

**Female Students' Use of E-mail as a
Communication Tool - The Kuwaiti
College Classroom: a Preliminary Study**

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Introduction:

Communication between student and tutor is an important aspect of student learning. And in recent years, research concerned with online communication, especially e-mail communication, has remarkably increased. (See for example; Anderlini et al, 2011). How students use e-mail and what they communicate with their tutors is one aspect of inquiry. Such studies are important for educationists, especially educational technologists. Communication, in general, and communication tools, in particular, are main features of educational technologists' work. The knowledge gained from such studies can help design learning environments which benefit students and fulfil their needs.

Within education, research approaches e-mail as a communication tool in a variety of ways, for example; the content of the email, the language used, 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. It is hoped that this study will do just that. This study is important for a number of reasons. First, it is situated in a women's only college where the researcher practices. Second, the scarcity of such studies within the Kuwaiti context is clear. And third, it investigates possibilities of communication offered to students other than face-to-face.

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The focus of this study is on how female students use the e-mail as a communication tool with their female tutor in a Kuwaiti college classroom. This is done by analysing and categorising the content of 549 students' e-mails compiled from October 17 of 2009 until January 16, 2011. First, a general view of the ongoing discussion regarding e-mail communication is given. Following that, a discussion on the use of online technology within the Kuwaiti context is given. Finally, the empirical study is presented; the context, the experience (methods and findings), ending with the discussion and conclusion.

E-mail; the king of communication tools!

E-mail is used in a variety of ways and in different contexts, such as business, banking, medicine, and education. Dubai Financial Market, for example, has introduced e-mail to reach clients and keep them updated. It is a choice service free of charge aimed at reinforcing effective communication. (GulfBase, 2009). Proposing e-mail exchange system as an official tool for communication in the e-government programme, such as in Bahrain, has also been discussed (Awad, 2010 and Awad and Zolait, 2013). Within education, Selwyn and Robson (1998) explore using e-mail as a research tool. They specify that the speed and immediacy e-mail offers are principal features for using it as a research tool. It is commonly said that e-mail is the most popular means of communication within educational settings. "[T]he availability of technology, the familiarity of its use, and the growing distance education sector" are some of the reasons given for the proliferation of e-mail use in higher education (Chimi and LaMacchia, 2007, p. 344).

E-mail technology is also changing how tutors communicate with students and vice -versa. To some educationists e-mail exchanges between instructor and

students is considered a given character especially to North American higher education institutions (Hassini, 2006). Hassini (2006) gives an account of a case which demonstrates "how a 'strategic' use of email leads to a richer learning experience" (p. 29). In an operations research course taught for 42 engineering students Hassini sets up a class e-mail list and uses it for communication throughout the course. The content analysis of the e-mail exchanges that took place reveals that 98% of the messages revolved around course teaching matters while the remainder (2%) was administrative type of messages. Hassini (2006) is therefore convinced that "a 'planned' use of email lists provides an additional channel of communication between the students and the instructor, which in turn adds value to the course." (p. 34-35)

Further, Weiss and Hanson-Baldauf (2008) carried out a study investigating the differences between undergraduate students and professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill regarding e-mail practice and use. They deployed an electronic survey tool with quantitative and qualitative research design. Research question 2 focused on how does faculty and students actually use e-mail in communicating with one another. The answers show that both students and faculty agreed that the primary purpose of using e-mail for communicating was related to coursework correspondence. The data concerning students revealed that 83% of them used e-mail for assignment clarification. In the open-text responses, students reported that they also used e-mail to discuss their assignment performance, request grade explanation, and set appointments with their instructors.

In an incisive account on virtual collaboration, Ribbons and Hornblower (1998) describe two separate projects which utilize e-mail as a collaborative learning tool. In the first project, first year undergraduate nursing

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students participated in a 'Virtual Colleague' activity. In this activity each student is assigned a 'virtual colleague' who blindly peer reviews the designated assignment of the course by e-mail. The second project is structured around engaging senior registered nurses enrolled in a Master of Nursing with new graduate nurses to whom they act as an electronic mentor. Electronic mentors are expected to offer knowledge and support from their own experience to beginning nurses. The researchers used questionnaires comprising open ended and closed questions to gauge students' feedback concerning email technology. The researchers conclude that "the project has been considered worthwhile by participants, facilitating the development of new computer skills related to contemporary communication skills. In doing so, the students have developed a positive appreciation of scholarship and have been exposed to a rich and dynamic learning and problem solving tool." (p. 600)

Similarly Krisnamurthi (1999) explored students' attitudes and use of e-mail, at the time when California State University had just implemented an e-mail system, and given e-mail access to all students and faculty members. In an exploratory survey she collected data about students' e-mail use patterns and their perception of e-mail usefulness. Krisnamurthi found that students perceived e-mail to be a useful tool for communication. In addition they felt that e-mail was an appropriate tool to send short messages and lengthy assignments. As a result Krisnamurthi points out that "[p]erceiving email as useful can hasten its use, adoption and implementation. Barriers to any of these can result in e-mail becoming a wasted technology." (p. 107)

Research on using e-mail in a classroom setting focuses also on how this medium enables effective,

efficient and engaging learning or what Kim (2008) refers to as 'e3-learning'. Writing on the importance of effective communication in online education, Betts (2009) provides a comparative overview of communication research as it relates to online education. She identifies e-mail to be one of the most commonly used format of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) associated with educational delivery. However she alerts that the intended e-mail message may not be as easy 'type and send'. She also refers to the importance of e-mail etiquette, an area which is vastly discussed in e-mail publications such as tone, volume, and tips and strategies to minimize misinterpretations of e-mail messages.

Furthermore, Schmeider (2008) discusses how online communication tools could be used to foster social interaction, an aspect of collaborative learning. He emphasizes that the "[i]ntegration of communication tools not only foster social interaction and a sense of community and belonging, but also enhances the learning process." In his section on asynchronous communication tools Schmeider (2008) explains that e-mail allows students time to reflect, review, and commit additional thought to ideas presented before responding.

Chimi and LaMacchia (2007) explore the use of e-mail communication between professor and students, in order to create best practice guidelines on the use of e-mail in a university setting. They state the four primary reasons for students' e-mails to professors; seeking clarification of assignments and course material, avoiding language and personality requirements in verbal communication, getting support and help, and promoting personal convenience. The researchers indicate that there is a 'false sense of security' that users of e-mail experience, which allows them to use a tone that is never brought to a face-to-face meeting. This

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type of informal communication common to students urges the need for a best practice guidelines in the use of e-mail between instructors and students in a higher education setting, Chimi and LaMacchia (2007) argue.

To summaries then: it is clear that e-mail has found its way in educational settings. There are innovative implementations of e-mail as a communication tool, as research reports. Evidently, many issues are involved when it comes to using it as a communication tool between tutor and students. In the next section, I discuss the female students' use e-mail to communicate with their female tutor in the Kuwaiti college classroom. I start first by setting a background image of the Kuwaiti context.

The Kuwaiti experience; a technological awakening:

Efforts to learn about the contextual dimension of the study are vital, because they tell us about the lived reality of the people involved. It can also help illuminate our understanding of why things are happening the way they are. Within the Kuwaiti context there is a serious lack of research on internet use and online communication, in general, and within educational settings, in particular.

The use of communication technology is slowly permeating the different contexts within the Kuwaiti society. Announcing the catch phrase the 'e-government', the Kuwaiti government intends to deliver all services electronically. With the lack of studies, it is nearly impossible to detect the challenges that the implementation of technology is creating in the different contexts. While stressing that companies and e-learning play a role in the e-government plan, Ali and Magalhaes (2008) stress that "there is a very limited number of studies on the implementation of e-learning in this country and nearly no research conducted on the barriers encountered by companies using this new training method" (p. 37).

In the academic setting the e-library phrase is gaining momentum. Both Kuwait University and the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training are investing in establishing the e-library to improve their services. Al-Fadhli (2004), for example, describes a case of the e-library at Kuwait University and the use of electronic communication to facilitate their services. There is also some research conducted to study the effects that the use of the internet has on the lives of individuals. For instance, in her paper on the internet and youth subculture in Kuwait, Wheeler (2003), explores the importance and implication of the internet in the lives of young people in Kuwait. She indicates that while approximately 60% of the population in Kuwait is under the age of 25, this sector of the Kuwaiti society constitutes the highest concentration of internet users. According to research conducted at Kuwait University (in 1997, 1998, and 2001) nearly three quarters of the students actively used the internet, as Wheeler (2003) suggests.

Al-Othman, 2004, on the other hand, agrees that "[t]he Internet represents an information revolution, and its use in pedagogy is beneficial whenever interaction, discussion, research, or transmission of information is involved" (p. 2). But she criticizes current studies as being descriptive in nature, and points out the lack of studies that explore the effects that the Internet have on learning and teaching. Few studies that measure students' attitudes rather than examine their experiences of e-learning immersed. One such study is that of Al-Doub et al. (2008). Investigating students' attitudes toward e-learning in Kuwait, Al-Doub et al. (2008) focus on students from the College of Business Studies, under the Public Authority of Applied education and Training, as well as students from the Gulf University of Science and Technology, a private

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university. Along with other findings Al-Doub et al. state that students of both institutions showed their satisfaction with the provided e-learning course materials. They were also willing to continue using e-learning facilities if they were offered in other courses. In another study, Al-Khashab (2007) carried out an empirical study using a sample 276 students. His analysis showed that Kuwaiti students have favourable attitudes towards e-learning and the use of technology in education.

Some individual efforts which go a step further in implementing e-learning are recorded. For instance, seeking to identify the relationship between learning styles and the interactions between genders within an online Masters course in TEFL, Al-Othman's (2004) students indicated that the use of the online course helped them gain new skill in relation to the technology used. They also responded positively with regards to enrolling in another online course. 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 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.

In all, there seems to be a 'technological awakening' which prompted the rise of a number of international conferences in Kuwait. Since 1998 when the first professional conference, to consider the impact of the Internet in Kuwait, was held (Wheeler, 2003), and until

March 2011, when the second conference on e-systems and e-service was held, a large number of seminars, discussion groups and conferences took place. Yet the educational systems suffer a slow crawl of technology. The consequences of this slow progress is mostly affecting tutors and students.

The Study

The Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) is a government higher education organisation which offers education and training to students of different educational backgrounds. Education and training in all colleges and institutions is segregated so there are women's colleges and institutes and men's colleges and institutes. The applied education sector in PAAET consists of five colleges. The biggest of all is the College of Basic Education which hosts more than 10,000 male and female students. In fact this college is the biggest teacher training college in the Gulf region. Women students constitute around 2/3 of the total students' population. 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 the women's college. The different departments of the women's college are 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.

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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.

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 with better facilities.

e-mail: a communication tool in an all-female Kuwaiti classroom

The study at hand focusses on how female students use e-mail to communicate with their female tutor. This is done by analyzing the accumulated 549 e-mail letters sent from the different students to their tutor, over the period of time, from October, 17, of 2009, until January, 16 of 2011. In each course that I taught during that period of time, the first lecture was used to present the course, and discuss the course outline and means of communicating with the tutor.

The course outline usually ends with stating tutor's office hours and e-mail.

In general, tutors are required by college rules to assign and post their office hours at their office door. There is no rule concerning the distribution of these hours with regards to day and time. I usually assign one hour and a half, twice a week, as office hours. In the many years that I have been teaching at the college only few students took advantage of the office hours. Students usually met me either before or after the lecture, or at a time convenient to them. Either way, students did not get the full attention they needed. When asked, students explain that they cannot utilize office hours due to their demanding study timetables, and the distributed campus site which makes mobility more difficult. Therefore, I encourage students to e-mail me with their inquiry, or to set a time which is of mutual convenience to meet face-to-face, other than office hours. So students in this study were given the option of either using tutor's office hours or e-mailing, to communicate with her.

All students whom I taught, during that time, were 18 years of age and above, and spoke the Arabic language. There was one computer laboratory, in the main building of the college, and few computers were available in the libraries of the college buildings. Neither the accessibility of the computers on the college site, nor the state of the internet in the different buildings was taken into consideration. Some students had access to a personal computer/laptop.

Method and findings – the experience

In this study 549 students' e-mails were generated over the period specified above. All e-mail letters were printed and thoroughly examined. The two most important aspects of the e-mails considered were the content and the purpose.

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“What does this student request, or say in her e-mail?”, and “What is the purpose of this e-mail”, were the two main questions I repeatedly asked when reviewing the content of the e-mails. It was a method consciously used to help me delineate the idea of, and reason for the e-mail. A title/heading, that best reflected the purpose of the email, was then chosen. All e-mails were then grouped under main titles/headings. So for instance, ‘asking tutor’s opinion on sample assignment’ generated 37 emails of the total number.

The process of delineation was carried out to further establish themes, under which titles/headings were grouped. So the previous heading was part of a general theme of ‘Coursework and assignments’. Although there were 549 e-mails from students accumulated from October 17 of 2009 until January 16, 2011, the process of grouping and categorizing resulted in 33 headings which fell into four main themes.

Table (1) below reveals all 33 headings (subthemes) and the number of students’ e-mails sent to tutor, as well as the percentage of each heading with regards to the total number.

(Table 1)

No.	Heading/Title	No. of emails	%
1	Asking Tutor's opinion on project topic	79	14.4
2	Asking for tutor's opinion on sample work (assignment)	37	6.7
3	Handing Assignment	99	18
4	Asking for clarification on assignment, project, references, visits,	33	6
5	Sending clarification on how assignment was done	6	1.1
6	Sending note that assignment was sent	8	1.5
7	Informing tutor on written work progress	5	0.9
8	Asking about deadline to hand in	4	0.7

No.	Heading/Title	No. of emails	%
	assignment		
9	Informing change of topic (of assignment, project..)	2	0.4
10	Apologizing for not handing assign. on time	17	3.1
11	Asking for extension to hand in assignment	12	2.2
12	Negotiating and asking to change project topic	27	4.9
13	Empty or unreadable assignment files	37	6.7
14	Sending information on how group work progress	13	2.4
15	Asking about final grade of the course	46	8.4
16	Asking tutor to postpone test	2	0.4
17	Asking for clarification on final grade, marks distribution	7	1.2
18	Negotiating course grade	8	1.5
19	Sending/Sharing references related to content under discussion	3	0.5
20	Apologies for sending unreadable file	1	0.2
21	Apologizing for misconduct (using mobile during lecture)	6	1.1
22	Sending excuse for not attending	8	1.5
23	Asking tutor to explain unclear content	3	0.5
24	Asking tutor to send content/paper to groups	7	1.2
25	Asking tutor if lecture is canceled	2	0.4
26	Asking tutor for mobile number	1	0.2
27	Asking tutor for help with personal issues	2	0.4
28	Asking tutor for recommendation letter	3	0.5
29	Asking tutor to answer student questionnaire	1	0.2
30	Thanking tutor for help and support	9	1.6
31	Asking for face to face appointment	19	3.5
32	Seasons' greetings	18	3.3
33	Introducing self	24	4.4

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Furthermore, table (2) reflects the main themes that were last delineated.

(Table 2)

Category/ Theme	No. of Emails	%
Coursework and assignments	379	69
Grading and Grades	63	11.5
Lectures and Content	30	5.4
General Inquiries and Comments	77	14.1

Discussion and conclusion:

The College of Basic Education is in a disadvantaged technological state as an institution of higher education. The one computer laboratory that existed (during the time of this study) was mainly used for students' registration on campus. And to do that, students were allocated time slots to be able to use the facility. The college did not provide internet service for students' use. Some students had their own laptops and personal internet service while at college. It is unclear, to me, if all female students had access to computers and internet while at home. All female students were fulltime students; some were married and some had children and other social responsibilities as women. These circumstances, inside and outside the college, dictated the extent of online communication with their tutor.

Over the period of nearly 5 semesters and two summer courses (from October, 17 of 2009, until January, 16 of 2011), 549 students' e-mails were received. The majority of the e-mails were assignment related leading to a 69% of the total number. While 11.5% of the e-mails were concerned with grading and grades. And the least number of e-mails students sent was related to lectures and their content with a 5.4% of the total. However, the remainder of the e-mails, a 14.1% of the total number, was to do with general comments and inquiries.

More than half the e-mails sent (62.3%) were directly assignment and coursework related, disregarding the 'empty and unreadable assignment file' (heading 13). While a total of an impressive 73.8% of the emails were linked to assignments and also grading (headings 1-18 discounting heading 13). Since all coursework pieces and assignments are graded, and are part of the total final grade of the course/subject taught, it is clear to me that female students' interest is focused on 'assessment' in their online communication. On the other hand, only 1% of the e-mails (headings 19 and 23) were directly related to the content material of the course.

The findings also reveal that female students took initiative and used this tool to communicate personal requests and matters. The 14.1% of theme 'General Inquires and Comments' evidently reflect this aspect. In their study on e-mail practice and use, Weiss and Hanson-Baldauf (1998) refer to this aspect as 'extracurricular use of email', when students used email other than to perform the assignment task. The female students in the Kuwaiti college classroom used e-mail communication to assert a personal side in their student-tutor online communication. Investing further this tool of communication could help guide and facilitate student's learning, on a personal individual level. This is a matter that should not be overlooked and should be taken seriously.

Undoubtedly e-mail communication in this study acted as an extra communication choice for the female students and their female tutor. The two main purposes of e-mails, female students chose to communicate with their tutor, assessment and personal aspects, are noteworthy. E-mail is consciously used by the female students to assert the prominence of assignments and grades (assessment) to them. It is also used to communicate the personal aspect of

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the student-female relationship. This is therefore an opportunity for tutors, as well as instructional designers, to devote their effort to create ways to use this tool, not only as an effective communication tool, but also as a tool to facilitate learning, and encourage students on a personal level. This is by no means an easy task, but it is a possible task.

In conclusion then, and within the technological deprivation of the College of Basic Education during the time of this study, female students used e-mail as a tool of communication to assert the importance of assessment to them. Assignments and grades were the single most important aspect of this kind of online communication within the Kuwaiti college classroom, with a colossal 73.8 % of the total number of students' e-mails. Female students also used e-mail communication to seek tutor's assistance and support with personal matters. These are all indications that e-mail communication could be, and must be seen as effective tool to facilitate female students' learning. Hence, not only does the e-mail tool offer additional means of communication between student and tutor, but a strategic and planned use of it adds value to the course, and could facilitate student learning making it a worthwhile learning experience.

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