

## **USING E-MAIL, BULLETIN BOARDS and LISTSERVS: TEACHING STUDENTS to COMMUNICATE ELECTRONICALLY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Communication has traditionally been thought of as face-to-face interactions, as occurring via personal telephone calls, or through media such as radio, movies, books and newspapers. As we moved into the electronic age the concept of communication broadened to include television, audiotapes, videotapes, FAX machines, e-mail, and the wide, wide world of the Internet. Students of all ages need to learn a variety of methods for effective communication.

Three closely related methods used to communicate electronically are e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and listservs. Generally, one thinks of e-mail as directed to one or more people selected to receive a specific communication, or as a method for sending files. Bulletin Boards are referred to as “threaded discussion groups” because both input and output are grouped by topics. Listservs are used to send an e-mail to a preselected group of people. In the educational setting, all of these should be used by students and teachers. For example, a Listserv can target a specific group, posing a question or topic, with the students responding to the entire list of recipients. Whereas a Bulletin Board can host many different topics and students can decide which ones to respond to.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today’s busy world of academia, and similarly in the business world, electronic communication is essential, yet many programs of study do not allow for the addition of computer science courses. This is particularly true in many professional fields that have difficulty fitting in all of the required general education courses along with the content of their specialty. One way of dealing with this problem is to imbed the learning of computer based skills in student assignments. This becomes even more essential when the assignments are part of a web-based course, where the students can access the course at their convenience. This paper will use as examples assignments and courses in the field of nursing, however they are appropriate in most disciplines.

### **ORIENTATION**

How to orient students to the use of e-mail, and to other electronic forms of communication, needs to be pre-planned carefully, before the beginning of the semester. For our

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courses in the School of Nursing, students are sent an orientation letter, and in the letter they are also directed to the web-site for the course homepage. For one web-based course see: [http://www.iupui.edu/~baross/b231/b231\\_homepage.html](http://www.iupui.edu/~baross/b231/b231_homepage.html). If the student has previously taken a web-based course or a basic computer course they do not need to attend, but many choose to do so anyway. For classroom-based courses the computer orientation is scheduled, in a computer lab, for either the first or second day of class. In order to be certain that each student has a working e-mail account, an assignment should be given in the orientation letter, asking them to e-mail the instructor a short biography the week before classes begin, including such information as address and phone number.

Students also need to be given a list of instructions on etiquette for using e-mail, since many of them will commit grievous errors otherwise. Our students are told, for example, not to send anything by e-mail they would not like to see splashed across newspaper headlines, and not to send messages intended for one person to the entire group.

Since nursing faculty place great emphasis on the use of library resources, a Power-Point orientation to the main library and to electronic literature searching is also offered (same site as listed above). During the orientation, students need to be taught how to receive and send files. One way to do this is to design a short survey seeking information about the students in the class. On the above homepage there is a bulleted item that reads, "News Source Survey - will be sent via e-mail: download, print file, complete form, and return via e-mail." The instructor for this course creates a listserv, and sends the survey to all the students in the course.

### CREATING A LISTSERV

The instructor uses the e-mail addresses received from the students when they sent their biographies, to create a list of all students' e-mail addresses. Most e-mail software provide a method to create a group list, or the university may offer a listserv package. In either case, the instructor can send one message to the entire group of students, using one address. In the example above, the students are expected to complete the survey and e-mail it back as an attached file. For students who are new to the use of e-mail, these seemingly simple assignments will take about two weeks.

Setting up a listserv may be challenging at first, but once it is set up properly, it is really easy to create and maintain lists. Care must be taken to configure and set appropriate privileges for the list. For example, who can maintain a particular list and who can send messages to the list.

If you do not have access to a ListServ server, you may want to consider installing Linux operating system with email and listserv subsystems. The reason we chose to install Linux at our Columbus campus is it does not cost any money. It runs on even a 386 machine (but at least a faster 486 machine with 16MB RAM is recommended). So you really do not have to spend a lot of money for new hardware.

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Bulletin boards are used at our university to manage threaded discussion. One good thing about this is nobody gets emails, and it is nicely organized by the topic. For an example, the instructor can post a discussion topic and students can respond to it. Any time a student wants to check about what is going on, the student will access the Internet and then on to the bulletin board and access the appropriate discussion topic. Unlike listservs, students will not receive any notice that someone has posted something else. It is up to the instructor to make sure that everything is working and all the students are participating.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

There are both advantages and disadvantages to electronic communication. The primary disadvantages are the increased number of e-mails, and the lack of face-to-face contact. In the view of many students and teachers, the advantages outweigh these.

### Advantages:

1. Asynchronous communication: unlike telephone conversation one can send messages any time and the other person can access the message at any time, often without a need to log-in to discussions that are not of interest to the student.
2. Can access e-mail and course work from anywhere in the world.
3. E-mail is supported by many different client software packages. With the advent of web based email clients one can truly enjoy the access to these services without having to worry about a particular software and hardware.
4. Both the students and instructors are more accessible - virtually 24 hours a day and 7 days a week!

## CONCLUSION

Communication is extremely important in any facet of our life. The means of communication have evolved from many earlier types (e.g. signs, graphics, regular mail, telephone, telegraph, etc.) to email, videophone, listserv, and bulletin boards. The technology is changing very rapidly and it is exceptionally important that students keep abreast with the latest technology for success in their chosen profession. "Technology is not only nice, it is a necessity" – unknown.

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