

Chapter 43

Tone and Attitude in E-Mail Communications and the Online Classroom

Melissa A. Miller
Kaplan University, USA

ABSTRACT

In the online classroom, e-mail has emerged as a predominant communication method between students and faculty. As such, despite many benefits of e-mail, including ease of use, familiarity of the technology, and rapid response times, there are numerous challenges faculty face when sending and receiving e-mail correspondence with students. This chapter addresses several of the challenges presented to faculty, including lack of cues such as body language, inflection, and other sensory stimuli. The author of the chapter discusses ways to overcome these challenges including appropriate tone and attitude in the faculty member's e-mails, which help mitigate the challenges the medium presents. The chapter concludes with discussion supporting use of electronic communication for students and faculty, especially when written effectively and purposefully.

INTRODUCTION

As Marshall McLuhan famously said, “The medium is the message.” For online educators, the e-mail communication we send to our students and colleagues are extensions of ourselves. Our e-mail correspondence is the lifeline between us and our students, and in an online classroom, it essentially replaces the face-to-face dialogue. We use various means of communication within the classroom platform, but e-mail (and possibly other social media) are the means of closing the personal gaps sometimes lacking for online learners. Reaching out via e-mail is the smile or wave of a professor you see on campus and a quick reply to a student question via e-mail is the feedback a student receives during face-to-face office hours. Because of its importance, educators must be committed to effective e-mail communication.

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It is socially valid to address tone and attitude in e-mail communication between faculty and students because, “more than any other, e-mail is the adjunct faculty member’s most important communication tool” (Cooper & Booth, 2011, p. 16). Also, due to the bulk of communication occurring via e-mail, “it is worth asking what effect the e-mail medium will, in the long run, have on students’ language use, or, how students’ face-to-face language use in the academic domain might affect their e-mail use with their professors” (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 74). Because e-mail serves as a main tool of communication, it is vital faculty use it effectively and judiciously. Additionally, e-mails are often misunderstood or leave the reader (student) more confused than prior to the communication. Kruger et al (2005) remind us, “people routinely overestimate how well they can communicate over e-mail,” and this is often the case when the meaning is “ambiguous” (p. 926). Even when faculty believe they are communicating effectively, and writing with appropriate tone and attitude, it is prudent to re-examine and fine-tune their practices. E-mail communication impact student-to-faculty relationships, and impact instruction in the online classroom. To this end, tone and attitude must be considered when improving e-mail communication. This chapter explores these potential challenges and prescribes ways for faculty to bridge the potential gap created by these obstacles.

BACKGROUND

Although e-mail is a relatively new mode of communication, numerous studies have been conducted in this field, particularly regarding e-mail use and the online learning environment and relationships between faculty and students. For example, in a 2010 qualitative study that examined faculty members’ and students’ expectations and perceptions of e-mail communication in a dual pathway pharmacy program, the researchers found “constructive criticism received by e-mail can be misinterpreted as being rude and condescending” (Foral et al., 2010, para 27). Students also reported feeling “faculty members should be accessible, approachable, and available for e-mail questions” because they are paying for their services via tuition (Foral et al., 2010, para 28). Yu and Yu (2002) conducted a study which showed “empirical evidence supporting the usefulness of e-mail as a promising aid to promote student cognitive growth” and that “incorporating e-mail into the learning process might be a promising enhancement to instruction that teachers could readily adopt” (p. 117). However, Wood (2002, as cited in Heiman, 2008) found increased positive perceptions of the online community and student-to-faculty relationships, regardless of the number of e-mails sent (two or fifteen) (p. 240).

Heiman conducted a 2008 study at The Open University of Israel that looked at *The Effects of E-Mail Messages in a Distance Learning University*, as higher education e-learning is not a frequently examined field, to date. The study found evidence that “students who received e-mail messages expressed higher perceived social support, had a higher task-oriented strategy, and emotion-oriented strategy, and tended to express higher satisfaction with academic courses” (Heiman, 2008, p. 244). A 1999 study by Minsky and Marin found “favorable attitudes toward innovation and change, computer self-efficacy, and computer experience directly and positively influence e-mail use” (p. 195). In a survey conducted by Johnson (2000), cited by Pena-Sanchez of Texas A&M University (2008), e-mail was rated highest (over interpersonal and written communication) by students in the context of social presence when defined as personal touch, socializing, and allowing the receiver to get to know someone (p. 196). Pena-Sanchez (2008) then went on to conduct a survey regarding reliability and validity of various communication channels, including e-mail, and found “students considered e-mail to be superior for timeliness, conve-

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