

Stop Drowning in Email

By Allyson Davis

Online instructors frequently cite email as the biggest distraction in managing their online course workload. Those obnoxious pop-ups or auditory dings announcing new email might as well be a siren call, pulling online instructors away from the work at hand and into a stormy sea of email.

The good news is you don't have to drown in your email. You can implement techniques and strategies to decrease the amount of email you receive from students, as well as manage the email you do receive and respond to it more efficiently and, most important, on your terms!

- 1. Create a dedicated email account**—If possible, create a separate email address dedicated to your online course(s). Some institutions may have their learning management systems (LMS) locked down so you cannot change your email in it, but if you can, change your email to your dedicated account to keep course emails separate from your “regular” email.
- 2. Use filters and rules**—If you can't create a separate email address, consider setting up a rule or filter to send all your course email to a

separate folder that you can check on your schedule.

- 3. Create and communicate your email checking policy with students**—To avoid multiple emails from the same student on the same topic, communicate your email checking policy with students at the beginning of the course. I always let my students know that I check my email Monday through Friday, twice a day, once at 8:00 a.m. and once at 4:00 p.m. I will respond to their emails at that time. If they write me at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, they will not receive a response until after 8:00 a.m. on Monday.
- 4. Create an auto-reply for students**—If using a dedicated, separate email address, as suggested in #1, then create and turn on an auto-reply for all incoming email that states your email checking policy from #3. For example: Your email has been received. As a reminder, I check my email Monday through Friday, twice a day, once at 8:00 a.m. and once at 4:00 p.m. I do not respond to emails over the weekend.

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

How to Engage Online Learners on Theoretical Content

Students tend to engage with concrete ideas and examples better than they do with abstract concepts. This is why, if you teach a lot of theory, you need to find ways to make your instruction interesting, engaging, and relevant, said Tyler Griffin, assistant professor at Brigham Young University, during his recent Magna Online Seminar, “Online Learning That Lasts: Three Ways to Increase Student Engagement & Retention.”

To help students engage with the content, Griffin suggested answering the following question: Why should students care about this content beyond the fact that they need to know it so they can pass the course?

“The answer you're looking for is something associated with their lives, their struggles, keeping in mind that they've got other things going on beside the course,” Griffin said.

He suggested another questions to consider: Whose questions are you helping students answer, yours or theirs? “If the answer is always your questions, then you're going to disengage more of them more often,” he said.

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5. Get students to read the syllabus—One immediate way to get students to email less is to make them read the syllabus. Giving a quiz on the syllabus information will force students to read the document. A syllabus quiz also provides an opportunity to troubleshoot any issues the student may have with online testing before a high-stakes test.

6. Create a Frequently Asked Questions area in your course—Answer any student questions that are relevant to everyone in a public area in your course, and then train your students to go there for answers before contacting you.

7. Refer students to where in the course the answers to such questions are posted—If students are asking questions that have already been answered in the course documents, discussion boards, or announcements, refer them back to the course to find the answer. This is part of training students to utilize the course as it was meant to be used. If students are asking a question that would be relevant to all students, copy their question into your question-and-answer discussion board, answer it, and reply to their email directing them to look for the answer that you have posted in the Q&A discussion board.

8. Require student signature lines—Institute a policy that students must include a signature line with their name as it appears in your LMS or SIS to take the guesswork out of your responding. Don't spend time trying to figure out who that generic Gmail account belongs to!

9. Implement a protocol for subject lines—While you are instituting course policies, consider implementing a protocol for drafting subject lines. Some LMSs automatically include the course name or ID in the subject line. That's great, but if your LMS does not, or if students write you directly (not through the LMS), you may want to make sure they include a course prefix, course number, and section number so you can access their information quickly and efficiently.

10. Turn off your desktop email notifications—After you have budgeted the time you will spend checking your email, dare to turn off your email notifications. Without the constant distraction of notification of new email, you can fully focus on your other tasks.

Reducing the amount of email you receive is often about training your students to read the syllabus, to utilize the Q&A areas already built into your course, to identify themselves in emails using a signature line, and to write subject lines that are helpful to you. Management of your email can be achieved by using email tools such filters, rules, and auto-replies, and in some cases, turning off email tools such as notifications. Finally, keeping your head above water is sometimes about good old-fashioned time management, such as setting aside specific times to respond to student email and sticking to that schedule.

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Creating a Simple Weekly Structure for Online Courses

By Sami Lange

When teaching intensive online courses and smaller load courses, it is crucial to create a simple, easily accessible weekly course structure for students. While a simple structure is relevant for all online courses, a disjointed structure in a short-term class can cause students frustration and stress and result in lower enrollment and lower student grades. I don't want students wasting valuable time searching for course expectations, weekly assignments, or lecture content. I have taught in Desire2Learn and Blackboard, and now primarily use the Moodle learning management system (LMS). Regardless of the LMS used, a simple weekly structure can cut down on wasted student time, repeated student questions, and confusion on assignments.

I have a five-part weekly structure that includes a lecture, read, watch, discuss, and assignment portion. Below is a screenshot of this streamlined structure, including an optional checklist (which is included each week based on continuous positive student feedback).

initial course site, this helps me create a theme for the week. Even if the theme is not expressly clear to students, it serves as a road map for me to start creating and including content (e.g., information resources, citation styles, plagiarism, annotated bibliographies, etc.).

Lecture

I consider the lecture as the foundation of the week. In it I lay out the week's goals, the overall structure of the assignment, and the content students need to read and focus on. Additionally, I give examples and prompts of where their research will take them for the week. I DO include short videos if they directly apply to the lecture content, and this is not considered their watch unit for the week. If comprehension of certain concepts is crucial, I include questions within the lecture that have a point value connected with the grade book.

Read

This is generally an outside reading: an excerpt from a chapter, a Web page, an example created on the research process, etc. The time

Watch

This is generally an educational video from another library, a Prezi I created myself, or a learning tool created by a database vendor. Very rarely are any longer than five minutes, and they are used as a mandatory element to the learning process. Often students will need to watch the video before the details of the assignment will be fully clear.

Discuss

Each week there is a prompt or question students need to address. Points are given for an original post and for a substantial response post to a peer. These are always exploratory in that students are working to assist each other on issues or continuing to explore their individual semester-long research projects.

Assignment

I format each assignment as if it is a quiz within Moodle. That way the icons are the same, and students can access and save the assignment in the same way each week. Even if the "quiz" is one long question in which students submit a guided research explanation, the overall structure is clear, with no confusion on submission of the culminating weekly assignment.

Additional Benefits

- i. The weekly study and reading time is balanced so students can plan when to study and do research, with a good idea of how long it might take, and can fit their online course time in between work shifts or in-person classes.
- ii. I can easily swap out readings or videos with minor changes to the overall weekly structure. I don't have to reshift or redo the entire unit if I want to update certain



Introduction

Each week I include a short introduction of what we will be doing that week. When I'm building the

required to complete the Read unit is based on the other components of the week (shorter Web page versus book chapter).

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Require Your Students to Use Citation Software

By John Orlando, PhD

Imagine a colleague insisting that his students memorize the URLs of the top 20 websites in his field, as well as keep abreast of any changes in those URLs. Would that make sense? Of course not. Students can find any of those sites through a Google search. There is no reason to remember URLs anymore. Technology has taken that task off our hands, and we are glad that it has. It is more important to teach “information literacy,” which is how to find the proper source when necessary.

Yet faculty are doing no better than teaching URLs when they toil over citation mistakes in their feedback to students. Citation software takes the work out of memorizing the host of citation methods out there and keeping updated on their latest versions. These systems can extract bibliographic information from a source automatically, or have the user enter it into fields manually. Once the information is stored, the user can tell the system to export his or her work in whatever citation style is desired.

Most important, toiling over citation rules in your feedback to students takes time and attention away from teaching the deep concepts in your field that should be the focus of any faculty member. You were hired for your understanding of business, philosophy, history, etc.—not of citation style. Your focus should be on those topics that define expertise in your field. Citation style is the worry of copyeditors, a job that requires only an undergraduate degree.

Don't throw away all the years and effort spent earning your PhD by turning yourself into a copyeditor. Take that duty off your

shoulders by having students use citation software that puts their work into the correct format to begin with. There are quite a few excellent, free citation software programs out there that do the citation legwork for them. Here are some of the best.

Zotero (www.zotero.org)

The granddaddy of them all, Zotero basically opened the citation software field and is still one of the best systems available. The software automatically extracts bibliographic information from a website to allow users to format their work with a touch of a button. Zotero integrates itself into the user's browser to allow for very simple one-click saving of site information. Originally developed as a research tool, the system has since expanded into a general purpose note-taking and information organization system similar to Evernote. It allows the user to add notes to sources that have been captured and organize those sources into libraries, as well as tag them for easy search. It syncs across multiple computers and even hosts large communities of researchers who share their favorite sources.

EasyBib Bibliography Creator (www.easybib.com)

EasyBib Bibliography Creator is a new Google Drive add-on that allows users to add a bibliography to their Google docs in a variety of formats. With the doc open, you merely search for the resource through a sidebar, and when you find it, click a button to have the bibliographic information added to the document. While somewhat limited in citation methods, it's remarkably easy to use (it's Google, after all) and effective.

EasyBib differs from the other options in that it is an online system

rather than a software application that is downloaded and run off the user's computer. However, it does have an iPad app that would appeal to the mobile-inclined. The app has a useful feature that allows users to scan a book's ISBN to generate a bibliography. The one drawback is that the free subscription generates bibliographies only in MLA format—other formats require a paid subscription.

It also comes with a free Google Docs add-on that allows you to search for the resource through a sidebar. When you find the resource, you can click a button to have the bibliographic information added to the document. However, the reviews for this add-on have been mixed, as it appears to be buggy. Consider ProQuest Flow below as an alternative.

Scribble (www.scribble.com)

Scribble is actually a cloud-based bookmarking tool like Diigo that allows you to capture and annotate good websites. But it also includes a feature that allows you to save and format bibliographies, which could make it an attractive alternative to Diigo for bookmarking.

CiteThisForMe (www.citethisforme.com)

CiteThisForMe is a straightforward and easy-to-use citation tool that allows users to either grab bibliographic information automatically from a Web page or enter it manually into fields. Once information is entered, the student can produce a bibliography in a variety of formats to be added to any work. One nice feature is its understanding of citation styles for podcasts, videos, and even emails.

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Would a Hybrid Be More Efficient? Analysis of Class Grades: A Traditional Format vs. One With an Online Component

By John A. Tures, PhD

“Have you ever learned special things from faraway places?” That’s how a famous 1993 commercial began. Then it proceeded to show a MOOC, where a student in one country asks a question of a professor at a podium in another country. After a series of similar technologies followed on-screen (videoconferencing, GPS, pen computing, etc.), the commercial concluded “You will...and the company that will bring it to you is AT&T” (Rispo, n.d.).

That series of ads stimulated a lot of high-profile interest in online learning. Has it created a better system for students?

Just three years after those AT&T ads, Linda Harasim (1996: 203) wrote, “Computer networking and conferencing have found important practical application in education with such innovative developments as online delivery of courses, networked classrooms, and knowledge networks linking peers and experts. The benefits have been powerful and compelling, and have contributed to a paradigm shift in education. This shift is especially evident in higher education.”

One of the underrated benefits of an online class is the ability to monitor what students are doing in a course in a way that is much tougher to accomplish in a traditional class setting. At the same time, we can test assumptions about both types of classes if there is a hybrid component. Just a decade after those “You Will” ads, Jeffrey R. Young (2002) wrote of blended education that would link both traditional and online instruction.

One such assumption is that a student will take full advantage

of the hybrid system, utilizing the online component to enhance the traditional teaching methods. Opponents of this approach find that such online benefits add little to the old methods of in-person lectures and classroom discussion.

Comparing traditional and online methods of instruction is not necessarily a new idea. Mary K. Tallent-Runnels, et al. (2006) compared the type of students for both teaching delivery methods, as well as communication between faculty and students, pace of learning, and student expertise in computers. Alfred P. Rovai and Hope Jordan (2004) found that blended courses do better than traditional and fully virtual classrooms for developing a sense of community. Kyong-Jee Kim and Curtis J. Bonk (2006) conducted a series of surveys about who teaches such online courses, how they feel about these courses, faculty training, monetary support, and a variety of other factors, even comparing the “expected quality of online versus traditional education.” And students have also been surveyed about how effective they feel online teaching is in Suzanne Young’s study (2006).

The Study

To learn more about how students learn, I conducted a test of a core subject that I teach. It’s titled “The American Experience,” and it’s a required course for juniors and seniors at LaGrange College. I’ve taught the course using in-class presentation of the material and student discussions of key points and questions posed to the class. I’ve also taught the course in an online format, complete with presentations and podcasts, discussion forums and chats. In both

cases, papers are emailed to me.

But it is always difficult to compare across classes because my traditional-oriented class tests are of the closed-book, pencil-and-paper variety with a format of multiple-choice questions and short essays for in-person classes, while online exams tend toward essays that are open-book and open-note.

The solution was to offer a hybrid course that blended the in-person experience with an online supplement. While attendance would be mandatory, accessing the online materials would be optional. If it was made available, would students utilize the online methods? Would the online material help them in a traditional class?

In the spring of 2014, I ran such a test. I compared a pool of students who simply relied upon the in-person format to prepare for the exams to the group of students who chose to take advantage of the online materials to assist them in their in-person exam.

The supplemental material constituted copies of those PowerPoint lectures, some of which had an audio podcast, a variation from my lectures. They were similar to, if not carbon copies of, the material available in class.

Results

I gathered the data on the 19 students who took the American Experience course that semester. Eight chose not to view the supplemental online material while 11 did, even though all had access to it (for turning in papers and group research assignments). I calculated the exam averages for both groups, as well as their standard deviations,

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to conduct a difference of means test.

The group average for those who relied solely on the traditional methods of lecture, note-taking, and discussion was an 84.78. For the 11 students who took advantage of the online materials before the exam, the class average was 89.81.

Certainly the students thought a five-point swing was significant enough. But the results were not statistically significant at the .10 threshold, just missing the mark. But I took another look at the data, and found there was an outlier. A hardworking student (Student "S") who had one of the highest grades in the class (99.5) chose not to access the online material. She clearly outperformed her counterparts who did not use the online material; none of the others who ignored the online material made an "A" on the test.

Rather than just eliminate her scores before rerunning the data, I also chose to eliminate the best-performing student who chose to adopt the online material (Student "Z," who had a grade of 98), to be fair. When eliminating students "S" and "Z," we had a class average of 82.67 for those who did not choose to use the online teaching materials. The average grade of those who opted for the online teaching materials was an 89. For the students, the results were still significant. But this time, the difference of means test showed that we could reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between the variables with a 99 percent level of confidence.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the students who used the online materials appreciated them. "As a student I loved the slides," wrote one student. "Even if the slides were questions about the material we were supposed to read, it helped highlight

the material," he added. Another student, expressed his appreciation for video links to the episodes "America: The Story of Us," which students watched online as well as in class.

I presented the results at an in-house teaching and learning conference at LaGrange College, and it stimulated a lot of discussion about whether it was the technology or the student motivation to do more in a class that accounted for the significant difference in test scores. Certainly additional research about the student quality before the class should be analyzed. But at a minimum, the early results for the online component of a hybrid class are encouraging.

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components or skill sets.
iii. I can take out or shift weekly themes based on the student population of that particular class if, for example, it is linked with an engineering or science cohort or a specific level English class.

In our constantly shifting teaching fields, whatever course components used should be consistent, streamlined, and accessible, providing the student with less frustration and the instructor with more time to create content and have rich student interactions.

Sami Lange is an academic librarian at Santa Rosa Junior College, Petaluma, Calif. She has been teaching online information literacy courses for five years at junior and four-year colleges throughout California and Colorado. She holds two masters degrees, one in library science and the other in education with a focus in online teaching and learning. @

How to Design Online Courses That Motivate Students

By Rob Kelly

When designing an online course, it's important to consider how to create learning experiences that will spark learners' intrinsic motivation. While different learners may be motivated by different factors, there are several models that can provide useful guidance when you're designing motivating learning experiences.

Two useful models are self-determination theory (developed by Ryan and Deci) and the culturally responsive motivation framework (developed by Ginsburg and Wlodkowski). In an interview with Online Classroom, Rebecca Zambrano, director of online faculty development at Edgewood College, talked about elements of these models and how to apply them to online course design.

According to these two models, the following three elements affect motivation:

- **Relationships**—People are motivated by relationships. They seek to interact with other people.
- **Competence**—People want to feel that they're capable and that they're making progress.
- **Autonomy**—People like to control their own learning and make choices based on what is most relevant to them.

"As educators, if we can tap into those areas of human motivation when we design activities for our students, it will help our students enjoy the learning process and go much further with it than if they're only doing it because of a grade or external control," Zambrano says.

Relationships Community

Zambrano recommends asking,

"What does community mean in the context of this particular course?" when designing a course. "If I'm teaching a course on statistics, students may be coming into the course strictly because they want to learn those skills. They may not be there to network or become really connected with other people in that course. So community and relatedness in that course might just mean students want to make sure that their professor is highly available to them when they're struggling.

"In another course on marriage and family therapy, it may be that students really want to understand or become much more highly motivated to go in depth on understanding family systems by hearing each other's family stories," Zambrano says.

Individual communication

Learners come to a course with a variety of skills and experiences. When an individual's use of language does not match the language of others in the course, he or she may view the others in the course as more competent, which can be demotivating. "It's really critical to know that their voices and ideas matter more than their language, so I think the instructor has to design some way to interact with students individually early in the course," Zambrano says.

Appreciation wiki

Zambrano includes an appreciation wiki in her online courses to provide a space for students to anonymously show their appreciation for their peers. She asks students to copy and paste important contributions from the week's discussion forum into the wiki and attribute each quote to the individual student.

"That's very motivating because

all the students begin to see that their contributions are valuable to others in the course. It's very intrinsically motivating to become part of a community where your voice is important to the growth of the group," Zambrano says.

The broader community

Relating the course to the broader community can be intrinsically motivating as well. "If we can give students a sense that everything we're discussing relates to ethical change in the world, it really ignites their passion. I think that relates to a sense of relatedness and caring about being in the larger human community. Even though it's not often discussed that way, I think it's really important," Zambrano says.

Instructors can lead students to think about how the course relates to the broader community by asking appropriate questions. For example, at Edgewood College, there are two core questions associated with its Dominican tradition: Who am I? and How do my particular gifts meet the needs of the world?

To address the needs of the broader community, Zambrano recommends looking beyond what occurs within the learning management system. "When I think of creating community in my online courses—I work mostly with adult learners—I ask students to connect with others out in their organizations or fields of work. And they actually network and create community as part of the course. That's highly motivating," Zambrano says.

Another way to reach beyond the LMS is to design assignments that have the learners create resources for groups in the broader community.

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Competence

Because learners are motivated when they see their progress, it's important to design assignments that provide this evidence. Assignments are often summative demonstrations of learning at the end of the course. Zambrano recommends breaking assignments into smaller parts so that students will be observe the deepening of their knowledge over time.

Another way to enable students to see their progress is to ask the same series of questions at different times throughout the course. This gives students the chance use new knowledge and skills to address familiar problems, providing opportunities to monitor their progress.

Autonomy

Opportunities for choice can be

highly motivating for students. And it helps students to have a good sense what their choices might entail. Zambrano recommends interviewing former students to get their perspectives on what was enjoyable about different assignments. You can provide audio or video clips of former students talking about which assignments they chose and how these assignments matched their learning styles, what they enjoyed, and what they valued.

When students are making choices about assignments, it's important for the instructor to have a conversation with each student by telephone or Skype to help students determine which choice would be most motivating.

Different students require different levels of autonomy and structure. "I'm constantly asking myself whether a rubric I created is going to interfere with creativity or stifle motivation or whether it's

flexible and open enough to allow for autonomy," Zambrano says. "I'm not sure I have the perfect balance, but I express the dilemma to my students. I provide high structure because some students need that to be able to trust the instructor. So I put together rubrics and tell the students, 'I don't want my structure or rubric to interfere with your creativity. I want you to be responsible for making this learning meaningful to you. If you want to veer from the assignment's instructions because there's something else you're interested in and you want to move in that direction, let's talk about it.'"



On October 15, Rebecca Zambrano will lead the Magna Online Seminar "Designing Online Learning to Spark Intrinsic Motivation." For information, see www.magnapubs.com/catalog/designing-online-learning-to-spark-intrinsic-motivation/. @

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ProQuest Flow (www.proquest.com/products-services/flow.html)

ProQuest Flow is a new Google Docs add-on that has gotten good reviews. Place the "save to flow" button on your toolbar, and when you land on a Web page that you want to reference, just click it and the system will extract the bibliographic information and enter it into your permanent reference library. You can also manually enter reference information, or enter a document and have the system extract the reference information from it. You can then have the system enter both in-text and bibliographic citations for your document in what it claims to be any of 4,000 reference styles.

Understanding how to use citation software is a form of

information literacy and is the equivalent of learning how to do online searches rather than memorizing URLs. Encourage—no, require—your students to use these programs. That understanding will serve them now and in the future.

John Orlando writes, consults, and teaches faculty how to use technology to improve learning. He helped build and direct distance learning programs at the University of Vermont and Norwich University and has written more than 50 articles and delivered more than 60 workshops on teaching with technology. John is the associate director of the Center for Faculty Excellence at Northcentral University, serves on the Online Classroom editorial advisory board, and is a regular contributor to Online Classroom. @

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To help make the learning more relevant, Griffin suggested letting students answer each other's questions. "You will find that this creates more of a sense of buy-in, a sense of ownership from the students. And the more ownership they feel, the more likely they are to engage at all levels with your content and with your course and have positive feelings about it."

For information about the online seminar, see www.magnapubs.com/catalog/online-learning-that-lasts-how-to-engage-and-retain-students/. @