Electronic Communication with Trainees:

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Navigating the Nuances
Learning Objectives

1) Recognize the benefits and liabilities of electronic communication
2) Reflect on your own experience and tendencies
3) Apply some golden rules
4) Set expectations
5) Analyze complex scenarios
Many flavors

Texting / Text paging
Social Media
Email
Listservs
EMR notes
Faculty Experience:

- Faculty receive **twice** as many emails as they send
- **Female** faculty receive more emails than males
- Faculty who respond **quickly** receive more emails

Faculty motives

- Utilitarian

Student motives

- Make appointments
- Offer excuses
- Clarify and ask questions

Benefits

Provide instant feedback to faculty

Augment student learning

Enhance rapport and relationships

Cultivate communication skills and professionalism

Overcome time and space constraints

Provide a means of record-keeping

“Out of Class” communication
Liabilities

- Time-consuming
- Perceived availability 24/7
- Could negatively impact promotion
- Erases boundaries
- Weakens rapport and damages relationships
Unfavorable Impressions

- Personalized addresses ("sportychick@email.com")
- Failure to use the professional title of the recipient
- Lack of appropriate salutation ("Hi" or "Hey")
- Complete absence of an opening salutation
- Variant spellings (‘nite’)
- Initialisms (‘BTW’ for ‘by the way’)
- Decapitalization (‘i’ for ‘I’)
- Missing punctuation (‘its’ for ‘it’s’)
- Shortenings or clippings (‘Tues’)
- Where one letter or numeral represents a word (‘u’ for ‘you’)
- Capital letters for emphasis (‘NOW’)
- Excessive punctuation (!!!!)
Unfavorable Outcomes

- Induces unpleasant feelings in the recipient
- Damages the credibility of the email
- Leads faculty to underestimate the competency and professionalism of the sender
- Lowers the willingness of faculty to help or collaborate
- Could result in a bad recommendation

Favorable Impressions

E-mails with overall positive endorsements:

- e-mail senders were perceived as professional, pleasant, and kind
- Recipients were 2.6-fold more likely to respond immediately when they perceived e-mails as favorable

Politeness strategies:

- Instructors have higher levels of positive affect toward students
- Instructors are more motivated to work with students
- Instructors have higher perceptions of students’ competence and potential for success in their classrooms

Bolkan, S., & Holmgren, J. L. (2012). “You are such a great teacher and I hate to bother you but…”: Instructors’ perceptions of students and their use of email messages with varying politeness strategies. Communication Education, 61(3), 253-270.
Hi Dr. Smith,
This is John Ford from your 12:00 p.m. class. I just received my score on your exam and I did not do as well as I thought I did. I would like some help understanding what I did wrong but I have class during your office hours and can’t make it. I need to schedule an appointment with you outside of office hours to have this conversation.

Regards,
John

**Positive Politeness**

Hi Dr. Smith,
This is John Ford from your 12:00 p.m. class. I just received my score on your exam and I did not do as well as I thought I did. I would like some help understanding what I did wrong but I have class during your office hours and I need to schedule an appointment with you outside of office hours to have this conversation. I realize this time of year is busy for all of us (include the other, presuppose target’s wants) but you do such a good job explaining the material in class that I am sure if we meet up you will be able to help me answer my questions (give gifts to target). I hope we can make something work (be optimistic about cooperation), your help would be extremely appreciated (exaggerate interest)!

Regards,
John

**Negative Politeness**

Hi Dr. Smith,
This is John Ford from your 12:00 p.m. class. I just received my score on your exam and I did not do as well as I thought I did. I would like some help understanding what I did wrong but I have class during your office hours and I need to schedule an appointment with you outside of office hours to have this conversation. Normally, I would not ask you to make a special appointment so I want to apologize in advance for the inconvenience (apologize). I’m sure the questions I have can be answered within a few minutes and I won’t take up much of your time (minimize the imposition). I hope this doesn’t bother you too much, I would be very grateful if we can make something work (apologize, redress the other’s wants-go on record as incurring a debt)!

Regards,
Etiquette

Wellspring
- Traditional letter
- Spoken conversation

Sequence
- Initial email
- Subsequent correspondence
“It is a fine balance to accommodate what students need while maintaining a level of legitimacy as an instructor who is institutionally authorized to make demands on them, and not the other way around”

- Michael Kessler, Asst. Dean at Georgetown

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/21/education/21professors.html
Table 1. Responses to Survey Items Regarding Faculty Accessibility to Campus and Distance Students via E-mail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree, No. (%)</th>
<th>Agree, No. (%)</th>
<th>Neutral, No. (%)</th>
<th>Disagree, No. (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree, No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Faculty should be available outside normal business hours the night before an examination.
  Distance                                                              | 9 (4.7)                 | 39 (20.2)      | 49 (25.4)        | 73 (37.8)         | 23 (11.9)                 |
| Campus                                                                | 30 (9.3)                | 111 (34.5)     | 81 (25.2)        | 88 (27.3)         | 12 (3.7)                  |
| Faculty                                                               | 1 (2.1)                 | 8 (16.7)       | 5 (10.4)         | 18 (37.5)         | 16 (33.3)                 |
| Students try to answer their own questions prior to contacting faculty.
  Distance                                                              | 124 (64.2)              | 67 (34.7)      | 2 (1.0)          | 0                 | 0                          |
| Campus                                                                | 182 (56.5)              | 135 (41.9)     | 3 (0.9)          | 1 (0.3)           | 1 (0.3)                   |
| Faculty                                                               | 2 (4.2)                 | 11 (22.9)      | 16 (33.3)        | 17 (35.4)         | 2 (4.2)                   |
| Students consistently formulate the answer before asking a question.
  Distance                                                              | 41 (21.2)               | 108 (56.0)     | 40 (20.7)        | 4 (2.1)           | 0                          |
| Campus                                                                | 50 (15.5)               | 211 (65.5)     | 51 (15.8)        | 10 (3.1)          | 0                          |
| Faculty                                                               | 0                       | 8 (16.7)       | 18 (37.5)        | 20 (41.7)         | 2 (4.2)                   |
| Faculty members are expected to directly answer student questions.      | 34 (17.6)               | 86 (44.6)      | 42 (21.6)        | 27 (14.0)         | 4 (2.1)                   |
| Distance                                                              | 60 (18.6)               | 146 (45.3)     | 89 (27.6)        | 25 (7.8)          | 2 (0.6)                   |
| Campus                                                                | 11 (22.9)               | 27 (56.3)      | 5 (10.4)         | 5 (10.4)          | 0                          |
| Faculty                                                               | 0                       | 8 (16.7)       | 18 (37.5)        | 20 (41.7)         | 2 (4.2)                   |
| Distance students consistently contact mentors first before faculty.   | 17 (8.8)                | 63 (32.6)      | 68 (35.2)        | 37 (19.2)         | 8 (4.1)                   |
| Faculty                                                               | 1 (2.1)                 | 12 (25.0)      | 23 (47.9)        | 11 (22.9)         | 1 (2.1)                   |
| Faculty are accessible to answer questions by e-mail.                  | 42 (21.8)               | 130 (67.4)     | 17 (8.8)         | 4 (2.1)           | 0                          |
| Distance                                                              | 72 (22.4)               | 226 (70.2)     | 20 (6.2)         | 4 (1.2)           | 0                          |
| Campus                                                                | 30 (62.5)               | 17 (35.4)      | 1 (2.1)          | 0                 | 0                          |
| Student questions by e-mail are similar to questions they asked in classroom.
  Distance                                                              | 44 (22.8)               | 118 (61.1)     | 21 (10.9)        | 7 (3.6)           | 3 (1.6)                   |
| Campus                                                                | 24 (7.5)                | 134 (41.6)     | 78 (24.2)        | 82 (25.5)         | 4 (1.2)                   |
| Faculty                                                               | 1 (2.1)                 | 28 (58.3)      | 11 (22.9)        | 8 (16.7)          | 0                          |

*a* expectations  
*Kruskal Wallis 1-way ANOVA: p < .001 (refer to text for discussion of post hoc comparisons)*  
*b* perceptions
Trainees need **Training**

- Don’t assume that their poor communication is a reflection of their professionalism
- Recognize that each person/group brings their own style and expectations
- Model the communication that you expect from students
- Help them understand hierarchy
- Spell out the potential risks

When/how do you respond?

Avoid inflammatory controversial emails altogether

Don’t be the first to suggest another’s negative traits or emotions

Avoid curt or long responses

Consider legality and scope of practice

Have the hard conversations in person
Giving Feedback

It is almost always best to provide feedback in person!

When might e-Feedback be helpful?

- Opposite schedules
- Formal evaluations
  - May help to share or summarize in writing before or after the in-person discussion
- Others?

Cross-Cultural Differences

Social orientation

Phraseology

Confrontation avoidance

Preference for formality

Comfort with new situations

Beyond the Basics...

Texting

EMRs

Social Media

Listservs

Privacy and Confidentiality

Protecting Anonymity

Guidelines / Norms
References


• http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/21/education/21professors.html

• Aguilar-Roca, N., Williams, A., Warrior, R., & O’Dowd, D. (2009). Two minute training in class significantly increases the use of professional formatting in student to faculty email correspondence. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 3*(1), 15.


