

Throw Me a Life Jacket: I am Swimming in Student E-mails

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Abstract

As an online and face-to-face instructor at a college in Ohio, I found myself spending day and night replying to student e-mails. When discussing this issue with other faculty members, I found I was not alone in trying to keep up with the never-ending e-mails. As a result, I decided to implement an action research project focused on the following research question: Will the use of a question and answer (Q and A) subscribed forum on Blackboard reduce the number of student e-mails? Results indicate the use of a subscribed forum in all courses significantly reduces student e-mails.

Keywords: E-mails; forums; college courses

Swimming in Student E-mails

As an online and face-to-face instructor at a college in Ohio, I found myself spending day and night replying to student e-mails. When discussing this issue with other faculty members, I found I was not alone in trying to keep up with the never-ending e-mails. As a result, I decided to implement an action research project focused on the following research question: Will the use of a Q and A subscribed forum on Blackboard reduce the number of student e-mails?

Literature Review

E-mail is considered to be an instructional technology tool that is widely used by students to communicate with their instructors (Brunner, Yates, & Adams, 2008; Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005; Wilson & Florell, 2011). Communication between student and instructor is essential for student learning (Levitch & Milheim, 2003). Students primarily use e-mail for “clarification, to self disclose, to discuss personal matters, to learn more about an instructor, and to impress an instructor” (Brunner et al., 2008, p. 107). This is also supported by a study conducted by Duran et al. (2005) which reiterates the use of e-mail to pose questions or clarify assignments. Students are also more likely to send an e-mail than ask instructors face-to-face (Levitch & Milheim, 2003). Students have expectations for instructors when using e-mail to communicate. Orso and Doolittle (2012) conducted a study which focused on what online students value most. Students wanted “frequent, timely communication” (para. 4) with their instructors.

According to Miller (2006), there is no question e-mail is beneficial, but the high use comes with some negative consequences. When comparing the number of e-mails initiated by instructors and students, students send on average twice as many (Brunner et al., 2008; Duran et al., 2005). Due to this, instructors feel bombarded with never ending e-mails from students. In addition, many of the emails sent by different students are similar in nature (Handlos, 2019). Instructors feel students expect them to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Brunner et al., 2008; Glater, 2006; Levitch & Milheim, 2003). Instructors have reported receiving messages “from 10 a week to 10 every day” (para. 4). Student expectations of instructors replying to their emails in a timely manner has substantially increased the workload of instructors (Brunner et al., 2008; Duran et al., 2006; Miller, 2006; Min, Bonk, & Magiuka, 2006; Morrison, 2012). Although both online and face-to-face courses require time commitments to reply to student emails, Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) found the online instructor’s time for completing the task was “significantly greater” (p. 133). The increase in email communication has been found to cause tension among instructors, especially junior faculty (Glater, 2006). According to Wilson and Florell (2011), instructors understand the possible consequences of not responding to student emails in a timely manner because course evaluations often have a question about communication. Therefore, instructors feel the pressure to respond to every student email even when the response is similar for several emails. This redundancy takes time away from other essential work (Collis & Gervedink Nijhuis, 2000; Handlos, 2019).

As a result of the increased workload of responding to student emails, instructors must find strategies to implement in order to reduce the number of emails being received (Handlos, 2019; Min et al., 2006). Morrison (2012) concluded the need for instructors to make changes in order to minimize the time spent on replying to e-mails.

Communication with students still needs to be a priority for instructors, but there are ways this can still be accomplished while reducing the workload (Morrison, 2012). Instructors should use technology tools such as announcement boards and forums (Collis & Gervedink Nijhuis, 2000; Handlos, 2019; Min et al., 2006; Morrison, 2012). Unfortunately, some students have questions, but are hesitant to even send the instructor an email. By using announcement boards or forums, students who do not ask questions may still benefit from the information posted in response to another student's question.

Methodology

Findings from the quantitative action research study will provide college professors with practical knowledge on how to decrease the number of student e-mails. The purpose of the study was to analyze the number of student e-mails before and after the use of a subscribed Q and A discussion board forum.

Population

The population for the action research study consisted of first- and second-year college students enrolled in my courses at a public college in Ohio. The courses are housed within the social sciences department. Not all students enrolled in the courses sent e-mails; however, each student was included in the Excel file if they were enrolled.

Instrument

An Excel file was used to collect student e-mail data for five semesters. Data collected included the semester, student name, and count of e-mails received during the semester. A subscribed discussion board forum titled Q and A was created and used for an additional five semesters. The Excel file was still used to collect the student e-mail data.

Procedure

Students enrolled in my courses during the following five semesters were included in the action research study: (before) fall 2016, spring 2017, summer 2017, fall 2017, spring 2018, and (after) summer 2018, fall 2018, spring 2019, summer 2019, and fall 2019. All student names were added to an Excel file noting the semester. When a student e-mail was received, a "tally" mark was made next to the student's name. A count was kept of each student e-mail received across the five semesters. At the end of those five semesters, a Q and A forum was created on Blackboard's discussion board section in all courses. Students were to subscribe to the forum in order to post questions. Those subscribed to the forum would receive an e-mail alert when a post was made. This question and answer forum was used for the following five semesters: summer 2018, fall 2018, spring 2019, summer 2019, and fall 2019. The data collection method followed the same process as was used during the previous five semesters. If a student was in multiple courses or across multiple semesters, the semester was noted in which the e-mail was received as well as the count of e-mails.

Analysis

Excel was used to track student e-mail data across the 10 semesters. At the conclusion of collection, the data was entered into the SPSS software in order to ascertain if using a Q and A discussion board forum affected the number of student e-mails. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to provide characteristics of the student e-mails. A 2 Sample t-test of unequal variances otherwise known as a Welch's *t*-test was used as the primary analysis procedure.

Research Question

The research question for this quantitative action research study focused on the impact of using a subscribed Q and A forum on the number of student e-mails received during the semester. The following is the research question for the study:

1. Does the use of a Q and A discussion board forum decrease the number of student e-mails?

Hypothesis

H₁₀: There is no difference in the mean number of student e-mails when using a Q and A discussion board forum.

H_{1A}: A significant difference exists in the mean number of student e-mails when a Q and A discussion board forum is used.

Results

The purpose of the quantitative action research study was to determine if a Q and A forum affects the number of e-mails students send to me. Although studies exist concerning student e-mails in a college setting, many of the studies focus on the content of the e-mails. Strategies have been suggested, but little research on the effect of a strategy has been conducted. Therefore, there was a need for such study.

Descriptive Characteristics

Before the implementation of the Q and A forum (see Table 1), 367 students were enrolled in the courses across five consecutive semesters. During that time, 663 student e-mails were received with an average of 132.6 e-mails per semester. Since some students were in multiple courses or enrolled in multiple semesters, unique users (48) were also tracked.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Before

	Before Q and A Forum						
	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Summer 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Avg	Total
# Students Enrolled	111	87	27	81	61	73.40	367
Total # of E-mails	203	178	20	101	161	132.60	663
# of Unique Users	31	7	1	6	3	9.60	48

After adding a Q and A forum to the discussion board in every online and face-to-face course (see Table 2), 317 students were enrolled in the courses across five consecutive semesters. During that time, 157 student e-mails were received with an average of 31.4 e-mails per semester. An additional 11 unique users were identified.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics After

	After Q and A Forum						
	Summer 2018	Fall 2018	Spring 2019	Summer 2019	Fall 2019	Avg	Total
# Students Enrolled	20	101	94	17	85	63.40	317
Total # of E-mails	1	79	37	4	36	31.40	157
# of Unique Users	1	5	1	2	2	2.20	11

Test of Hypothesis

Research hypothesis 1 stated that a significant difference would be found between the mean number of e-mails received from students based on a Q and A discussion board forum. A Welch's *t*-test was calculated comparing the mean number of student e-mails before and after implementing a Q and A discussion board forum.

The results (see Table 3) show the mean number of e-mails over the course of five semesters is significantly higher than the mean number with the use of a Q and A forum. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. There is a significant difference between the number of student e-mails when a Q and A forum is used in courses. The statistical test power (0.93) was strong while the effect size (1.88) was large. Results indicated that using a Q and A forum in courses reduces the number of student e-mails. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3

Statistics

Sample Statistics			
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	Difference
Mean	13.81	5.61	8.20
Standard Error	0.70	0.66	0.04
Median	13.00	5.00	8.00
Mode	12.00	2.00	10.00
Standard Deviation	4.85	3.48	1.37
Sample Variance	23.56	12.10	11.46
Sum	663.00	157.00	506.00

Discussion

Implication for College Educators

Understanding the increased role technology plays in the college setting is paramount to student learning and instructor sanity. Without a strategy in place, instructors are bombarded with student e-mails night and day. Students expect instructors to reply; therefore, placing pressure on instructors. By simply adding a Q and A discussion board forum to all college courses, student e-mails dramatically decrease. This result is beneficial to the instructor and all students.

Limitations of Study and Recommendations

The action research study was conducted with education majors enrolled in specific courses taught by the same instructor. The study should be replicated on a larger scale and with other college majors. In addition, examining the content of the e-mails for themes would provide a qualitative approach.

Conclusion

Living in a technological world has its advantages and disadvantages. Students rely on e-mail to communicate with college instructors and expect immediate feedback from instructors. Using e-mail is one strategy to communicate with students; however, using other technology tools such as Q and A discussion forums have the potential to minimize the number of student e-mails while still providing important information to all students.

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