Appropriate Use of Online Communication Methods in Education

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Abstract
Online communication is interaction that takes place synchronously or asynchronously using computing technology over the Internet. There are many reasons for communicating online, including business transactions, personal interactions, and educational interchanges. One of the greatest benefits is the anytime/anyplace nature of online communication, which offers persons a viable alternative to traditional educational environments and provides the online student with the support system that is necessary to feel connected in what could be an isolated environment. This paper focuses on online communication within the educational environment. It presents some positive and negative aspects of different methods of online communication and makes recommendations for the appropriate use of online communication methods. It is recognized that not all online communication methods are appropriate for every situation and so care must be exercised when selecting a method for a particular situation.

Keywords/Key-phrases: methods of online communication, email, discussion forum, blog, wiki, instant messenger, chat

Introduction
From pigeons to runners to post offices, all considered, snail mail with the prospect of the message taking a significant time to get to its intended recipient, methods of online communication were invented since persons wanted a more efficient method of message transfer and computing technology finally allowed it. Online communication is interaction that takes place synchronously or asynchronously using computing technology over the Internet (Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006). There are many reasons for communicating online, including business transactions, personal interactions, and educational interchanges. One of the greatest benefits is the anytime/anyplace nature of online communication, with no travel time, no set time, and no lecture time, which offers persons a viable alternative to traditional educational environments (Abramson, 2005) and provides the online student with the support system that is necessary to feel connected in what could be an isolated environment (Abramson, 2004; Abramson, Harris, & Thibeault, 2004). A strong social presence must be built into the online community where students feel they fit in and belong and a safe psychological climate is established (Groen, & Li, 2005).

This paper presents different methods of online communication together with the associated advantages and disadvantages and gives recommendations for minimizing the disadvantages through appropriate use of the different technologies, so that educational stakeholders may benefit more from these methods of online communication. Online communication methods such as email, discussion forums, instant messaging/chat, online conferencing, blogs, and wikis will be discussed. Not all methods of online communication are appropriate for all situations and there must be some analysis of the method and the environment in which it is to be used before it is employed in any given situation. A fantastic implementation in one situation may work quite poorly in another, due to the existence of different parameters or boundaries. Due diligence must be exercised to realize the greatest benefit from online communication technologies.

Communication Methods

Email
Early efforts at online communication can be traced to The Well of 1985, where electronic mail was used to exchange information between persons who were connected to networked computers. This was before the invention of the World Wide Web, but even at that time, persons saw the tremendous benefits to be gained by using networked computers to transfer messages (Abramson, et al., 2004). Electronic mail or email is the most common form of online communication and students experience great benefit from peer to peer interactions via email, as well as student-instructor interactions. The provision of free email clients on the Web promotes the use of email as persons are able to log on to the Internet at any time, from any place, and access their email. Email provides the facility for students
to ask an instructor questions more regularly than what may be possible in a face-to-face class (Repman, Zinskie, & Carlson, 2005). Also, timid students get a chance to make known their opinions or ask questions with greater ease than would be experienced in the face-to-face situation.

An associated drawback to email is the unreasonable expectation that some students have in that they would like the instructor to respond to their emails immediately. Email is an asynchronous form of online communication and it should be treated as such. It is designed so that when the recipient has the time, the email message can be checked and responded to, as desired. Faculty need to be very clear on when the students should expect responses and try to be faithful to what was published as their available times for email (Repman, et al., 2005). This would eliminate anxiety on the part of the student as the response is awaited. It would also relieve the faculty of the nagging feeling that they must check email more regularly than is reasonable.

Another major drawback in the use of email is the crowding of inboxes due to spam. Spam is unsolicited emails, usually from advertising companies or from mischievous and/or malicious persons. Persons may sometimes miss important messages because they are surrounded by spam. One way of combating spam is to put a filter on the inbox that looks at incoming messages and sends email from unrecognized senders to a junk folder, which can later be scanned and emptied. Also, being careful who the email is shared with goes a long way in reducing the number of unsolicited emails received. A simple action like placing the email on a website as contact information may open that email to attack by spam. If one needs to post an email address on the web for contact purposes, it is better to establish an email account for that purpose so that messages can be scanned separately from the rest of the emails received in the main email account.

A fair amount of discussion can take place using emails. A listserv is one application of email use for group communication. There is an established list owner and persons can subscribe to be added to the list. When messages are sent out, all persons on the list receive the message. The list owner acts as the moderator. Persons may unsubscribe from the list at any time. As an early method of group communication, listserv supported communities of practice by inviting contributions from many persons with the same interest. A threaded email is used to gather the main points made by the contributors to the topic being discussed. Although many undergraduate and graduate educational settings do not make use of listservs, it is still being used by professionals in a continuing educational context. An example of this is the med-ed listserv of which the author was a member. The Association of American Medical Colleges provides this medium for discussions related to technology in medical education. This, however, is not as organized for presenting threaded discussions as the discussion forum. Discussion forums will be discussed in the following section.

**Discussion Forums**

Another method of communication that quickly caught on was the discussion forum, also called the message board. A discussion forum is an asynchronous online communication tool that is used to invite participation on a specific topic of interest. Contributors post opinions and facts related to the topic and others get to respond to the messages posted. Communities of practice can be facilitated and nurtured by this method of communication, where persons of similar interest can interact and carry on conversations in the common area of interest. It is possible also to develop a sixth sense of learning to read between the lines, where increased perception due to regular communication allows the reader to imagine the facial expressions and body language associated with the text being read (Abramson, 2004).

For a successful implementation of a discussion forum, the stage must be set (Abramson, 2004). The moderator or facilitator must lay ground rules and expectations. These must be clearly stated and available for review at any time in the use of the forum. The discussion forum must be designed and used appropriately if its many benefits are to be achieved (Abramson, 2004; Schwartzman, 2006). There should be an identified facilitator while the other contributors are seen as participants. Both have rules that must be followed. Instructions on the types of topics that can be discussed, the length of the postings, the time frame for the discussion, points for inviting discussion, and the appropriate and professional ways to respond to postings need to be established. The many benefits to be associated with discussion forums include increased interaction among students, higher levels of cognitive reasoning, increased satisfaction with the course, development of social negotiation, thoughtful questioning, creative suggestions, reduction in scheduling synchronous meetings, ease of following discussions and responses, as the thread is usually indented and responses are usually easily identified. There is also increased activity in the online course as time is available for reflecting, requesting clarification, eliciting information, and offering feedback (Zha, et al., 2006). Timid students get an opportunity to post or “voice” their opinions in the less aggressive environment that can sometime characterize the face-to-face classroom (Abramson, 2005).
Discussion forums provide extreme learning opportunities, once they are well designed and the rules of participation and facilitation are clearly stated and explained. The author is a beneficiary of the work described in Abramson (2004) and the careful design and well stated rules for facilitation and participation removed the prospect of confusion or feelings of isolation. The rules were made available and explained before any online communication was required. The outcome was a tremendous learning experience where communities of practice were formed and persons were able to share experiences and teach each other with little intervention on the part of the instructor. The stage was well set and the players played their part well, under the guidance of the outlined rules.

Persons sometimes use instant messaging for fast communication and therefore use emoticons, slang, or short-hand typing to get the message across as quickly as possible. This can sometimes filter into formal communication and be seen as a negative side effect. As true as this may be, if the standards for formal communication, either through email or discussion forums, are set out and students are penalized for not using proper language to communicate, then each method of communication has its place and can co-exist. Peers actually learn from each other in formal discussion forums and improve their writing skills as they encounter the writings of others (Zha, et al., 2006). They quickly correct their mistakes themselves or they are corrected by their peers and this leads to an overall improvement in their use of proper language. Although not all written influences may be positive, Zha noted that improvement of the use of language is possible when proper guidelines are set and students do peer-reviewed. This formal review setting will allow students to distinguish between social, informal, and formal writings and hopefully guide them in the appropriate use of language.

**Instant Messenger**

The two methods discussed previously were asynchronous methods of online communication. Persons found the need at times to have a more immediate method of communication that matches the immediacy of the telephone. This gave rise to the chat or instant messaging feature where two or more persons may communicate in real time and get instant feedback to their messages (Repman, et al., 2005). Some course management systems provide a chat feature that can be open to whole class chat, and some have the provision for live online office hours, where the instructor can determine who is invited to chat at a particular time. Some topics are open issues that are pertinent to the entire class. Others are more specific to certain students and faculty need to distinguish those and use the appropriate option to communicate with the students. There is much benefit to be gained by utilizing office hours provided by faculty. For the part-time student or the student in a totally online course, where the campus is not in close proximity to the student’s locus of operation, making use of conventional office hours may not be possible. The next best option is to engage in online office hours with the instructor (Wang, & Beasley, 2006). Advantages of the use of online office hours include the ability to offer online support with technology issues, online clarification of course content, and online feedback from student to instructor and vice versa.

An associated drawback to the immediacy of instant messaging and chat is that once it is activated persons may interrupt someone who is trying to work. The solution should be quite simple. Only activate the chat software when you would not mind being disturbed. Some organizations use chat software as a method of communication within departments and therefore some employees are required to leave the software active while working, so that persons can interact readily with each other. Management needs to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of such a requirement. There is the option of marking one’s status as “Do Not Disturb” or some other descriptive notice that lets others know of one’s unavailability. Other related disadvantages include poor or unreliable network connections or speed that can frustrate the user, slow typing can be a potential obstacle in realizing the benefit of instant contact, the use of abbreviations that are not universal can lead to misunderstandings or constant requests for explanations, and the expectation of students that their instructors should be available around the clock. Clear guidelines need to be put in place to establish availability and appropriate use of language to facilitate productive online office hours.

Realizing the benefits to be gained by synchronous communication, the author and another classmate arranged to meet online at a time that was convenient to both of them; one student lives in Alaska and the other lives in Grenada, in the Caribbean. With the time difference an issue in this case, the students needed to schedule appropriately. MSN Messenger together with voice and video were used to carry on a one hour conversation, where many aspects of the course were discussed and clarified and resources were shared. The feeling of connection that was achieved through this online encounter was beneficial to both students and they encouraged others to try it.

**Online Conference**

The immediacy recognized in chat and the benefit of being able to communicate over the Internet is being taken advantage of in online conferencing. Persons are able to share video, audio, and multi-
media materials with persons around the globe in a real time situation that is facilitated by the technology. The many advantages that can be gained through an online conference include the facilitation of a subject matter expert teaching from a distance, the ability of persons learning a language to experience the language being spoken and practice with the natives of the language and the ability to observe demonstrations occurring in another location, to name a few (Repman, et al., 2005).

As attractive as this may sound, there are some other considerations to take into account. Online conferencing should be used where there is benefit to be gained from the video and audio feeds that are made possible through this methodology. It should not be used just because it exists (Abramson, 2006). When a synchronous online communication method is forced into an online educational setting, it may cause problems since persons sometimes choose the option of online classes due to their busy schedules and inability to be at a specific place on the spur of the moment or on a regular basis. To overcome such drawbacks and to harness the benefits to be gained from synchronous communication in an online environment, it must be planned in advance so that persons can schedule it into the other aspects of their lives. The number of sessions should be few and well spaced within the time frame for the online course (Groen, & Li, 2005). Other considerations include the need to have reliable hardware, reliable Internet connection and speed, and to have the skills to set up and use the conferencing system (Repman, et al., 2005).

**Blogs**

Persons needing to self-publish and share their ideas with others may find a solution in the use of blogs (short form for Web log). Blogs provide a facility for persons to place information of interest to themselves on the Internet so others can view it. Blogs are best suited for personal opinions and ideas that persons would like to share. In the past, students only had to concern themselves with what the instructor thought about their work. Now students can share these ideas and opinions in a way that they need to be prepared for comments/feedback about the work submitted.

An associated drawback to this widespread publishing of non-reviewed, non-scholarly material is instructors are already seeing references made to blogs when the references needed to be scholarly sources (Schwartzman, 2006). Students need to be mindful when selecting sources and be able to decide on appropriate peer-reviewed journals and other scholarly sources when writing formal papers.

**Wikis**

When persons aspire to take the sharing of information to a level that is one of collaboration and invitation to contribution from others, the blog becomes inadequate. This gave rise to the wiki. A wiki is a collaborative technology which is self-organizing and self-documenting (Stahmer, 2006). The issue of authorship of a collaboratively constructed learning object placed in a wiki is a question worth asking, especially when copyright and plagiarism concerns abound with the use of the Internet. The unrestricted editing of another person's work can have a negative impact on the student writing in a formal setting. Any serious piece of academic work must contain the appropriate citations with the associated references, as students must give credit to the persons whose works they are using. With wikis, persons get to copy or change online content with no regard for authorship. A wiki is a peer to peer collaborative effort where persons can edit other persons' work, mostly to correct and add value to the posting. Wikis can be used to search for information that was not necessarily reviewed and informally placed on the Web. They must be used with caution as there is no guarantee to the authenticity, quality, or correctness of the information contained within. Quality assurance is a major concern for educators when it comes to the use of wikis. Wikis, however, have proven to be self-organizing, self-regulating systems that are managed by all who contribute to them and mistakes are quickly corrected. The information should still be used with prudence. The most famous example of a wiki is Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org). Related sites to Wikipedia are Wiktionary (an online multi-lingual dictionary) and Wikisource (a wiki dedicated to open source: an online library of free content publications). Another free content wiki that is growing in popularity is WikiEducator. This wiki was launched by the Commonwealth of Learning. It provides free elearning content and was piloted by the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. More information on this wiki can be found at http://www.wikieducator.org.

Peer-reviewed sources are always more desirable than open public information edited by possibly many authors on a site such as Wikipedia. Questions about the motives of persons editing wikis and their expertise to do so as well as the possibility of mischievous hackers editing out of mischief have been raised, with good reason (Locke, & Andersen, 2006). One of the benefits that Locke sees in this communication method is the ease with which corrections can be made as opposed to printed materials. Errors can be corrected more immediately than in the case of printed material where one usually has to wait for the next updated version. Andersen opposed this view and stands against the use of wikis in education. She is of the opinion that wikis promote sloppy research where students tend to stop at the first result they find and do not complete a more thorough search that is necessary for good
research outcomes. Students who are not expert in a field have not reached that level of scholarship where they are able to determine flawed resources. Therefore, they need to rely on peer-reviewed sources and other content that is known to be vetted.

Conclusion

For effective online communication to take place, reliable Internet connectivity and speed are required as well as user technical skills and other soft skills referred to by Abramson (2004). The online communicator needs to listen, negotiate, manage conflict, read for meaning, articulate points clearly, and know when to post. There are many methods of online communication and each has a distinct role. For asynchronous communication, email and discussion forums were investigated as methods that invite dialogue, conversation, and debate. Blogs and wikis are seen as the new technologies that allow persons to post content to the web, either personal, non-editable content as is the case of blogs or content posted by one that can be edited by anyone, as is the case with wikis. Instant messaging or chat and online conferencing were reviewed as synchronous methods of online communication and the many benefits to be gained by the use of such tools in an online environment were presented along with the caution to know when to use these methods. Although some of the disadvantages raised were related to the technology itself and must be addresses by service providers and other external bodies, many disadvantages identified with the methods can be managed by users. The appropriate use of the technology can allow persons in the online educational environment to have an enriching experience.

References


About the Author

Avril Best is the Supervisor of the Educational Computing Team at St. George’s University in Grenada. She leads the team in the development and administration of training programs for faculty. The team’s main goal is to facilitate the use of technology to enhance the educational experience, with a major focus on the administration and support of the course management system used at the university. The email, discussion forums, live chat, and live office hours features of the course management system, as well as the email and instant messenger features used among faculty and staff allow Avril and her team to use and support online communication on a daily basis. abest@nova.edu