

How Does Your “Online Identity” Impact Classroom Climate? Strategies for Managing E-mail Communications and Social Networking Sites

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E-mail, online discussion tools, and social networking websites (e.g., Canvas, Facebook, flickr, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.) offer tremendous potential to extend the boundaries of the physical classroom and to enhance student learning. Many undergraduate students spend time using these online tools to develop and maintain their social networks. Instructors can take advantage of these same tools to increase rapport and create a sense of community in their courses. They also can help students develop greater motivation by showing the relevance of course-related material to students' lives. By sharing a wide variety of resources with and among students, instructors can deepen exposure to course-related material and highlight connections among concepts within and across disciplines. For example, Professor Mark Clague (Musicology, University of Michigan) uses Facebook to build community by informing his students of one another's class recitals and upcoming conferences and concerts they might wish to attend. He can broaden their perspectives on course materials by creating a space for students to reflect upon and discuss resources he posts and connecting students to people outside U-M who share their interests in music. Finally, links to a group that explores the growing (but still underrepresented) number of women conductors help him raise diversity awareness in a disciplinary-specific context.

While these technologies can be powerful means to promote learning, they may also present pedagogical and logistical challenges to instructors. This article highlights some of these challenges regarding instructor-student interactions and poses questions and suggestions to help instructors manage their online communications and “online identities.”

E-mail

Typically, Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) are available for questions and to help students before or after class, during regularly scheduled office hours, or by making an appointment. In addition to these opportunities, students perceive e-mail to be an effective, convenient means to gain access to instructors to clarify confusion, obtain answers to questions, or receive feedback on their learning. Many faculty and GSIs encourage and welcome such interactions. However, some instructors report that students sometimes have unrealistic expectations for e-mail communications, such as expecting responses over very short time periods or during all hours of the day or night. As you balance the competing demands of research, teaching and taking courses,

the volume of student e-mail can also seem overwhelming. Consequently, e-mail can be a source of frustration for both you and your students if your expectations differ.

Additionally, some faculty and GSIs report that poor e-mail etiquette by some students can negatively affect instructor-student relations and classroom climate, particularly when electronic discussion tools are used to extend the classroom. As you are planning to teach, it is important to consider how you will communicate these issues to students. For example, it may be helpful to explicitly state your e-mail policy and your expectations for e-mail etiquette in your course syllabus. Below are some questions, issues, and suggestions to consider as you formulate your course-related e-mail policies and e-mail management strategies. A syllabus template for an e-mail policy is also provided.

*When and how often will you read and respond to e-mail?
Are there times when you will not check and respond to e-mail?*

To reduce unrealistic expectations of students and structure your time effectively, consider setting time limits for e-mail. As with office hours, you may want to set aside regular times for course related e-mail. You can leave open the possibility of other times, but define the times when you will not respond. To communicate these limits clearly, add your policy to your course syllabus (for example, see the template below). If you do not intend to respond immediately to a student, send a confirmation e-mail communicating that you received the student's e-mail and state when you will respond. Confirmation e-mails can prevent students from sending multiple e-mail inquiries or copies of the same e-mail inquiry.

What types of questions or comments are appropriate or inappropriate for e-mail? What types of questions or discussions are more appropriate for office hours?

E-mail is intended for concise communications. In some circumstances, a phone call or brief face-to-face meeting may be more efficient and effective than writing an e-mail.

Do you have the same e-mail policies and expectations as faculty supervising the course?

Clarifying any differences in e-mail policies may minimize student confusion or frustration.

What boundaries, if any, do you wish to establish between yourself and your students?

Students may communicate personal matters or problems to instructors through e-mail that may or may not be related to a course. You may want to establish limits regarding the topics to which you will respond. For some issues, you may want to refer students to appropriate campus resources and support units, such as Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

What are your expectations regarding e-mail etiquette? What level of formality do you expect?

In e-mail as well as online discussions and course blogs, students may write aggressive, discriminatory, inappropriate, or offensive comments that they would never say during class. Such comments can negatively affect classroom climate and student-instructor relationships. Therefore, as with classroom discussions, it may be useful to establish and communicate guidelines and expectations proactively for e-mail etiquette and online discussions.

When should you not send an e-mail? Is this a sensitive communication that would be best done in person rather than by e-mail? Does the communication regard conflicts about grades, personal information, concerns about classmates, complaints, cheating, or disciplinary action?

Such sensitive issues are often best resolved in person. It is easy to misinterpret the meaning of an e-mail because facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and the intonation of your voice are absent and you cannot gauge the reaction of the other person. If you are angry or upset by a student's e-mail, collecting yourself before responding is likely to produce the best results. If conversation turns to conflict, respond with short, simple e-mails that suggest talking in person rather than continuing an e-mail exchange.

Additional strategies for efficiently managing student e-mails:

To avoid losing student e-mails, regularly check your spam folder.

To streamline and organize your e-mail management, create a folder or mailbox in your e-mail program dedicated to each course. Select a keyword for students to put in the subject line of all course related e-mails, for example, the name of the course. Then, create a "rule," "filter," or "label" in your e-mail program so that anything with this keyword in the subject line is automatically moved to a dedicated mailbox for the course. Alternatively, one can make a "rule" that any e-mails from a specific list of e-mail addresses are automatically moved to a dedicated mailbox. For this type of rule, one needs to input all of the e-mail addresses from the class roster. These addresses can be copied from Wolverine Access. If you need help to set up filters, you can seek assistance from your department's IT support staff.

Syllabus Template: E-mail Policy

For questions regarding <insert topics>, please consult the course syllabus before e-mailing. Please include the key-

words "<insert keywords/course title>" in the subject line of all e-mails. I will read and respond to e-mails regarding course content and/or logistics <insert days and times>. I will not check for or respond to e-mails <insert days and/or times>. I will answer the following types of course related questions and concerns via e-mail: <insert question topics/types>. Questions or concerns regarding <insert question topics/types> are more appropriate for discussion during office hours. I will not respond to the following types of questions or concerns via email <insert question topics/types>. <Insert any other guidelines or e-mail policies or any differences between faculty and GSI e-mail policies>.

E-mail and online discussions are governed by the same rules of academic conduct as your behavior in class. Please use common courtesy, be polite, and, of course, avoid sending or forwarding aggressive, sexist, racially discriminatory, obscene, offensive, libelous, or defamatory comments of any kind. <Insert any additional guidelines, policies or expectations>.

Online Networking Websites

Many factors affect student-instructor interactions and classroom climate, including instructor identity and behavior. Student perceptions of instructor behavior and identity are not necessarily limited to how instructors present and conduct themselves in the classroom. For instance, instructor-student interactions frequently extend beyond the physical classroom, not only through e-mail and other online course discussion tools, but also through student and instructor recreational use of blogs and online social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace. As a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI), you should be aware that your online postings may be accessible to students and therefore may directly or indirectly become part of the classroom environment. Consequently, you may want to consider how your "online identity" may impact classroom climate, your interactions with students, and your credibility and authority as an instructor. If you are managing an "online identity," you might find the following questions, issues, and suggestions useful as you are planning to teach.

How might your online postings impact classroom climate and instructor-student interactions? Does your online profile contain something that you would not be willing to say or show in the classroom?

Be aware of how much information you are publishing online that is publicly accessible to students and faculty and the consequences it may have for you as an instructor and a professional. Seemingly private online communications or postings can easily become public, as they are shared or forwarded among students and become part of classroom interactions. Consider removing anything from your online profile that could potentially undermine your efforts to maintain a supportive, respectful, inclusive learning environment. For example, it may be best to avoid posting

comments and materials that are aggressive, discriminatory, potentially offensive or otherwise inappropriate for a classroom setting. Similarly, refrain from complaining or posting disparaging comments about your students, fellow GSIs, or faculty supervisors. Such postings may negatively affect classroom climate, instructor-student interactions, and faculty-GSI relationships.

What professional and personal boundaries should you establish with your students in the classroom and online?

Your online identity can reveal information about your personal life and thus compromise the level of professional distance in your GSI-student relationships. To help maintain appropriate boundaries with your students, you might want to familiarize yourself with the privacy settings for any online networking site(s) you use. Additionally, be vigilant about restricting access to any information you post that you do not want others to see. For many social networking sites, your “friends” have the highest access to your profile information, can easily share it with others, and can post comments and photos to your profile page (“wall” or message board). Therefore, you may not want to add your students as “friends” on your profile or be added as a “friend” on your students’ profiles. Given that social networking sites allow users to send messages similar to e-mail, please also refer to the section above on strategies for managing instructor-student e-mail communications. To avoid confusion and misunderstandings, clearly explain your online communication policy in your syllabus and on the first day of class.

How might your online identity affect your credibility or authority as an instructor or professional? What impressions do you think your students would form about you if they came across your online profile(s)?

The perceptions students have of you as their GSI can directly influence your ability to effectively manage the classroom. Today’s generation of students is accustomed to the extensive access of information available to them via the Internet. Purely out of curiosity, students (or supervisors or future employers) might do an Internet search and locate information about you and photos of you. Therefore, you may want to be strategic about what information you include in personal versus professional profiles and meticulous about restricting access for each profile type. In particular, refrain from posting any private information or photos you may not want students, colleagues, faculty, or future employers to see. Likewise, you may wish to scan your friends’ online sites to check whether they have posted any compromising photos of or information about you. If so, politely ask them to remove the material. Given that site designers continuously add new features, often with the intention of making more information about users available to others, safeguard yourself by staying updated on new developments to your online networking sites.

How can uncovering your students’ online identities affect the GSI-student relationship?

Overall, it may be best to avoid scanning the Internet and looking up information about or photos of your students. Looking at your students’ online sites and postings exposes you to information that is irrelevant to the course and can lead you to form prejudices against your students. By resisting the temptation to look up your students on the Internet, you minimize the risk of compromising your ability to function as an impartial instructor.

What should you do if you know a student has posted negative information about you online?

Discovering such negative or critical comments can be upsetting and uncomfortable. Keep in mind that students may not always think about who might encounter this information. As an instructor, seeing these postings may be equivalent to inadvertently overhearing a conversation about you. It may be in your best interest to refrain from responding to the posting or confronting the student, especially if the comments are not directly relevant to the course or that student’s learning. If you do decide to respond or question the student, it would probably be best to do so in person, privately, and to wait until you have collected yourself and your thoughts.