
USING E-MAIL TO COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER TEACHER - AND INCREASE CLASS PARTICIPATION

Using e-mail to communicate with students can make you a better teacher - and increase class participation.

By Kerry Hannon

Last spring, when University of Maryland Journalism professor Willie Schatz kiddingly e-mailed his students that class was canceled the following day due to his birthday, half of them took it seriously and didn't show up for class. He meant it as a joke, but, hey, it was the perfect excuse for students to take a breather on a beautiful sun-kissed day to toss the frisbee around on the quad or sleep a bit later. "I never thought for a nanosecond they would take it seriously," says Schatz. "I even said that the university president had signed off on it and had declared it a holiday for the entire campus."

Schatz thought he was being funny and reaching out to them on a personal level-or maybe he was merely trying to rustle up birthday cards-but communicating via e-mail can cause its share of misunderstandings. Schatz learned his lesson, and he didn't penalize the students who took him at his word. After all, if the professor was humorously canceling class, then that was his prerogative. The few who did show up had a great private session.

But while some professors at universities across the country still refuse to use e-mail as a teaching tool, it's here to stay as a quick and easy way to communicate with students. Though not a replacement for the classroom and face-to face contact, it is a reinforcement, a lifeline, an open door even after office hours are over.

While e-teaching has rapidly become an essential tool for professors in all disciplines, engineering professors have had to jump-start their computer prowess faster than others to keep up with their techno-savvy students. "Computers have taken the place of the slide rule," says Julie E. Sharp, associate professor of the Practice of Technical Communication in the chemical engineering department at Vanderbilt University.

"Today's students are so agile with a computer that you can post a handout on the Web, answer questions a shy student might not want to ask in class, or give bulletins about scheduling changes, among other things," she says. Moreover, you can remind students about papers that are due and give them tips to help them succeed. "It's a just-in-time kind of thing," she says. "It's helping them immediately when they need it."

Students today keep a hectic pace. Many are involved in extracurricular activities or jobs that conflict with a professor's office hours. Encouraging students to e-mail their papers, if they feel they are running hard against the deadline, is a great option and may ultimately produce a better result. Those few additional hours can make all the difference.

Here's another thought to consider: Listening and remembering seem to be a problem for many students in today's fast-paced world, says Sharp, who has been a professor for 25 years. "If you send your students an e-mail either individually or as a group, they can refer to it. It's a reminder. They don't lose it like they might a class note."

E-mail does seem to help improve student learning and participation, according to the professors Prism interviewed. Sharp actually conducted a two-semester study of 59 students to get their feedback on how it's working from their perspective. She says her students concur that it's a great way to turn in work, receive information about an assignment, and get help. It also increases interaction between professor and student. And education is all about communicating, right?

TIPS FOR USING IT

Here are some techniques that Sharp's study indicated are effective: Install virus protection software and keep it updated. At the beginning of the course get the preferred e-mail addresses from students. Announce the course requirements for checking e-mail. Make your e-mail subject lines as specific as possible--you don't want them to get confused with the mail from Mom. Check your student e-mail at least once and preferably twice a day. Also check messages the evening before a major assignment is due; there could be some folks out there with dire last-minute questions. Send a mass e-mail with tips for success no later than one day before a major assignment is due.

Most students have their own computers or have access to computers at the engineering schools, so it shouldn't be a problem to get this line of communication rolling--though you should check early on in the course to make sure everyone can pick up messages. According to Sharp's study, students check e-mail more frequently than printed class materials and want messages with information about their assignments. Sharp swears by the rule of one e-mail a week, but answers individual messages every weekday and Sunday night.

Computers can also boost the person-to-person connection that helps the education process. Of course, students want the option of meeting with the professor and want to know what the office hours are, just in case they can amble by for a chat.

But computer communication is definitely a different animal. You'll be dissed for being long-winded; communicating succinctly seems to be de rigueur. E-mail messages from professors should be relatively short, according to Sharp's study of her students. And, whenever possible, trash the attachments.

If you're still unsure, how's this for a vote of confidence about using e-mail in your teaching? "Few of my professors communicate by e-mail," wrote one Vanderbilt engineering student surveyed by Sharp. "Those that do, I feel, care enough about their students to give little reminders or words of encouragement that I appreciate greatly. Come to think if it, it's discouraging to think I have so many professors that don't have those extra 10-15 minutes a week to have any sort of extra communication with their class that they themselves initiate."

In no way should professors limit themselves to e-mail, or think of e-mail as a strategy to take them off the hook of physically teaching. But it is, without question, a great way to build a bond by reaching out to students and letting them know that you are there to help. After all, you want them to succeed.

So, if a student has a question at two in the morning, they can ask it. Hopefully, you'll get to it in the morning before class and deal with it, quickly and privately. You can also get papers outside of normal classroom hours and they can meet the deadline. It helps you to be, in other words, the "guide on the side" rather than always being the "sage on the stage."

There's more though, of course. You can use e-mail to highlight major points made in class, to mention things you forgot to bring up in class, or to give a heads-up about an unexpected absence. (Not like Schatz's, mind you.)

And, of course, there are some drawbacks. All students must have computer access, attaching files can often be problematic. For example, America Online users still can't download most files from other Internet carriers, so you have to paste them into an e-mail message.

In the end, remember to make it short and sweet. But keep in touch. You've got mail.

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