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Does a Different Person Write Your E-mail?

By Rick Hesse, Feature Editor

In our current electronic age, telephones, faxes, e-mails, and electronic discussion threads replace a lot of our face-to-face time with students. It is possible that our persona changes depending upon the medium we use, and we may not realize it. We can become a "Sybil," with multiple personalities, that may confuse, anger and/or upset our students, who may respond in ways that surprise us, given our good intentions.

Student Problems

Over the last few years, the way I've run my two classes (Statistics and Quantitative Analysis) has changed dramatically. One reason is because our Fully-Employed MBA (FEMBA) program at Pepperdine University has classes that meet just once a week for four hours, 6-10 p.m. Since we now have six professional centers around the greater Los Angeles area, we usually see our students only once a week face-to-face, so I basically have electronic office hours. A second reason for change is the ubiquity of access to e-mail, so now I average about 30 e-mails per day from classes of 50-75 students. Many of these are group e-mails, so one e-mail helps 3-4 students. Therefore, I check my e-mail at least twice to five times a day or night so I don't get a big backlog of questions. I can check from home, any of our professional centers, hotel rooms during trips, and so on. Most students adapt very well to this, because they are working professionals (average age is 35), accustomed to company e-mail, and can send and respond from both work and home. A few can only respond from private e-mail addresses at home.

Homework

My homework assignments and cases are usually "shells," which are Excel templates with some of the data, formulas, and/or answers erased; which is a form or shell

that students can fill out. Because it is a shell, I know where to look for their answers or intermediate calculations. I also provide one or more "check figures" so students know if they are on the right track. This prevents students from going too far down the wrong path or confirms their progress in the correct direction. In the case of not getting the check figure, they know immediately to try another path.

One of the things I try to impress upon my students is that although we were taught in grade school to do math sitting in rows (which, by the way, are really columns!) and not to look to the left or to the right, problems are not really solved in isolation. The real way to solve and analyze statistical and quantitative problems is in a group—with many eyes looking at the data, problem statement, intermediate results, answers, and what it all means. This can be done synchronously (with the group meeting face-to-face) or more likely, asynchronously—doing a little bit at a time by one or more members, then looking at it later or getting help from the professor or other team members. This latter way (asynchronously) is new for most people because we think math problems have to be worked lock-step in one sitting, individually, until we get the answer. So I encourage students to work on a problem for a while, and then if they get stuck, to just put it down, or e-mail me or a group member, and go do something else. This is hard for some personality types who just can't let go, but they find that by shifting their attention, or e-mailing for help, the solution pops into their mind later on, even before they get any help. Or at least they don't end up being frustrated for several hours while banging their heads on the same problem.

Professor Problem

Now, when a student or group e-mails me for help, this is where I am supposed to



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come to the rescue, riding up on my white horse. If I were talking to them face-to-face, my demeanor would be friendly and helpful, and I would point out where they had strayed in their logic, or try to be Socratic and ask them a question to make them think for a while. However, when I do this via e-mail, it doesn't come through sometimes as friendly and/or helpful. There are no physical clues or verbal intonations along with the body of the message. I had noticed for a few years that a few students would comment on their course evaluations that I wasn't helpful or that I was arrogant. That always confused me, because the majority of comments would say that I was helpful and considerate. Were these students in the same class? I have to admit to being concerned, perplexed, and sometimes irritated that I was getting slammed from time to time. Then the other day I happened to be reading a text on how to build communities in cyberspace (Palloff & Pratt, 1997), and came across a passage that spoke of how the authors had each discovered that their e-mails to students can take on a different persona. In a flash of the obvious, I could see how my emails might have a different voice or persona from my classroom persona. (To extend this idea, we probably tend to write in a different fashion when we fax, e-mail, use chat rooms, or threaded discussions. All of these have subtle twists that can change our "voice" for ill or good.) Being aware of this fact is the first step in making my e-mails more like my classroom voice.

Positive Steps

I had suspected that maybe my e-mail voice was sometimes harsh, so I had begun consciously to add a word of encouragement, or say "I hope this helps." But now looking back on it, I can see that even these added comments could be seen as sarcasm, and not true concern. I also realized that when I received the same question from different people, I would have either less patience ("I've already answered that question!") or realize that if many people were having trouble, I needed to take more time to explain things for the latter e-mails and would try to calm down before answering. I now see that I need to be very conscious of how I answer e-mails

and this has led me to the following conclusions.

1. I need some e-mail protocol instructions in the syllabus for students that help will help me, in turn, be more patient. My suggestions are as follows:
 - Each e-mail should have a subject line.
 - Don't use all caps—that's like SHOUTING!
 - Make sure you have your "signature line" filled out, so if you forget to sign your e-mail, I know who sent it. This saves me from having to match e-mail addresses to see who I'm talking to.
 - Attach your Excel file so I can "see" what you are talking about. Also, make sure that each file has a unique name, rather than HMWK01.xls, it might be AS01.xls if sent by Arnold Student, or Wizards01.xls if sent by the Stat Wizards. That way my e-mail program doesn't rename all the HMWK01.xls files so I can't keep straight which file belongs to which group or student.
 - Try to limit your e-mail to just a few questions at a time.
 - Use your spell checker—it's a good habit to get into and can save you some embarrassment.
2. On my side, I need to have some protocol for my interaction with the students.
 - I will check my e-mail at least once a day and reply to your questions.
 - I'll always "Reply All" so that if you include the other members of your group, they will get my response and you don't have to forward it to them.
 - My intention is to always be helpful, but it may not come off that way. Therefore, I will endeavor to be straight-forward and not arrogant; helpful and not sarcastic. Remember you can't see me or hear me, but the reason I'm taking time to answer is to help.
 - I may give hints or outright give an answer, depending upon the situation and how many times you've attempted the problem.

Conclusion

Being aware of how our e-mails come across should help us set up some protocols for our students and ourselves, which should in turn help us to be more consistent in our communication, both in the classroom and through our e-mail. By having some common reference point about class e-mail etiquette, our communication should be enhanced and we might not be unpleasantly surprised that "someone else" is writing our e-mail.

References

- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1997). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 83-86. ■

Decision Sciences Institute

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