

**Communicating via E-mail; Views and Perceptions – the female  
experience: a preliminary study of a Kuwaiti college classroom**

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## **Introduction**

Communication between tutor and student is an important part of daily college life. It is just as important to be able to communicate outside the classroom as it is inside it. Whether face-to-face or online, communication between students and tutor is seen as a vital element of learning. Educationists and educational designers in particular probe into ways and methods to design learning environments conducive to learning. One important aspect of educational designers' interest is to find and implement ways that foster and improve communication.

Communication and communication tools are main features of educational technologists' work. Research concerned with online communication, especially e-mail communication, has remarkably increased. Such studies are important for educationists and educational technologists. The knowledge gained from such studies can help design learning environments which benefit students and fulfil their learning needs. Within education, e-mail, as a communication tool, has been the subject of research in a variety of ways, for example; the content of the email, the written language, gender difference among users, and students' attitudes towards and use of the tool. Hence, offering meanings and expanding knowledge not only in relation to the tool, but also, with regards to context within which it is being used, and the individuals using it.

This preliminary study examines female students' views and perceptions in relation to communicating via e-mail. And as such the researcher enters the research study unrestricted by presuppositions and assumptions. On the contrary, the data gathered is used to portray a preliminary account of how female students view and perceive the e-mail as a tool of communication in a Kuwaiti college classroom. There is a serious lack of research on internet use and online communication, in general, and within educational settings, in particular. In this sense, it is the purpose of this paper to set grounds for further in-depth research. This study is important for a number of reasons: first, it is situated in a women's only college, second, the scarcity of such studies within the Kuwaiti context, and thirdly, this study investigates possibilities of communication offered to students other than face-to-face, and outside the college classroom.

The paper is divided into five main sections. In the first, a general view of e-mail as a communication tool sets way for the proceeding sections. The second section introduces the context within which this study is positioned and carried out. The third section follows with the study design and method. Then the discussion and analysis is presented. And finally a brief summary and conclusion ends the paper.

## **E-mail; a tool of communication – an overall view**

According to Judd (2010) email has been the primary way of formal and informal communication between correspondences. In the United States, for example, there are more emails sent every day than telephone calls. In fact, and according to Easton & Bommelje (2011), its volume outdoes that of the U.S. Postal Service. While in the United Kingdom, as Limberg (2008) indicates, two million e-mails are sent every minute; this amounts to almost three billion per day.

Goldsborough (2011) puts forward some of the features that make e-mail a desirable tool of communication. For instance, e-mail is easy, simple and effective and not limited to time or place, it can be sent 24-hours a day from and to any place, and to as many people as one wishes. E-mail is delivered faster than any traditional post, and its content include text, photographs and multiple media files such as audio, video and graphics. E-mail comes structurally with easy and user-friendly interfaces. Its features and functions allow users to send and store huge amounts of data. These features also help users organize different types of email received in the inbox. Some argue that the speed and versatility of e-mail are the two aspects that make it different from other communication channels.

But still, e-mail has its limitations and downfalls as Rahman (2012) explains:

“Despite having many advantages, the use of email has some problems. The general limitations include loss of context, a message cannot be removed once it is sent to a receiver, information overload, inconsistency, liability, spam mail and computer viruses. However, some feel that email is not a reliable medium even though there are online services that guarantee the security or privacy of email. Yet, for sending normal, everyday email, people do not use these types of special services often” (p. 9)

Some writers go even further to admitting that email had been ‘king of communications’, but its supremacy is over (Vascellaro, 2009).

In the education sector, e-mail is widely accepted for professional/educational and social communication between students and faculty members and tutors. It is considered a medium that provides students an extended opportunity to interact with instructors (Bloch 2002). According to Hinkle (2007) e-mail is “increasingly becoming the preferred means of communication between students and faculty” (p. 27). To some educationists e-mail exchanges between instructor and students is considered a given character especially to North American higher education institutions (Hassini, 2006). The expansion of new media and the growing acceptance of new communication tools (e.g., text messaging, instant messaging, and email) means that communication outside the classroom has extended (Ibid).

Further, researchers such as Ebner (2011) allude to the effects of email communication on relational and transactional elements of negotiation. She argues that “we are all aware that some information could be easy to communicate face-to-face, but difficult to convey in an email; other messages might be hampered by a face-to-face setting. We might have one response to something we are told face-to-face, but respond in a completely different manner to the same message, conveyed by email.” (p. 3) She (2011) explains that the capacity of any given media is related to the supply ‘contextual cues’ such as; body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. And while face-to-face communication is considered a “rich” medium, because it allows for all of those cues to be a significant proportion of a message’s meaning, e-mail, on the other hand, is considered a “lean” medium because it denies facial expressions, or tone of voice. The absence of these contextual cues, negotiators both transmit and receive information differently, Ebner stresses.

In their study on testing gender differences that might relate to beliefs and use of computer-based media, Gefen and Straub 1997, sampled 392 female and male responses via a cross-sectional survey instrument. Study findings indicate that women and men differ in their perceptions but not use of e-mail. Findings in this exploratory

study showed some support for the proposition that perceived attributes of E-mail can differ between genders. And in another study on professor-student e-mail communication, interpersonal relationships and teaching evaluation, Sheer & Fung, 2007 show that e-mail communication has contributed positively to both professor-student relationships and teaching evaluations.

Furthermore, Rahman (2012) stresses that “Email and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have become an important part of university students’ daily lives” (p. 5). Part of her work focused on studying students’ perceptions and motivations for using email in terms of communication features and gratifications. While, in his study on computer-mediated accounting communication skills, Jones (2011) states that students should be taught to maintain a professional presence on social media because email serves as an outdated communication mode and some other digital invention will take the place of today’s electronic mail.

Studies on e-mail communication within the Kuwaiti context are limited. But what is available records a positive account. For example, a Kuwaiti study Alsharija, Qabla and Watters (2012) sought to capture the principals’, teachers’, and students’ perceptions of ICT integration in pedagogical activities. They also investigated how ICT is being used for learning and teaching activities in three ICT leading Kuwaiti secondary schools. Alsharija et.al (2012) found that e-mail was used to improve communications within the school. For that purpose an email system was established for each department, which the teachers checked regularly.

At Kuwait University El-Sabban (2009) writes about his experience on implementing e-mail communication in his classes. For each of his three classes he established an e-mail account and provided the user name and password for his students, to circulate content material, handouts, announcements related to the course. Students used their personal e-mail accounts to communicate inquiries about assignments, requests for confirmation or postponement of dates for quizzes and midterm examinations and apologies for not attending class. On the whole, all students expressed positive responses towards using email as a communication tool. And in a study on the reality of the use of internet application by Head Departments in Kuwait University, Alhamdan and Alkhizi (2008) found that e-mail is the most used and the most highly rated application by them.

## **The context**

The Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) is one of the two government higher education organisations which offer education and training to students. Kuwait University is the other government higher education institution. Education and training in all colleges and institutions (of PAAET) is segregated so there are women's colleges and institutes and men's colleges and institutes. The biggest of all five colleges, of the applied education sector in PAAET, is the College of Basic Education, which hosts more than 10,000 male and female students. Women students constitute around 2/3 of the total students’ population. The academic year of 2011/2012 witnessed 22786 female students and 7603 male students graduating.

Face-to-face is the single and only approach to interaction between students and tutors, which is institutionally recognized within PAAET. Any attempts to introduce

other approaches to interaction are sole efforts of tutors. Blog, Twitter, and Facebook are used by some tutors. Few other tutors use e-mail. Every tutor must assign office hours for face-to-face consultation with students outside the classroom. Tutors are free to choose the days and the times of their office hours. Most tutors announce their office hours in their course syllabus and/or at office door. In my own experience few students take advantage of those office hours.

Many of them are married and some have children. The medium of instruction at the college is the Arabic language. At the end of successfully completing a 4-year programme, in a field of their choice, students receive a Bachelors degree in education.

Male tutors travel between the men's and women's colleges while women tutors are confined to teaching females only at the women's college. When this study was carried out, the different departments of the college were scattered over three buildings which are not very far from one another. Students use personal transportation or the college transportation facilities for mobility between buildings. The Department of Educational Technology, where I work, is located in annex one. Annex one consists of three main academic departments, as well as a language centre and the annex administration. Instruction in the college is in the Arabic language.

Student services in this building are limited. Beside a cafeteria, there is a very small library which suffers a shortage of books. There are few computers for students' use. This library opens for few hours in the morning during the main semester, and closes during the summer course. Many students use the main library located in the main college building as an alternative or the public libraries in the city. Similar conditions of other colleges under PAAET are reported elsewhere. Regarding the College of Business Studies Al-Doub et al. (2008) express a similar view to that of the College of Basic Education, mainly; no internet access, no wireless network, no e-learning facilities and material. But there have been serious attempts to improve education for students in the different colleges. Kuwaiti administrators, for example, embarked on an e-learning project in 2006. An e-learning team was officially formed which consisted of representatives of most colleges and divisions under PAAET. This team was to pursue the execution of the e-learning project. The project was a failure and was abandoned.

During the time of this study, the culture of technological deprivation has created a number of challenges regarding the way tutors manage and teach their courses, as well as communicate with their students. Tutors are required by college rules to be physically present on site during teaching and office hours. Individual tutors may implement the use of electronic communication in their courses, according to their needs and as they see appropriate. It is important to note that since this study was conducted, the College of Basic Education moved to a new campus.

## **Design and method of study**

Instructional Design is a compulsory subject for students majoring in educational technology at the College of Basic Education. Every semester there is a full section of students, and at times the number of students exceeds 50, like the section in this study. In the past I have used e-mail as a communication tool in all my courses. A number of

reasons prompted me to communicate with students by means of e-mail. The increasing number of students each academic year and each semester, the limited office hours that might not be of convenience to students, the growing number of students who own their personal facilities and have internet services, and the real desire to create alternatives for both students and tutor to be able to communicate with each other, other than face-to-face, are but a few reasons. For these and other motivations, an e-mail account was established, and students were given the e-mail address and password for the account. I used the account to send course syllabus, announcements regarding the subject, readings for the subject, handout activities, and reminders for exams among other things.

Students were instructed to use the account to access the important information regarding the subject. And they were also asked to use their personal accounts to send questions, discuss an issue related to the lectures, and share information, thoughts and references associated to the subject being discussed, to the shared account. Students were encouraged to send e-mails to the shared account, or the private account of the tutor in case of a personal matter. E-mail in other words created an opportunity for students to communicate with the instructor 24 hours during the seven days of the week. In order to encourage students to use the shared e-mail and contribute electronically, participation was rewarded. To overcome any problem that students might face, such as difficulty in accessing the e-mail account, or problems with personal facilities, students were grouped into small support groups of 4 or 5 to help one another and share information posted in the account. In addition, and according to college rules, students were also informed of the office hours where they met with the tutor face-to-face.

All students participated in using the shared account, some more than others. Some students shared references of interest to the topic being discussed during the lecture. Some posed questions and inquires. While others shared their views on what is being discussed. There were also complaints with regards to accessing the e-mail account. And to overcome this hurdle, students were advised to try more than once and at different times, or get assistance from their support groups. This paper focuses on students' perception and views regarding their experience of using the e-mail as a communication tool. It must be said that students used their own facilities of computers and internet services, and in their own time and space as the college did not provide such services, facilities, or even spaces.

At the end of the last meeting of class, students were presented with a simple questionnaire related to the e-mail experience. The questionnaire was also shared in the e-mail account for all students to respond to in their own time. The questionnaire was not intended to help formulate hard statistical evidence. Rather, the objective was to collect enough data in order to depict a description of how the female students viewed and experienced communication via e-mail. It is also hoped that this preliminary study paves way for further research, design, and implementation.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 statements, and students agreed, disagreed or did not know. The statements were chosen to reflect different elements that could illuminate how students might view the e-mail experience, such as, preference, convenience, satisfaction, speed and so on. Thirteen statements, of all statements in the questionnaire, focused on the different aspects of e-mail as a tool of electronic communication. While only three statements compared e-mail communication to

face-to-face communication. At the end of the questionnaire students were asked to write and comment on their experience of using e-mail as a communication tool in this course. A total of 73 students responded to the questionnaire, and out of those 48 students wrote about their experiences.

## **Results, Analysis, and Discussion**

It is vital to accentuate that this is a preliminary study, and as such it is not the researcher's objective to generalize the issues and elements raised in this discussion. Rather, it is hoped that the issues raised and discussed here initiate further in-depth research. With this on mind, the analysis and discussion unfolds.

A simple mathematical analysis was applied to questionnaire responses, and a percentage format was created and displayed in the timetable below. Content analysis was applied to students' written responses to the open-ended request. This was achieved by reading the texts several times in order to comprehend what the main concerns were and extract key elements students raised. There was a general consensus amongst students on the points raised. But there were also important issues that were raised by a small number of students. These were also taken into consideration and included in the discussion.

In all, the results, shown in the table below, reflect a positive account on behalf of the students towards communicating through e-mail. Most students were satisfied with the experience and highly rated the use of e-mail to communicate with their tutor. Not only did students like the idea of communicating with their tutor any time and place, they found this medium to be time efficient, and a faster way to reach their tutor. In fact, the students highly rated all aspects concerning email use to communicate with their tutor. The rates fell between 60% to 90%, which reflects a positive experience and attitude towards the use of this medium.

Positioning e-mail communication in comparison to face-to-face communication, students clearly leaned towards the latter. This is well reflected in statements 5, 10, and 12. In other words, when students were asked to rate aspects concerning the e-mail tool only, they tended to highly appraise it. But when students were asked to rate e-mail communication vis-a-vis face-to-face communication, they valued the latter more. There were more students in this class who preferred to communicate with the tutor face-to-face. And they found it to be more effective in comparison to e-mail. In short, they preferred talking to their tutor rather than writing to her. But this preference did not seem to devalue their experience of communicating by e-mail. Students' feedback on the open ended request posed at the end of the questionnaire sheds light on this matter.

No	Statement	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree
1	E-mail is a convenient method of communication for the course	89%	11%	--
2	I prefer to use the e-mail to communicate with my instructor	83.6%	5.5%	10.9%
3	This method made me feel fully-informed and provided	83.6%	12.3%	4.1%
4	My instructor always responded to my e-mails	87.7%	11%	1.3%
5	I feel that e-mail is as effective as face-to-face communication	46.6%	9.6%	43.8%
6	I feel that communicating by e-mail saves me time	89%	4.1%	6.9%
7	I use e-mail because it is faster to reach my instructor	80.8%	11%	8.2%
8	I like the idea that I can communicate with my instructor at any time and place	93.2%	2.7%	4.1%
9	I feel satisfied about my instructor's responses to my e-mails	79.5%	16.4%	4.1%
10	I like e-mailing more than talking to my instructor face-to-face	26%	13.7%	60.3%
11	I feel that my instructor is more accessible by e-mail	71.3%	15%	13.7%
12	I prefer to talk to my instructor rather than e-mailing him/her	65.7	22%	12.3
13	I like communicating with my instructor by e-mail because she always answers back	71.3%	20.5%	8.2%
14	I will always use the e-mail to communicate with my instructors	60.2	22%	17.8%
15	I recommend communication by e-mail for all my courses in the future	69.8%	8.2%	22%

Of all students who responded to the questionnaire, 48 students, that is 66%, chose to write about their experience of using e-mail. A number of important points concerning the e-mail experience were raised. **First:** students reiterated the attributes that made their experience with e-mail a positive one. Students agreed that communicating through e-mail was a worthwhile experience, and they appreciated the fact that they could easily send messages at any time and with not much effort. But they also agreed that the speed of tutor's response play an important part in this kind of communication and interaction. One student explained that:

“Communication by e-mail depends on the tutor and his speed to respond to the e-mail sent, in my experience not all tutors are as prompt in responding to students’ queries”

Another student wrote:

“From my personal experience, I have faced difficulties in communicating with tutors because they don’t check their e-mail, or unable to answer the question... some tutors use their mobile devices to reply and therefore their reply is brief”

**Second:** some students criticized the way the tool was used and the e-mail account that was set for all students. In fact some students suggested other systems of online learning such as wiki, Moodle, Gmail, and Blackboard. Here is how one student expressed it:

“There are special e-learning systems, and these systems are more effective, but on the other hand e-mail is useful and effective if used when communication is between tutor and one student only...Moodle for example allows all students at the same time, without having to wait for one student to exit as in the e-mail account...”

This reflects a technological awareness by the students.

**Third:** students stated that using e-mail to discuss issues raised in the lecture was not preferable. They found e-mail to be appropriate to “pose inquiries that are easy to respond to.” To these students, discussion was harder to implement using e-mail as one explained:

“In my opinion e-mail is very effective for communication between tutor and student. She can communicate with the tutor at any time and any place. But to discuss by means of e-mail is useless. I prefer to let discussion take place in the classroom, because students can negotiate better, and present their ideas and personal experiences...”

This student and others like her pointed out that:

“online discussion, to the students, is cut and paste theories and reports from other websites, and then sent to e-mail account.....some students are incapable of articulating their opinions by means of writing, they are unable to communicate their views, and sometimes there is not enough time to participate because of the workload that must be done for other courses, or because the internet service is unavailable...”

**Finally,** few students were concerned with rewarding their online participation. “It must be said,” one student wrote, “that students’ participation is compulsory since it was associated with the final grade, it is not fair to assess students for their [written] participation, because there are students that enter the account to only read”

This student rightly distinguishes between two types of online participation; writing and reading, which is visible and invisible participation respectively.

Regarding the same point above, another student explained that:

“this is an excellent way to communicate but the idea that it is graded had diminished it...Students’ worry was focused on sending as much information as possible without paying attention to the scientific quality and depth ...”

The concerns that students expressed above underpin a number of significant issues. Tutors’ responsibilities when embracing an online tool such as e-mail to communicate with students is one issue. The speed of tutor’s response, the content and answers delivered in tutor’s e-mail, facilitating students’ responses and discussions, organizing students’ e-mail messages, are but faces of tutor’s responsibilities and commitment when using a ‘new’ tool of communication. For example and with regards to e-mail negotiation and discussion, Ebner (2011) rightly points out that the “communication channel through which the negotiation is conducted affects the dynamics of the interaction, the degree of inter-party trust and cooperation, the information shared and the outcome.” (p. 3)

Another important issue that surfaces is related to rewarding online participation. Online participation in this study is seen in the ‘visibility’ of the student. That is, students’ participation was graded according to the quantity of their e-mails and writings. While invisibility; not sending e-mails, means failing to participate. But according to these students ‘reading’ is a kind of participation though it is not visible. When participation is graded students have a lot at stake. This is an issue which

invites tutors to rethink 'participation', in general, and online participation in particular.

The last and third issue is concerned with implementing a 'new' tool/method of communication. This implementation is not as simple as it might appear to be. An 'add-on' tactic or approach to technology, like the one I adopted in this course, is problematic. Much attention should be given to how students interact with these technologies. The mere fact that some students do not have access to internet facilities, or do not own the hardware needed, or do not have an e-mail account and have not engaged in e-mail communication prior to this study, are but a few issues to consider.

## Conclusion and summary

This is a preliminary study which sets out to gauge female students' views and perceptions on using e-mail as a tool of communication between the tutor and the students. A questionnaire of 15 statements, and students' accounts to an open ended request was used to illuminate students' experiences. Students appreciated the use of e-mail as a communication tool. And they liked the idea that they could communicate at any time and any place with their tutor. But they favoured the use of face-to-face communication over e-mail communication during discussions. Students' experiences elicited in their responses to the open ended account raised certain concerns. These concerns highlighted tutor's responsibilities in this endeavor, the grading of online participation, and the add-on tactic embraced by the tutor in using e-mail as a tool of communication.

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## Acknowledgement

The questionnaire used in this study was part of a larger inquiry on students' use and perception of the e-mail as a communication tool, both at Kuwait University (Women's College) and the College of Basic Education (during 2011). The larger project involved Prof. Farouk El-Sabban, KU, and myself (PAAET). I was the main researcher. For personal circumstances I experienced at the time, the project was terminated. However, all data was collected and analysed, with each author working on his and her own courses in the respected colleges. The questionnaire was agreed upon by both authors. However, the idea of using an e-mail account for students' use was suggested by Prof. El-Sabban, and was adopted by myself for my part in the larger inquiry.