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Students' Expectations for E-mails to Faculty

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Abstract

This paper focuses on students' expectations and experiences with e-mailing professors. A questionnaire study found that students expect quick replies to their e-mails, especially during workdays. Students also expect professors to return e-mails during weekends and in less than three days during breaks. Students' expectations for response time were met during the workday and after work hours during the work week. However, students waited longer than they expected to wait during weekends and breaks between semesters.

Introduction

E-mail is a common communication medium in faculty-student relationships (Adams, Brunner, & Yates, 2010; Lam, 2014) and can be beneficial for students' interaction with faculty (Young, Kelsey, & Lancaster, 2011). As a result, we are interested in students' expectations and experiences with the e-mails they exchange with their professors. This paper discusses the use and benefits of faculty-student e-mail exchanges, satisfaction with e-mail exchanges and expectations for e-mail response times. Next, it advances four research questions regarding e-mail responses and reports results of a questionnaire study including implications, limitations and future research directions.

Use and Benefits of E-mail

Students frequently engage in out-of-class communication (OCC) via e-mail with their instructors (Taylor, Jowi, Schreier, & Bertelsen, 2011). For example, in a recent study, 71.5% of respondents indicated e-mail as their primary form of OCC (Brooks & Young, 2016). Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax (2001) reported three reasons students e-mail instructors. First, students e-mail for personal or social reasons, such as to self-disclose or to impress the teacher. Second, students e-mail for procedural or clarification reasons. Third, students e-mail for efficiency reasons. Students indicated a desire to avoid wasting time and to minimize face-to-face or telephone contact with instructors. In addition, students in online courses often must e-mail instructors as a primary means of seeking help (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006).

E-mail has benefits for students such as increased faculty availability (Adams et al., 2010; Young et al., 2011), convenience, efficiency (Farley-Lucas & Sargent, 2010; Kvavik, Caruso, & Morgan, 2004) and more opportunities for interaction (Yates, Adams, & Brunner, 2009). In a

recent study (Parker & Trolan, 2019), frequent communication with professors via e-mail or face-to-face also was associated students' positive perceptions of the campus climate for diversity. Students' communication with faculty members was positively associated with feeling respected and free to express their beliefs.

E-mail also has benefits for faculty members. For example, more than half of the faculty respondents in Yates et al.'s (2009) study reported that e-mail improved their relationships with students and 82% agreed that e-mail increased their communication with students. E-mail also can improve students' motivation and their attitudes toward faculty (Legg & Wilson, 2009). For example, in an experimental study, instructors indicating on the first day of class that they will use e-mail frequently was positively associated with instructor credibility and anticipated positive affect for the instructor and course (Ledbetter & Finn, 2018). Finally, it helps part-time instructors keep in contact with students (Adams et al., 2010).

Satisfaction with E-mail Exchanges

Despite the benefits, current research indicates that students and professors are not uniformly satisfied with the e-mails they exchange. Faculty members have four concerns. First, professors are concerned that e-mail is replacing face-to-face interaction with students (Farley-Lucas & Sargent, 2010). Second, professors are sometimes displeased with students' e-mail etiquette and lack of appropriateness (Flaherty, 2019; Knupsky & Nagy-Bell, 2011). As examples, students sometimes ask unnecessary questions by e-mail (Yates et al., 2009), are too informal in their e-mails (Lam, 2014; Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009), or might be too direct in their requests (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Third, faculty members believe that e-mail has increased their workload (Jerejian, Reid, & Rees, 2013). Finally, e-mail does not allow professors a break from work (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005).

Students have four grievances about e-mailing professors. They complain that professors do not return e-mail, are unhelpful in their replies, do not return e-mail quickly enough, and sometimes send offensive messages (Duran et al., 2005; Goodboy & Myers, 2015; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015; Sheer & Fung, 2007). Messages perceived as offensive are generally negative, sarcastic, verbally abusive, or indicate favoritism. Such messages are negatively related to students' motivations to communicate with instructors about course-related information (MacArthur & Villagran, 2015). Response time is a key factor in students' perceptions. In an experimental study, instructors' e-mail response time was associated with a range of variables such as social attraction, task attraction, competence, character, and caring (Tatum, Martin, & Kemper, 2018).

Expectations for E-mail

Professor and student complaints suggest expectations for e-mail E are an important issue. Expectations are key features in the way humans communicate and interpret communication (White, 2008). There are two sets of expected behaviors: predictive and prescriptive (Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005). Predictive expectations are behaviors one expects to see because they are most typical culturally. Prescriptive expectations refer to beliefs about how one *should* behave. Prescriptive expectancies are based on needs, wants, and desires (Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005). Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard (2005) described them as "idealized standards of conduct" (p. 151). When expectations are violated, the violation can be viewed as positive or negative, depending on one's social norms for that behavior (White, 2008).

Prior research demonstrates the importance of meeting student expectations for communication in and out of the classroom (e.g., Kearney, Plax, & Allen, 2002; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015; Mottet, Parker-Raley, Cunningham, & Beebe, 2005; Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyeste, 2015). As an example, Gigliotti (1987) studied students' expectations for their Introduction to Sociology professor. He found that if students' expectations for instructional communication were met or exceeded, students were more likely to take subsequent courses with that instructor, major in sociology, and were more satisfied with the course. The opposite was true when the instructor did not meet students' expectations.

For professors to meet student expectations, professors must know students' expectations. Jerejian et al. (2013) describe students' expectation that professors are "permanently contactable" (p. 992) but information regarding students' prescriptive expectations for response times is limited. Consequently, we advance the following research question:

RQ1: What are students' expectations for response time when e-mailing professors and how does this vary by time of day (during the workday vs. after 5 p.m.), day of the week (workday vs. weekend), and time of the year (classes in session vs. a break between semesters)?

We also would like to assess students' experiences e-mailing their professors and whether instructors are meeting students' expectations using the following research questions:

RQ2: How long are students waiting for replies to their e-mails and how does this vary by time of day, day of the week, and time of the year?

RQ3: How do students' reported wait times for e-mail replies from their professors compare to their expected wait times?

RQ4: How many of students' e-mails to professors go unanswered?

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students at a small private Midwestern college received extra credit for participating in this study between 2008 and 2010. In total, 196 participants completed the questionnaires. Men completed 25% of the questionnaires and women completed 75%. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years old ($M = 21.04$, $SD = 3.95$). The sample included 14.8% first-year students, 23.5% sophomores, 25.0% juniors, and 36.7% seniors.

Procedure

During communication courses, students were asked if they wanted to participate in a project about how students prefer to communicate with instructors. If students indicated interest, they were provided with informed consent forms to read and sign. Willing participants were asked to complete and return the questionnaires within one week. The last page of the questionnaire included debriefing information.

Measures

Expectation for e-mail reply time. Students were asked how long they think it should take for professors to return e-mail "during a regular workday," "after 5 p.m.," "over the weekend," and "over a break from school." Respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours, days, or

weeks.

Reported e-mail response time. Students were asked how long they typically wait for professors to return e-mail “during a regular workday,” “after 5 p.m.,” “over the weekend,” and “over a break from school.” Respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours, days, or weeks.

Number of e-mails unanswered. Students were asked to provide the number of times they e-mailed a professor and did not receive a response.

Results

Given the exploratory nature of our study and the large proportion of females relative to males in our sample, we ran *t*-tests for the variables related to each question to determine if males and females differed in their responses. We will report significant differences, when applicable.

Research Question One – Expectations for Response Time

Research question one assesses students’ expectations for e-mail response time. Students expect quick responses to their e-mails from professors, especially during a workday ($M = .62$ days or 14.88 hours, $SD = .50$) or after work hours during the week ($M = .81$ days or 19.44 hours, $SD = .72$). Students also expect professors to respond to e-mails during the weekend ($M = 1.39$ days, $SD = .83$) and during breaks between semesters ($M = 2.71$ days, $SD = 2.34$). We ran *t*-tests to establish whether males and females differed in their expectations for response time. The only statistically significant difference involved students’ expectations for responses after 5 p.m. on workdays. Females expected quicker responses ($M = .74$ days, $SD = .46$) than males ($M = 1.00$ days, $SD = 1.18$), $t(177) = 2.10$, $p = .037$, 95% CI = [.02, .50].

Research Question Two – Reported Response Times

Research question two measured how long students perceive waiting for responses to their e-mails from professors. Students reported receiving quick responses to their e-mails from professors, especially during workdays ($M = .60$ days or 14.4 hours, $SD = .81$). Students reported waiting longer after 5 p.m. on workdays ($M = .87$ days or 21.12 hours, $SD = .73$), during weekends ($M = 1.75$ days, $SD = .80$), and during breaks between semesters ($M = 3.49$ days, $SD = 2.90$).

Research Question Three – Reported vs. Expected Response Times

The third research question compares students’ reported wait times to their expected wait times. Students’ expectations were met during the workday with professors replying a mean difference of .03 days or 43.2 minutes ($SD = .74$ days) before students expected them to reply, $t(179) = -.60$, $p = .55$, 95% CI = [-.14, .08]. Students’ expectations also were met after work hours during the work week with an average difference of .06 days or 86.4 minutes ($SD = .43$ days) between expected and perceived wait times, $t(177) = 1.73$, $p = .09$, 95% CI = [-.01, .12]. However, students waited longer than they expected to wait during weekends and breaks between semesters. Over weekends, students reported an average difference of .36 days or 8.64 hours ($SD = 1.03$ days) between expected and perceived wait times, $t(177) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.21, .51]. For breaks between semesters, students reported a mean difference of .80 days or 19.20 hours ($SD = 2.45$ days) between expected and perceived wait times, $t(170) = 4.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.43, 1.17].

Research Question Four – Unanswered E-mails

Research question four measured how many student e-mails to professors go unanswered during a typical academic semester. Students reported an average of 2.12 ($SD = 2.65$) unanswered e-mails throughout their time in college. When divided by the number of semesters these students completed, students' e-mails are not returned an average of .63 times per semester ($SD = 1.01$).

Discussion

Summary and Implications of Results

Our results indicate that students expect quick replies to their e-mails from professors, especially during workdays and after work hours during the week. However, students also expect professors to return e-mails during weekends and in less than three days during breaks between semesters. Professors are meeting students' expectations during the work week, but students perceive them as taking too long to return e-mails during weekends and breaks.

Meeting student expectations for instructor availability is important for the educational process (Mottet et al., 2005) and has implications for students' perceptions of instructors (Tatum et al., 2018). Prior research found students consider a lack of professor availability to be a form of instructor misbehavior (Kearney et al., 2002). Instructor misbehavior is negatively related with student learning outcomes (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009; Goodboy & Myers, 2015) and student perceptions of instructor credibility (Semlak & Pearson, 2008). Quick e-mail response times have been associated with more positive perceptions of instructors' competence, caring, and character than were average and slow response speeds (Tatum et al., 2018).

However, meeting student expectations requires little separation between work and home, including working at night, during the weekend, and during breaks (Broeckelman-Post & MacArthur, 2018; Duran et al., 2005). Due to the importance of managing student expectations and perceptions of instructor availability, we suggest that professors and students come to an agreement about students' expectations for availability and professors' ability to meet these expectations, especially during the weekend and during breaks between semesters. Perhaps a discussion about the best way to reach a professor and response times for different forms of OCC would help. Instructing students on how to write appropriate e-mails to faculty members might lessen some faculty complaints regarding e-mails (Flaherty, 2019; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Statements in syllabi also might help, assuming students read and remember the policies. Students could then make informed decisions about how to reach their instructors and interact with them appropriately.

Professors also should take students' expectations for e-mail exchanges into account (MacArthur & Villagran, 2015), especially when teaching Millennial students. Millennial students expect their instructors to use technology and use it effectively (Goodboy & Myers, 2015). They also tend to prefer individualized attention from instructors and want substantial amounts of communication and guidance in their educational pursuits (Becker, 2012).

In order to meet these expectations, some professors might need to adjust their work styles. For example, some professors might find that working from home one day a week but responding to e-mails quickly is a compromise between not having any time off work and still meeting student

demands, assuming the institution allows this. Shorter hours on campus might have the same effect. Atamian and DeMerville (1998) reported on an experimental course in which all interactions besides in-class dialogue took place by e-mail or other means of data transmission. Students were instructed not to telephone the professor or visit his office. In return, students were guaranteed a response to their e-mail messages within 24 hours. Students were satisfied with the instructor's availability and 89% of the students agreed that the course format made the instructor more accessible. The instructor's ratings for "instructor outside availability" improved by 11% when compared to semesters when students were not enrolled in this experimental course. Another idea might include reducing office hours to free time during the workday for other tasks but committing to quick e-mail responses in exchange. Finally, using a mobile or handheld device might allow professors to respond more quickly and also mirrors students' use of these technologies (Adams et al., 2010).

Limitations

Three limitations must be acknowledged when reviewing the results of our study. First, we recruited students from one institution. The type and size of institution might affect how students view e-mail with their professors. Second, as with other similar studies (Young et al., 2011), our study focused on students' retrospective estimates for e-mail use and response times. Finally, our sample included 75% women and 25% men. However, we found only one statistically significant difference between men and women. Females expected quicker responses than males after 5 p.m. on workdays.

Future Research Directions

Researchers should continue to study e-mail's use and effects in educational contexts. Specifically, we would like to investigate the consequences for professors who fail to meet students' expectations for e-mail communication. For example, Kearney et al.'s (2002) research demonstrates that students assume teachers know they are misbehaving and misbehave on purpose. However, some professors may not be aware of students' expectations for e-mail or may not realize the importance of meeting these expectations. Second, e-mail helpfulness is important to students (Sheer & Fung, 2007) so it would be useful to investigate messages perceived as helpful in order to provide guidelines for constructing such e-mails. Finally, investigating professors' expectations for e-mail would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Students expect quick replies to their e-mails from professors, especially during workdays and after work hours during the week. Professors meet students' expectations during the work week, but not during weekends or breaks. Discussing expectations for e-mail could be useful, but professors might have to change work styles to meet students' expectations.

Endnote

This article updates an earlier publication in *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (2013, 2016) *Students' Expectations for E-Mailing Professors* by Miller and Reznik).

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