling.

Developing a personal and professional awareness of the effects of e-mail in higher education has not been a priority. ***Who*** should be giving thought to these best practices and how should they be implemented? Surely someone should.

While ample training materials and policy papers exist to show users how to log on, send and reply to messages, and even on how to construct a "socially" appropriate message, most ***administrators and IT staff*** concern themselves more with ensuring the physical stability of the network rather than with offering sound techniques for managing mail. The ***faculty***, juggling enough work with research and teaching already, do not consider themselves in a position to instruct students on developing appropriate electronic discourse practices. That leaves the ***students***—the group most responsible for the bulk of sending and receiving—to come up with some ideas. However, since appropriate management strategies only apply in communications with their professors and in course-related e-mail lists (a small percentage of their total e-mail), they are certainly less stressed out over all that mail. And so there's no good answer to "***who***?" Currently it's "every man for himself" and "To each, his (or her) own."

Perhaps that's the way it should be. Manners evolve out of a community and everybody has to learn to manage their time for themselves. But it's in everybody's best interest to be concerned about developing and implementing some management strategies to cut the fat out of the infoglut.

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Editor's Note:

The editor's note in the last issue of the *Forum* tried to sketch a rough parallel between "conversation" and "picturing" and the processes of teaching and numbering. If "counting" and "numbering" (as Lee Shulman had used the ideas to represent the deep roots of scholarship) seemed static, explaining via words and pictures formed the necessary complement, the mode needed to pass on whatever facts and ideas seemed "nailed down." This issue of the *Forum* picks up where the last left off. Its several articles seek to leave faculty with a few ideas to ponder over the summer, ideas to consider applying to the courses being planned for next fall.

Only the rare picture is really worth a thousand words, but a picture can go a long way in clarifying ideas. **Mary Beaudry**'s article on course graphics makes a case for the value of a well-constructed diagram in helping students understand and integrate concepts. A good diagram functions like a map. It presents knowledge whole (or seems to) and lets students discover as their eye directs and revisit as their curiosity and need demand.

Thomas A. Marino, Matthew Eager, and **Taryn Draxler** offer a combined view, combined in a number of ways. First, while Marino is faculty, Eager and Draxler are students. Together they present a teaching and learning conversation in progress, the faculty member's idea, how it went over, and what he plans to do in response to what the students thought. It's also a very modern conversation and a very modern and practical use of new technology for pedagogical gain. Students view and listen to the straight out lecture material online, at their convenience—a situation rather like having a map available. Then face-to-face time becomes richer because it can be used for more give and take rather than simply a lot of "giving" on the professor's part.

Donna Qualters of MIT has used a structured set of guidelines called "Dialogue" to create a safe social space for faculty to probe deeply and honestly into their lives as teachers. Excerpts from these conversations show the value of these meetings.

Qualters' conversations are face-to-face, but much of our communication these days flows through e-mail. E-mail offers a tremendous blessing and has revived letter-writing and more frequent communication among all those with access to it who do not proudly count themselves among the neo-Luddite population. But even for enthusiasts, e-mail presents challenges. Like automobiles and the telephone, it's a mixed blessing. Do faculty have a role to play (beyond their own personal challenges in coping with e-mail) in helping students and the campus in general learn how to cope with the digital missive? **Ron Cramer**'s job has him pondering these questions every day, even as he works to keep the e-mail flowing and the rest of the new technologies up and running for faculty.

Finally, **Linc. Fisch** offers another practical AD REM column that ties together aspects of the new pedagogies and some age-old teaching problems. Let's say you've prepared wonderful case studies and put them on the Web, but when you arrive to teach your class, the students sit mute as posts. What do you do? Linc. has some ideas.

Speaking, finally, of ideas, let me remind readers that the *Forum* wants to hear yours. Manuscripts on teaching and learning topics are always welcome. Send yours to the *Forum* via e-mail at jrhem@itis.com or via "snail mail" to James Rhem, 213 Potter Street, Madison, WI 53715.

May we all have a good, good summer.

— James Rhem

Here are some general ideas on how to go about it.

Administrative Level

If the campus utilizes specific applications (software) for electronic mail, then IT support groups should create a host of training sessions, online presentations, web-based and hardcopy materials that can be used to reach and educate the entire user community on how to use them. The effort may well have to start with something as simple as surveying the intended audience to find out what the campus needs to know. (There's a lot of independent learning going on about computers, and nothing turns off an academic audience faster than being forced to endure elementary instruction when they're ready for intermediate or advanced coaching.)

Keeping large e-mail volume in mind, these instructional materials should show users the function of each feature in an e-mail application. Many people don't take advantage of the simple tools that can help them organize their mail, such as creating folders, sorting, filtering, and archiving messages.

The contemporary conventions of e-mail need to be shared with the faculty and staff. Some of these conventions are social and others technical, but both interact all the time. What is an "emoticon"? Why do some foreign characters come out looking like garbage? What does a response in ALL CAPS mean? What do "flaming" and "spamming" mean? Misinterpreting a message always leads to a request for clarification or a discussion heading in the wrong

> When instructors engage in a critical dialogue with students about technology and why it's being used, it emphasizes the importance of respecting best practices.

direction, and this means more mail (which means more "junk," more frustration, more wasted time).

Last—because they're in a position to see the big picture, which individual users often cannot see—IT staff should develop a ***"best practices list"*** or ***"effective management strategies"*** from which faculty members can create their own e-mail policies to bring into the classroom and share with the students. Naturally, policies will vary depending upon the instructor and the discipline.

Faculty and Staff Level

Even if the campus endorses a certain e-mail application, faculty and staff should look into the applications that best suit their needs. They may want to forward mail to an office package that has a calendar, the ability to schedule appointments, a task manager and an address book. Of course, they should make sure they can still do all the things with e-mail that they were able to with the campus application, such as sorting, filtering and archiving.

Everyone needs to make good and conscious decisions when constructing and sending e-mail. Generally, one should provide more details in a message going out to many recipients. We should always anticipate questions that might arise from such a message and provide the answers. Also, let's not buy into this idea that it is just SO easy to copy someone, or attach a certain document. Ask the question, ***"Do they really need to see this?"***

If the campus hasn't provided some strategies, faculty and staff should also develop classroom practices for students to follow when communicating with the instructor. They should take some time on the first day to explain these practices and why it is important for students to follow them. Also, they should explain these procedures to the teaching assistants as well, so they know and can help students understand the policies. When instructors engage in a critical dialogue with the students about the technology and why it is being used, it emphasizes the importance of respecting the practices.

In addition to drop-in office hours, instructors might establish some ***electronic office hours*** (usually twice as long as drop-in) where they tell students that they will read and respond only to e-mail related to the course. They should stress that they will be available only in this format at this time. No phone calls and no additional drop-in traffic. They might respond only to messages with a time-stamp that falls within those hours. This gives them opportunity to establish some good management techniques, because with lots of mail they can read the messages, note similar questions, synthesize an answer and respond to all. Writing fewer e-mail messages gives them the time to answer in detail if they choose, or get additional work done. Finally, instructors shouldn't be afraid to tell a student that their e-mail was abstract or unclear, or that their question could easily be answered by reading the chapter. This challenges the student (not a bad thing) to come up with better questions and also discourages the whole idea that it is easier to send an e-mail than it is to investigate the answer.

Finally, faculty and staff should try to ***appreciate the network activity*** of the campus by contacting the campus networking support group. On our campus, online activity peaks over the lunch hour, which is why we tell faculty members to expect some slow response if they are going online in their classroom at that time. Knowing the highs and lows of daily network activity helps one comprehend the infoglut problem and provide better times for holding electronic office hours.

Student Level

As information and management practices are passed down to them from campus administration, faculty and staff, students should begin to appreciate the importance of managing their e-mail correctly and incorporate these behaviors into their class projects and other academic/personal e-mail communications. For instance, it would be nice if students saved personal e-mail for the late evening period, but I'd be happy if they didn't tie up multiple machines in the computer lab just to keep a mailbox open.

Clearly, our e-mail interactions and management strategies raise more issues than those that arise in how we use it on any given day. There is more research to be done in the fields of discourse analysis, cognitive science, cultural studies and communication theory that can shed light on the subtle practices and outcomes of utilizing electronic mail. If technology were neutral, it wouldn't be problematic, but this is simply not the case. E-mail is a transformative communications technology, and we had better pay attention to all aspects of how we are using it and the many levels of change it is making in our institutions of learning and our daily interactions.

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Further Reading

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