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How can e-mail be used to facilitate communication between teachers and students

Nathaniel Anthony Moultrie
University of Northern Iowa

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How can e-mail be used to facilitate communication between teachers and students

Abstract

Electronic mail, e-mail, or Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is an electronic communication medium that is starting to emerge in the educational system. The use of e-mail between students and teachers is growing steadily and rapidly. In just a few years, the number of K-12 students involved in networking has grown close to one million with a rate of increase of over 10% per year. With the sudden burst of technology within the school system, a transition period of experimenting with innovative ways of communication is before us. This research paper will address the use of e-mail as a viable means for teachers and students to enhance communication.

How Can E-mail Be Used To Facilitate Communication
Between Teachers And Students

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

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Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Nathaniel Anthony Moultrie

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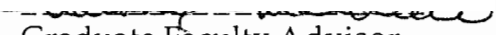
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of Master of Arts in Education

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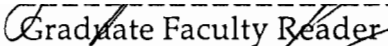
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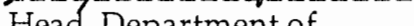
Sharon E. Smaldino


Graduate Faculty Advisor

Leigh E. Zeitz


Graduate Faculty Reader

Greg P. Stefanich


Head, Department of
Curriculum and Instruction

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The process of communication, when conducted successfully, yields comprehension and meaning. Specifically, in education, it is imperative that this process is not hindered so that information may be transmitted, discovery and exploration fostered, and learning and understanding achieved. Communication within the classroom can often be clouded by culture, personal idiosyncrasies, verbal and spatial intimidation, lines of authority, and many explicit and implicit factors between teachers and students. Therefore, communication must be optimized to diminish the potential of the aforementioned barriers.

Traditionally, a face-to-face model (teacher to student) has been the typical pedagogic style within the educational system. Moreover, technology has made available other media to enhance and facilitate the communication process between teacher and pupil. Electronic mail, e-mail, or Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is an electronic communication medium that is starting to emerge in the educational system. The use of e-mail between students and teachers is growing steadily and rapidly. Kandies, (cited in Joyner, 1995), stated that not only is the use of electronic networking growing exponentially in business and but also school children are becoming frequent users of electronic communication. According to Itzkan (cited in Joyner, 1995), in

just a few years, the number of K-12 students involved in networking has grown close to one million with a rate of increase of over 10% per year. With the sudden burst of technology within the school system, a transition period of experimenting with innovative ways of communication is before us.

This research paper will address the use of e-mail as a viable means for teachers and students to enhance communication.

Research Question

How can e-mail be used to facilitate communication between teachers and students?

Methodology

All of the research for this paper was conducted at the University of Northern Iowa using on-line computer searches of Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the Reader's Guide. The search index scope of this paper primarily covers published findings from 1989 to the present due to the sparse findings of technological applications of e-mail prior to this time span. Every reference was evaluated with regard to its validity. The literature was not very extensive with regard to the specificity of this subject in the developmental application within education. Specifically, the research from this study is reflective of the findings generated from the descriptors electronic mail, e-mail, communication, teachers, and students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical Background of E-mail

In the late 1960s the U.S. military was searching for a means to transmit communication in the occurrence of a large-scale nuclear war. The military needed a trustworthy, expedient, and decentralized system to sustain communication in the event of the destruction of main institutions. Electronic mail (e-mail) was the means that was created (Warschauer, 1995). In the early 1970s, e-mail was strictly limited to U.S. military control and use. The only other authorized users were defense contractors and universities doing defense research. Moreover, the use of e-mail began to spread more widely within the university communities. By the 1980s, the world of academia began using e-mail in numerous fields for professional exchange and collaboration. The explosion of e-mail occurred in the early 1990s with use transcending the former limited use and moving into personal, business, and recreational usage (Warschauer, 1995). "Whereas a few thousand people were using e-mail in 1980, it is estimated that more than 25 million people throughout the world were using it in the mid-1990s" (Warschauer, 1995, p.5).

Warschauer (1995) also elaborated on how e-mail works as a way of sending a message from one computer to one or more other computers around the world. First, compose a message, either by writing it

directly in a special e-mail software program or by writing it first in a word-processing program and then transferring (uploading) it into the e-mail software. Then, a simple command is issued to send the message. The computer system breaks the message into tiny pieces and sends them electronically to the destination, usually over common telephone lines. The pieces might travel numerous different routes through various other computers on the way. Then, usually within 2-3 minutes, the pieces will all arrive at their destination, where the receiving computer will reassemble them into a legible message. The person receiving the message can then log onto his or her computer account at a convenient time and read the mail.

Teachers and Students Communicating in the Classroom

There is no circumventing human relations in teaching and learning. *Communication* and *learning* are two terms for the same phenomenon (Spindler & Spindler, 1994). "If the introduction of computers into the classroom is going to change learning practices, then there has to be a corresponding change in the possibilities and forms of communication between teacher, children, and possibly others" (Spindler & Spindler, 1994, p.256).

E-mail has been reported as an effective communication medium in a variety of educational settings. Surveys conducted across campuses in the United States reveal that teachers and students use e-mail as

a communication tool to fulfill their personal needs (Wang, 1996).

E-mail is used for exchanging information, discussing opinions, and socializing with people (Grabowski, Suciati, and Pusch and Rice & Case, cited in Wang 1996). Warschauer (1995) contended that e-mail provides students an excellent opportunity for real, natural communication. Many students are lacking numerous opportunities to communicate in English, particularly, foreign students who live or study in English-speaking countries. "E-mail can put students in contact with native speakers and/or other English learners across town or the world in minutes and provide the authentic contexts and motivations for communication that teachers are always trying to supply." (Warschauer, 1995, p.2). Warschauer continued that e-mail empowers students for independent learning. The use of e-mail and the Internet involves a whole range of skills including knowing how to use a personal computer, knowing how to navigate the immense resources of what is often called cyberspace, and becoming familiar with the special register of e-mail communication (which lies between the formality of traditional writing and the spontaneity of speech).

E-mail communication is sometimes added to the regular classroom in the hope of increasing the interaction between teachers and students, and thus improving the quality of the learning environment (Wang, 1996). Studies report that students demonstrate an overwhelming acceptance of e-

mail as a supplement to traditional modes of instructor-student interaction (Wang 1996). Students described e-mail as “quick, convenient, and fun” (Kinkead, cited in Wang, 1996). The teachers interacted more frequently with their students using e-mail than they did in face-to-face or paper communication (Wang, 1996).

Students asked more challenging and more thoughtful questions, and the instructor’s responses to these questions were often of higher quality than those they provided in face-to-face interaction (Wang, 1996). Poling (cited in Partridge, 1995) purported that e-mail can be effective for the following: answering direct questions from any student, counseling, class assignments, occasional quizzes, direct communication with a particular student, posting grades, helpful hints about homework or upcoming quizzes or test and excuses for missing class. With regard to students’ questions, Poling (cited in Partridge, 1995) stated:

This is perhaps the MOST valuable and productive of the many aspects of using electronic mail. I have found that students who would NEVER ask a question in class for fear of sounding stupid or because he/she feels somewhat intimidated, will willingly and easily ask very pointed and meaningful questions while hidden behind a computer terminal.

(p. 9)

Tella (1992) contended that chatting, informing, and entertaining are all forms of written production that are encouraged by e-mail. Similarly, these forms of written production are not usually practiced in teacher-sponsored school-based writing. Tella hypothesized that this would help those boys who are less excited about teacher-directed writing than girls. Thereby, e-mail could provide a platform for boys, who are reluctant and apprehensive to writing to express themselves more. "In this sense, computer-mediated communication and the use of e-mail can be regarded as fairly democratic and contributing to gender-equity. "Basically, it does not favour one gender more than the other" (Tella, 1992, p.40).

Conrad and Rautenhaus (1994) found that in order to satisfy the different linguistic levels, pupils introduce each other and chat about their hobbies or any shallow topic, but they also can discuss very seriously problems like the Gulf war or the holocaust. The linguistic research done in Oldenburg ,1992 (cited in Conrad & Rautenhaus, 1994) it was demonstrated that the language with which pupils are using with e-mail adds spice to the often dry, mostly descriptive and not very up-to-date language that is found in textbooks. Conrad and Rautenhaus (1994) also described e-mail as more idiomatic, more communicative, more genuine, authentic and concrete and therefore meets the interest of the pupils in a very special way.

In a case study of secondary school students the dual character of computer-mediated communication is flexible enough to permit both slow and fast learners (or writers) to act according to their own learning styles (Tella, 1994). In reference to the patterns of dominance in the classroom, Tella found that those students who are perhaps used to dominating the immediate oral communication situations may lose some of their touch now that part of the communication is shifted over to written production. In addition, it may favor shy or introverted students who do not personify the self-confidence to openly be expressive in the classroom, in particular during face-to-face communication. Harasim (cited in Tella, 1992) added that this image of self in relation to communication is concerned to socioemotional factors that affect the students' level of performance, including motivation, anxiety, and satisfaction, among other things. Tella also found that an increased emphasis on computer-mediated communication may reduce the anxiety levels by shy students experienced in direct classroom communication situations.

One of the basic characteristics of computer-mediated communication is the dimension of immediacy/non-immediacy. It is already generally acknowledged that the use of e-mail systems liberates the users from the restrictions of time and place, thus facilitating place-independent learning and collaboration instead of traditional place-based education (Tella, 1992).

Mentoring Students with E-mail

Mentoring a child is a very delicate and intimate process to initiate. It demands grounds for trust, relation, and successful communication. A face-to-face model of communication has been a consistent means of verbal exchange. When problems in comprehension, cultural vernacular, and other communication barriers arise, the mentoring relationship can become challenging. E-mail has the capacity to enhance mentoring relationships. "Mentoring by e-mail, as sterile as it sounds, might be a great way for children and adults to have safe and interesting conversations with each other" (Spindler & Spindler 1994 p.250). Spindler and Spindler documented an account of an e-mail mentoring relationship:

A case of opening the gate for person-to-person contact and the passage of information. It is the story of a mentoring relationship between an adult (Seth Chaiklin) and two 10-year old, sixth-grade girls in a school near the park. More important, it is about how crossing borders and enabling unlikely relationships to develop could actually help inner-city kids break from the gate. The channel for the mentoring relationship was minimal, namely, the telephone wires that allow computers to exchange electronic mail (E-mail) messages, and the data for our analysis are correspondingly minimal, an exchange of 42 messages across 6 months (and brief exchanges in the ensuing years). (p. 249)

Spindler and Spindler (1994) observed that mentoring relationships between children and an adult in their wider community offers possibilities for organizing learning and growth across the social borders that are usually left impenetrable. In addition, regardless of the logistic, legal, or bureaucrat reasons for mentoring not being a significant part of American education, mentoring by electronic mail bypasses most of the problems. Specifically, the e-mail exchanges suggest that it is quite easy to communicate across some of the deeper social barriers found in our cities (Spindler and Spindler, 1994). Spindler and Spindler, suggest that the success of the E-mail exchanges within the study imply that problems with people on different sides of the cultural border have to do with the forces that organize the borders and not with differences in the communicative styles and values of the cultural groups on the different sides. Spindler and Spindler upheld that e-mail may be a particularly useful medium for a mentoring relationship. Furthermore, e-mail requires no face-to-face contact, and the messages are accessible to those maintaining the network. Moreover, Spindler and Spindler note that computers alone are not sufficient to change the fundamental problems of education. They only provide a tool that can be adapted and developed in pursuit of educational goals. Spindler and Spindler suggest:

A distinctive feature of these telecommunicated interactions is the playing down of power relationships between the mentor

and the children. This is one of the few interactions that we know of in which an adult and child can come together as relative social equals. The children have no reason to expect that the adult mentor is going to report the conversations to the teacher or their parents. The adult mentor has no obvious control over the material conditions of their lives.

The lack of face-to-face interaction may help to support this coequal relation. Physical size, strength, age and institutional setting differences are neither immediately apparent nor intimidating.

(p. 279)

Dismantling Communicative Barriers with E-mail

E-mail is a unique communication medium. As a written communication medium, e-mail not only allows the writer to interact with the text via computer, but also makes it possible and easy for writers to interact with each other via computer. E-mail enhances the communication between writers by transferring their writings to each other almost spontaneously (Wang, 1996). Daiute (cited in Wang, 1996) thus frames it as computers become "a communication channel as well as a writing tool" (p.767).

Hettinger (1995) elaborated upon an advantage of using e-mail to serve as a communicative bridge overcoming common obstacles. Participants

can usually be separated by space and time. Thus, students' questions and concerns about erudite concepts recently encountered during study or reflection of class discussions can be addressed while the issue is fresh in the student's mind. Hettinger continued that perhaps the most powerful advantage of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is that it provides the opportunity for students and faculty to clarify concepts, notwithstanding, small conceptual nuances can be missed in discussions infused with social and personal contexts.

Warschauer (1995) also found two major advantages of using e-mail over paper communication in relation to ESL students having difficulty expressing their ideas in writing. Warschauer found that using e-mail rather than paper for communication seems to create advantages. For example, with the use of e-mail the communication is going directly and rapidly to the reader which provides a wonderful sense of audience and because the words are electronic and are never committed to paper, e-mail seems to allow students to take more risks and to avoid getting terrified of committing original thought to paper.

Russell (1996) still receives e-mail months after a conclusion of a writing course from his students. This post-course electronic communication allows for an evaluation of the course that is free from the boundaries of anxiety of a grade and other communicably inhibiting factors that bind open communication. For example, after a number of e-mail exchanges over a

period of six months, one of Russell's former students mentioned that he hated the textbook that they had used. The honesty characterizing such conversations can be attributed to the absence of grading issues, to the amount of time that had passed since the course, and to the intimacy that e-mail often invites.

E-mail texts are rich with verbs that refer to a state of mind or feeling (Sporea, cited in Conrad & Rautenhaus, 1994), The verbs *love*, *hate*, and *enjoy* were used in the textbook-corpus with a frequency of only 0.1%, but in the e-mail-corpus they were used with a frequency of 1% (Leech & Svartvik, cited in Conrad & Rautenhaus, 1994). Concordances on *to*-infinitive constructions, as, according to Leech & Svartvik, *to*-infinitive constructions are typical for expressing emotions, intentions and aims. Leech & Svartvik suggest: The e-mail-corpus has a *to* in two ways: *To* serves as a preposition as well as part of a *to*-infinitive construction. Conrad and Rautenhaus (1994) continued, e-mail texts and letters are very personal in style; they make frequent use of the personal pronoun *I*. Within the e-mail corpus it occurs with a frequency of 9.2%. Conversely, within the textbook-corpus *I* has a frequency of only 2.5%.

The vocabulary text of e-mail were extrapolated in a frame of the investigations. Frauke Vub (cited Conrad & Rautenhaus, 1994) dealt specifically with the vocabulary of e-mail texts. She found numerous colloquialisms which she separated into sub-categories in order to

demonstrate the frequency of the different lexical and syntactic structures.

Her results were as summarized:

- (1) The letters exchanged by e-mail are full of colloquial English in all areas of language.
- (2) Aside from noun phrases the most productive category of colloquialism is figurative language
- (3) This shows the pupils' creativity when dealing with language
- (4) The closer the pupils get to one another, the more the letters change
- (5) Colloquial expressions make their letters more lively and more personal
- (6) While English textbooks strictly avoid colloquial English and only use formal English, e-mail letters contain colloquial expressions and open a new field of English to the German pupils
- (7) E-mail is a useful addition to conventional English lessons because it helps to improve the pupil's ability to understand the everyday English language (p. 5-6)

E-mail exchanges suggest that it is quite easy to communicate across some of the deeper social barriers found in our cities despite constant claims that children on opposite sides of social and cultural borders are different from each other in ways that are consequential for their learning potential (Spindler & Spindler, 1994). E-mail bypasses some of the communicative barriers that keep children and adults from different communities apart, it is

also the case that E-mail makes use of, and in fact requires, tremendous cultural input to be successful (Spindler & Spindler 1994).

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summation, the objective of this paper was to investigate how e-mail could be used to facilitate teacher-student communication. Overall, the literature heavily supports its effectiveness and ability to bridge communication gaps and barriers.

Electronic mail, or e-mail, is a magnificent tool for a communication bridge between teachers and students. In the classroom, it can be used in a myriad of ways to deter or overcome obstacles that restrict open and honest thoughts, suggestions, questions, or comments between teachers or students as supported by Poling (cited in Partridge, 1995). Furthermore, Tella (1992) contends the impartial nature of e-mail allows it to function as a non-biased means that channels and fosters an equitable medium between sender and receiver.

E-mail cultivates an intimate transmission of communication that transcends superficial communication and compels deeper levels of exchange between sender and receiver as verified by Downing, Schooley, Matz, Nelson, and Martinez, (cited in Wang, 1996) Similarly, teachers and students alike can better exchange and share information. Also, e-mail is a great tool for counseling, and mentoring students. E-mail provides a safe communicable

haven which supports and encourages the unveiling of inner feelings and emotions in contrast to face-to-face communication which can often inhibit, block or jade intended meaning.

Power relationships, physical presence, and personal anxiety are a few of the obstacles pertaining to face-to-face communication. This use of e-mail can immobilize these rifts and allow for more fluid and unclogged passages for the sender and receiver to absorb meaning of intended purpose as supported by Poling (cited in Wang, 1996).

Implications from the research

This researcher has formed and deduced four implications from the analysis and synthesis of research within this study.

- (1) E-mail has a positive effect on communication between teachers and students
- (2) E-mail may stimulate increased levels of interaction between teachers and students
- (3) E-mail can dislodge barriers of face-to-face communication
- (4) There are specific advantages of e-mail vs. paper communication

Recommendations include conducting research and educational studies involving the use of e-mail with regard to conflict resolution, counseling, and conferencing with students-students, students-teacher, and/or teacher-parent.

The literature pertaining to these areas were very scarce in studies involving electronic mail. More research in these areas could reveal other effective or ineffective usage of e-mail communication within education.

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