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COMMENTARY

Is E-Mail a Teacher's Friend or Foe?

By Aliza Libman

When I learned that a technical glitch at my school would mean I could no longer check my school e-mail at home, I cringed. How could I be responsive to the needs of my students? How would I get everything done without staying at school till 8 p.m.? The situation seemed nightmarish.

To my surprise, though, I soon discovered that the inability to e-mail around the clock actually forced me to become a better teacher.

Most of today's students can't remember life before e-mail. But for many teachers, even the young ones, school-related e-mail can be an addition to the instructor's toolbox that's often painful to master. While passionate teachers dream of having an impact on young lives, they may not be as enthusiastic about the prospect of round-the-clock availability, a notion that e-mail manages to convey.

On any given day, 50 or more messages will pop up in my inbox from students, parents, administrators, and other teachers. Some read like this: "hey did u get my papr i left it in ur box?" Others are epics that rival *Crime and Punishment*, at least in length. And some are 10 p.m. missives about tomorrow's homework. But almost all of them have authors who get antsy if I don't reply instantaneously.

Three factors can make e-mail a problem for teachers: volume, content, and choice of medium. By volume, I mean when teachers have too many e-mails to respond to; with content, I'm talking about e-mails that are rude, unclear, or of painful grammar. Choice of medium refers to the fact that by using the swifter, easier e-mail option, teachers run the risk of avoiding the phone call or face-to-face communication that would do the job better.

When I teach students about safe and appropriate use of the Internet, I remind them that it is a tool, comparable to a hammer, ax, or saw. Wielded carefully and appropriately, the Internet can do a job that needs doing. But in the hands of an unskilled or careless person, it can cause harm. So it is with teachers and e-mail.

If I e-mail a parent about a child, for instance, I may, depending on the circumstance, copy a guidance counselor, one or two administrators, learning-support-staff members, office personnel, and/or the school psychologist. Each of these recipients then has to read the e-mail, apprise him- or herself of what is going on, and decide whether to reply to the message or file it away. This means increased e-mail volume, and yet it is critical to having all parties know what is going on. The student in question will come to school the next day expecting the adult professionals working with him or her to

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know all about the situation and how the school will respond to it.

In this tech-savvy era, being able to deal with a reasonable volume of e-mail on a daily basis is an incredible asset, one that helps teachers connect with students where they are and respond to them in a way that's comfortable for them and moderately convenient for us. (As a bonus, your e-mail can't ring after midnight.)

The communication's value is less clear when the content of an e-mail is confused, malicious, or consists entirely of phrase-acronyms or jargon. And e-mails may pave the way for unexpected tirades, since many people will say online what they might not feel comfortable saying face to face. Consider the angry message I received from one parent, who told me that my differentiated instruction (a schoolwide priority) did nothing but make all my students feel stupid. Regardless of the merits of her concern, the parent's accusatory tone made for a lousy day, with her diatribe hanging over me like Eeyore's cloud of gloom.

At some level, though, teachers control whether or not they let their students (and their students' parents) get under their skin. Perhaps three or four parents a year will pick a fight with me, yet I know that the other 100-plus families of the children I teach are either happy with me or keeping it to themselves. Still, I can't seem to stop myself from walking into work, turning on my computer, logging on to my e-mail, and running the risk of an angry parent ruining an otherwise lovely day.

The sensitivity to e-mail messages I've developed helps me understand more deeply a universal truth about teaching: Anything I say may be misinterpreted—and perhaps even more so in cyberspace. After all, if I am irked by the e-mails of my students, then I know I must choose my own words carefully when e-mailing them. A misplaced comma or an ill-chosen adjective could cause major harm to the parent-teacher and student-teacher relationships I labor endlessly to cultivate.

The last area of challenge applies more to the younger generation of teachers than to older ones: Those of us who like e-mail the most are also the most likely to use it in situations where it is not the ideal medium. Just as every teen magazine my students read preaches "don't break up with someone via e-mail," so too must teachers remember that sensitive issues call for face-to-face discussions.

Every teacher is acquainted with these problems in some form. And, as is true with many other educational predicaments, the answers may already be clear. That doesn't mean they will be easy to implement, however. Best practices should apply to e-mail as much as to the classroom: Make your expectations and limitations clear from the outset. Many schools, my own among them, have policies that give teachers a certain time frame in which to respond to e-mails. Just as I tell my students 50-plus times they must bring a notebook and a pen to class, knowing full well that though most will eventually remember, some will always forget, so too must teachers clarify expectations on e-mail to students and their parents, knowing some will always disregard them.

Without e-mail at home, I've had to be quick and efficient at school, or risk staying hours after the work day ends. I have taught myself how to prioritize and weed out the e-mails that don't require immediate attention, or that don't need responses at all.

Restricted e-mail access, I've found, also makes me think seriously about whether there are better ways to communicate with a family or solve a problem. I don't automatically dash off quick series of e-mails anymore. When I do write them, I write carefully, giving attention to every word.

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Perhaps, I have concluded, e-mail is like ice cream—too much makes me sick, but life without it would be inconceivable.

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