

Chapter 4

The Importance of Tone and Attitude in Email and the Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In the online classroom, email has emerged as a predominant communication method between students and faculty. Despite many benefits of email, including ease of use, familiarity of the technology, and rapid response times, there are numerous challenges faculty face when sending and receiving email correspondence with students. Mainly, due to the medium and format of email, with its lack of cues such as body language, inflection, and other sensory stimuli, it presents a paramount challenge to faculty. However, appropriate tone and attitude in emails can help mitigate the challenges the medium presents. When written and read effectively and purposefully, email is an effective outreach and communication tool for students and faculty.

INTRODUCTION

As Marshall McLuhan famously said, “The medium is the message.” For online educators, the email communication we send to our students and colleagues are extensions of ourselves. Our email 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 email (and possibly other social media) are the means of closing the personal gaps sometimes lacking for online learners. Reaching out via email is the smile or wave of a professor you see on campus and a quick reply to a student question via email is the feedback a student receives during face-to-face office hours. Due to the importance of the format and its frequency of use, educators must be committed to effective email communication.

It is socially valid to address tone and attitude in email communication between faculty and students because, “more than any other, email is the adjunct faculty member’s most important communication

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tool” (Cooper & Booth, 2011, p. 16). Also, due to the bulk of communication occurring via email, “it is worth asking what effect the email 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 email use with their professors” (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 74). Because email serves as a main tool of communication, it is vital faculty use it effectively and judiciously. Additionally, emails are often misunderstood or leave the reader (student) more confused than prior to the communication. Kruger et al. (2005) reminds us, “people routinely overestimate how well they can communicate over email,” 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. Email communication impact student-to-faculty relationships, and impact instruction in the online classroom. To this end, tone and attitude must be considered when improving email communication. This chapter explores these potential challenges and prescribes ways for faculty to bridge the potential gap created by these obstacles.

BACKGROUND

Although email is a relatively new mode of communication, numerous studies have been conducted in this field, particularly regarding email use and the online learning environment and relationships between faculty and students. For example, in a 2010 qualitative study examined faculty members’ and students’ expectations and perceptions of email communication in a dual pathway pharmacy program, the researchers found “constructive criticism received by email 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 email 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 email as a promising aid to promote student cognitive growth” and that “incorporating email 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 emails sent (two or 15) (p. 240).

Heiman conducted a 2008 study at The Open University of Israel that looked at *The Effects of Email 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 email 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 email use” (Rockwell et al., p. 195). In a survey conducted by Johnson (2000), cited by Pena-Sanchez of Texas A&M University (2008), email 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 email, and found “students considered email to be superior for timeliness, convenience, efficiency, and turning in work,” while faculty rated it to be superior for “convenience, retention, and efficiency” (p. 200). Kruger et al. (2005) conducted five studies measuring the email senders’ lack of

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