

Course E-mail: Towards better student-teacher communication

Hashil Al Saadi

Course E-mail is a system which enables both students and teachers to exchange e-mail messages concerning various courses as well as other academic matters. It gives both students and teachers the opportunity to communicate and exchange information beyond physical and time-related restrictions of the classroom in a way that motivates students in their studies by employing the technology available in our practice.

Inspiration and Objectives

A number of things inspired me to adopt the Course E-mail technique with my students. First of all, I was trying to find a better and perhaps more effective way to make myself "virtually" available to my students outside class time. The inspiration for this idea came after the Language Centre move had taken place. Students found it extremely difficult to walk a long way across the campus to the new building to see me during office hours. Consequently, I thought it would be more convenient for me as well as for students to find another channel of communication, not only to overcome such obstacles which indeed hinder student-teacher communication and exchange of information, but also to add a touch of technology to our 'traditional' practice. In fact, it does prove useful in motivating students at a time when complaints from teachers about students lacking motivation have become louder.

Account Set-up and Management

The idea of the Course E-mail was introduced to students early in week one together with its rationale, applications and the many advantages it has. It was made clear to students that this e-mail facility is to be viewed as an integral part of the course alongside other course materials such as textbooks. This is particularly important so students take the matter seriously and never think of using it for personal messaging. Experience showed that it was never difficult to convince students to use the system actively and professionally, once its importance and contribution to their learning were clearly and convincingly stated. The use of the Course E-mail could, if necessary, also be linked to the Teacher Assessment Marks as a way to motivate students to use it.

The next step was to set up an e-mail account on the internet at any mail host such as 'yahoo' and 'hotmail'. However, for faster flow of information and to save time and effort, it is advisable to set up your account on the SQU server, although some communication between the Language Centre administration and the Centre for Information Systems (CIS) is needed in this regard in order to set up and activate your account as it is the second e-mail account at SQU.

To serve the above purpose of professionalism in the use of the Course E-mail, I have found it useful to use the course code and number as a user name to the account. For instance, the course I teach is (LANC1071). It is the second credit course for Commerce students. The course e-mail address can be lanc1071f@yahoo.com and/or lanc1071@squ.edu.om, where the letter "f" in the first address stands for Fall semester, which can be changed into an "S" to denote the Spring semester, should you feel such designation is important.

Once the course e-mail account is ready and active, the next step then is to urge each student in the group to give his/her email address to the teacher to be saved in the *address book* of the course account. This can be done either manually or electronically. It can be done manually and in class by asking students to write down their e-mail addresses next to their names in a form specially prepared for this purpose. It can also be conducted electronically by asking students to e-mail their teacher using the new course e-mail address, which by now, should be familiar to them. The teacher could then log on to the course e-mail account and save all

students' addresses in the address book. The address book is particularly important since it enables the teacher to send the same message to all students by selecting "everyone" from the address book. The reason why SQU e-mail system should be adopted is because it makes it possible to handle information faster especially when used within the university premises. This will ultimately save the students, as well as the teachers, time, especially when large files are attached to the original message.

On the management side, students should be made aware of the fact that it is important that they check their e-mails regularly so they do not miss what is being sent out. Obviously, the teacher should also check his or her e-mail regularly, perhaps every day, to reply to any message from students. To ease the process for the teacher, every message sent out to students could be easily saved in a private folder perhaps labeled as "e-mails F02", for instance, so the same messages could be re-sent in the forthcoming semesters. In short, good management of the course e-mailing system is a must if full advantages are sought.

Uses and Advantages

There are countless uses and advantages to Course E-mail, some of which are summarized below.

1. Communication: The vast majority of teachers believe that the amount of time available for both teachers and students in class is very limited and so it is extremely difficult to attend to individual student's needs and learning styles. Additionally, students find it difficult to meet their teachers outside the class time. The Course E-mail technique enables teachers to communicate and remain virtually available to their students at almost all times. Such communication can take various forms as set out on the following lines.

2. Lesson Plans: It is widely accepted among practitioners that teachers need to take their learners' expectations into account. That is because when learners have some knowledge of what is going to be delivered, they are better able to comprehend and process information employing the appropriate learning devices. It does not mean however that detailed and step-by-step plans are to be e-mailed to students. What is meant here is that brief, perhaps weekly, plans are e-mailed to students so they are better informed and kept updated on how the course in general and other specific forthcoming events like presentations and assignments proceed.

3. Questions, clarification and feedback: Experience showed that students do in fact ask a lot of questions about various aspects of the course. Not only that, but it is a fact that students have their own learning and/or personal problems which teachers have no time to listen to during the class time. From another perspective, students find it difficult to talk about their personal worries and problems in front of other students. Experience showed that the best way to deal with all these queries is by adopting the Course E-mail facility to send answers and clarification back to students, which is feasible even from home. Experience also showed that some students who tend to be shy and quiet in class do express themselves better via e-mail!

Feedback is another pedagogical issue which concerns all practitioners seeking improvement and change. Thus, such a system makes it possible for the teacher to get his/her students' feedback on certain methods or techniques used, whereas it is unlikely that they would exhibit their reaction in front of other students.

4. Photocopying: Perhaps one of the more apparent advantages to a Course E-mail is that it cuts down the huge amount of hassling photocopying which most teachers hate but have to do if handouts and/or supplementary materials are to be given out to students. By using the Course E-mail technique you will find that almost no photocopying is needed if the source documents are self-developed or adapted from the web, since materials are sent out to students as electronic copies attached to the e-mail message and it is the students' responsibility to

download the attached files and print out a hard copy for themselves. Such a procedure, in fact, teaches students not only how to be independent, but also how to be responsible for their own learning at a time when issues like independent learning and learner autonomy are raised in almost all formal and informal educational gatherings.

5. E-drafting and proofreading: Another application for the Course E-mail technique is in writing classes. There are many ways by which an e-mail facility can thoroughly contribute to improving students' writing skills and aid their ability to manipulate drafts before they get the final product. For instance, if collaborative writing is sought, students can be paired and each student writes one paragraph of the essay. Each one of them edits his/her paragraph, types it up and e-mails it to his/her partner. Both students can then exchange ideas on how to improve the new version of the essay before sending it to the teacher for comments. (*For further discussion of this technique see "E-ssay" article in Forum 7 by Sally Burns*).

6. Test Results: This is another area where the Course E-mail could serve and save both teachers as well as students time. Results of assignments, quizzes, presentations and the final examination could easily be sent out to all students in a matter of seconds.

7. Recommended Websites: There are plenty of websites which are of great benefit to our students to help them in their preparation for projects, presentations and/or assignments. Relevant links could also be sent to students. Our students should be encouraged to access these sites and make use of the information available. In addition, the Course E-mail facility makes it possible to forward useful information related to our students' areas of interest. Experience did show, however, that students build interest in particular areas of the course if these areas are linked to related sites on the web. For instance, I used to forward weekly self-explanatory grammar e-mails I receive from www.better-english.com. Although different resources of knowledge such as the internet have now become closer to hand, what is observed is that our students do lack the interest and curiosity to make full use of the tremendous literature available and relate it to what they learn in the classroom.

Students' reaction and feedback

Students' comments and feedback about the idea of Course E-mail and its applications were very encouraging. Students seemed to not only like the innovation of the e-mailing system, but also the rich contribution it has made to their learning and motivation, which was obvious in their messages.

Future applications

In addition to the multiple uses and advantages mentioned above, the present system can in fact be further developed in the future to serve other purposes and meet other pedagogical needs. For instance, an e-bulletin board and discussion groups could be initiated using the e-mailing system described in this paper to activate students' participation and enhance their contributions to the whole teaching – learning process. Topics of interest could be posted by the teacher and/or students and sent out to all students in the group(s). After that, the "Reply All" option could be used so that what the teacher or one of the students writes reaches all members of the group(s). Thus, the present system does indeed provide a solid ground to exchange ideas, views, perspectives and even solutions.

On a larger scale however, this e-mailing system could also be used in what is known as "Key Palling", as opposed to pen palling, where two or more groups of students from two or more different institutions and/or countries exchange e-mail messages and share views, experience and ideas.

Finally, the Course E-mail innovation, if used professionally, would definitely make the shift to the WebCT happen automatically and painlessly since students would, by then, have mastered the basic management skills required in order to use WebCT confidently.

In short, Course E-mail is a practical solution to bridge the communication gap between teachers and their students, which would ultimately aid and facilitate the whole teaching-learning process. However, that is only feasible if the system is viewed as a vital tool in the course and not as an optional choice.

