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ABSTRACT

Months after the conclusion of a course, a writing teacher still receives electronic mail messages from former students, referring to the class or asking for advice. The implications of this post-course e-mail could cause a refiguration of traditional concepts of the boundaries of the classroom and of the academic term itself. What kind of students are most likely to contact their former teachers, and what motivates the contact? Researching this post-course e-mail may allow some insight into these questions and into the long-term effects of the work done in the classroom. While it will not replace more traditional forms of course evaluations anytime soon, e-mail might function as a useful supplement. The informality of e-mail, however, can cause awkward situations in determining etiquette. Along with negotiating new roles, setting the limits of teachers' obligations and responsibilities to past students can also become problematic. Despite these problems, the likelihood of hearing from past students electronically is increasing each year. (CR)

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"Just Thought You'd Like To Know": Electronic Conversations With Former Students

I often end my writing courses with an assignment that asks students to reflect on their work for the semester. They describe their writing processes, their composing habits, their journey through the course, and the relationship of their work for my class to their lives and future careers. I encourage them to see where they have been and to envision where they might be going. The writing process is never over, I tell them. They hand in course evaluations, I wish them a pleasant break or a relaxing summer, and we go our separate ways. At least that's the way it used to be.

Now, months after the course, when I log on-line to check my e-mail, I am often greeted with messages from these former students: "Just thought you'd like to know", they write: "I'm thinking about switching majors, from Geology to English; do you think I write well enough?" Or, "I saw that movie we talked about in class last semester and now I realize what that essay in our text was all about; just thought you'd like to know." Or, from a non-native speaker, "I transferred to a college in Texas but I want to keep practicing my writing skills so I hope you will write back to me."

These "voices" that keep popping up on my computer screen have made me think about the implications of "post-course" email with former students. I started the conversation about writing with these students; was I obligated to continue it? If so, for how long? The theme of this year's conference reminded me of the way that electronic communication has refigured traditional concepts of classroom boundaries, but the e-mail from

past students made me question my former understanding of the boundaries of the academic term itself. For obvious reasons, perhaps, recent research and scholarship on electronic communication has tended to focus on its use during the writing course or during the tutoring session. A few years ago, Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran wrote about the need for a rhetoric and pedagogy that would include e-mail in their field of vision, because in the future there would be more, not less, electronic communication (629, 638). That future is already here. And now, I think, the time has come to include "post-course" e-mail in our discussions of technology and composition. If we consider e-mail as a legitimate site of writing, as Moran has argued in a recent essay, and if we acknowledge that student use of e-mail will only increase with time, shouldn't we anticipate electronic conversations that extend beyond the course itself?

E-mail with former students invites the following kinds of questions: What kinds of students are most likely to contact us? What motivates the contact? How do we negotiate the traditional roles of teacher and student when that relationship no longer exists? What can we learn about our teaching and our students' writing from post-course e-mail? Why should we listen and respond to these "voices" popping up on our computer screens?

A few months ago I began saving e-mail from former students and I started asking colleagues who teach writing about their experiences with post-course e-mail. Even such an informal survey suggested to me that further research may allow us to see the long-term effects of the work we do in the classroom. If former students want to discuss writing-related issues after the course is over, we should pay attention to what they have to say. While I don't think that post-course e-mail will replace more traditional forms of course evaluations anytime soon, it might function as a useful supplement to

them. For example, after a number of e-mail exchanges over a period of six months, one of my former students mentioned that he hated the textbook we had used. While this disclosure is not startling in itself, it did lead to subsequent discussions about that particular writing course. The honesty characterizing such conversations can be attributed to the absence of grading issues, to the amount of time that had passed since the course, and to the intimacy that e-mail often invites--which brings me to the problematic aspects of post-course e-mail.

Negotiating the personal/professional boundary can get sticky. One of my colleagues says that "the informality of e-mail" is seductive, and when corresponding with a former student by e-mail, she found herself "both hearing and saying things that made [her] somewhat uncomfortable". As Hawisher and Moran note, "In writing to a screen, writers may at times lose the sense of an audience . . . and lose the constraints and inhibitions that the imagined audience provides" (631). Clearly, there are some risks involved in the negotiation of roles in this new rhetorical situation. Another colleague told me she was contacted by a former student to discuss writing issues, but after five or six exchanges, was asked if she ever dated her students. While I have not experienced the awkward situations of some of my colleagues, I admit I have some difficulty determining the etiquette of e-mail with former students. One young man recently asked whether he should continue to address me as "Dr. Russell." I had invited the question, I suspect, by signing off mail with my both my first and last name, sans title: clearly an unsuccessful attempt on my part to avoid the form of address issue. I recognize that the degree of informality of my communication with past students depends greatly on whether or not I think they will be a current student at some point in the future. I teach at a fairly small university, so

there is a good chance that last year's writing students will reappear in next year's required literature course, which I also teach. I've noticed that my correspondence with the student who has transferred is much more informal than that with students who have not; he and I talk about writing, but the conversations naturally turn to personal interests, hobbies, and just life in general.

While negotiating new roles seems to be one of the most problematic aspects of e-mail with former students, another has to do with the limits of our obligations and responsibilities to past students. Most of my colleagues invite continued contact, especially from students they enjoyed having in class, but a few expressed reluctance about becoming involved in what they saw as prolonged mentoring situations. As Hawisher and Moran noted in 1993, "Five years from now we might regard e-mail as an invasive technology that has given writing teachers additional invisible work, work that is expected but performed without notice or pay, work that is, in effect, "telework" (637). Their warning may be even more relevant to post-course e-mail. We may not mind being accessible to current students, but do we want to remain linked forever to former students?

Despite the problems, pitfalls, and risks of e-mail with former students, most of us recognize that the likelihood of hearing from past students electronically is increasing each year. At my university, students are given free access to e-mail accounts and the internet. To find me, they need only type in my last name. While I can choose to ignore their messages, I find it difficult to do so. When they were my students, I emphasized the power of language, the central role it plays in academic life, and, most important, its effect on everything we do as human beings. In conclusion, I started the

conversation. Now I have to decide whether or not I want to continue it beyond the end of the semester.

Works Cited

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