A BLUEPRINT FOR EXECUTING INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT INTERACTIONS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM USING MARKETING TOUCHPOINTS

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ABSTRACT

Communicating with students is one of the most important responsibilities for faculty in an online course. It can also be a puzzling process. Having a "communication plan" and understanding effective email strategies, along with proper timing and frequency of communicating with students, are all important pieces of this puzzle. We propose using "touchpoints" in designing a communication plan. This article provides a blueprint of touchpoints as well as best practices for more effective emails for connecting with online students. The blueprint identifies key student touchpoints and provides actionable communication interactions for each touchpoint. These improved strategies can increase instructor-student engagement, student learning, and student satisfaction.

Keywords: online learning, instructor-student engagement, communication plan, touchpoints, email strategies, best practices

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has grown at the remarkable pace of up to 20% annually in recent years (Horn, 2015). While the growth rate may finally be leveling off, the fact remains that more than 7 million learners pursued at least one online course in 2014 (Horn, 2015). With such a large population studying in online settings, educators should consider factors that can be uniquely beneficial to these learners. Such considerations can improve course design, planning, and delivery, and especially day-to-day interactions with students in online settings. Despite its popularity, online learning can be isolating for some students and create a separation, requiring "instructors and the learners . . . to make extra efforts to interact with each other" (Wei & Chen, 2012, p. 539).

Lin and Chiu (2007) identified six components that contribute to performance in online learning. These factors are as follows: sense of community, learner motivation, learning styles, interaction, life characteristics or prior experiences, and instructor involvement. Of these six, sense of community and instructor involvement are inextricably linked and point to the critical importance of instructor-student communication.

The touch and demonstration of care and accessibility in an online educational context is known as social presence. Socially present instructors have an active, invested part in a learning community (Wicks, 2017). Student-employees were found to most desire things such as empathy, inspiration, and accountability from supervisors (Cobian, 2011). While, as instructors, we are not supervisors in a human resources sense, we are overseeing and evaluating our students'

work. Initiating and maintaining contact with them supports the notion asserted by Lewis, Whiteside, and Dikkers (2014) that social presence, as it relates to creating community, remains key to a successful learning experience.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE COURSES

Communicating with your students is one of the most important responsibilities you have in an online course. It can also be a puzzling process. Students and faculty often assume an online course will consist of one-way communication and will lack the interaction that may occur more readily in a face-to-face class. "The need for student engagement is ever present in the online classroom as engaged students are more likely to feel connected with course material, classmates, instructors, and their university" (Evans, Steele, Robertson, & Dyer, 2017, para. 1). Supportive involvement and the participation of instructors in an online course is perceived positively by students: "Active and timely communication supports teaching presence . . . students *perceive* the instructor as both enthusiastic and as an expert in the field" (UC Davis Canvas, p. 1). Having a communication plan and understanding what is the most effective message, along with the proper timing and frequency of communicating with students, are all important pieces of the communication puzzle.

The communication process for instructors can be time consuming and ineffective if you do not understand your target market: your students. The quality and frequency of communication are key issues to be considered. The goal is to ensure you are communicating with students in a meaningful way using optimal timing and frequency, whether it is with one student at a time or the entire class. Feedback from online learners supports this goal. Meaningful interaction between instructor and students in an online course reduces misunderstanding of course content and expectations (Li, 2017).

Jones (2013) indicates that "if the e-learning site or learning management system (LMS) interfaces can become a place of interest where participants can interact repeatedly with one another on topics related to the product, this can provide an important draw" (p. 32). The interaction itself can then become a draw to the course, a means of engagement, and an impetus for performance and success.

This article provides a blueprint of touchpoints for connecting with online students in order to reap benefits such as increasing student satisfaction, increasing the instructor's ability to interact with students, and, as a result, to make improvements along the way. The blueprint identifies key instructor-student touchpoints, provides a schedule for these touchpoints, and provides example touchpoint messages.

WHAT IS A TOUCHPOINT?

A touchpoint is a marketing term used to refer to any point of contact between a business and their customer (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). More specifically, a touchpoint relates to the consumer or customer and anytime they come in to contact with your brand—before, during, or after they make a purchase (How, n.d.). From a customer standpoint, a touchpoint presents an opportunity for the customer to learn, experience, interact with, or purchase from the organization across various channels and points in time (McKechnie, Gran, & Golawala, 2011; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

As a result, customer perceptions and opinions about the product or service are influenced by touchpoints (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). From a marketing perspective, touchpoints present opportunities for marketers to inform and remind customers about their products and services and about why their product or brands are better than the competition's. From an educational perspective, touchpoints represent an opportunity for student engagement, for faculty to inform and remind students about the value of class content and the value of how they should engage with classroom content.

Shostack (1984) suggests blueprinting consumer touchpoints by identifying processes in which the customer interacts with the service and mapping them according to the time frame in which they occur.

Similarly, we propose the use of a touchpoint blueprint for connecting with online students to accomplish a number of positive outcomes, including the following:

- to increase the sense of a personal connection with the instructor,
- to ensure students are making satisfactory progress,
- to create an optimal number of instructor-to-

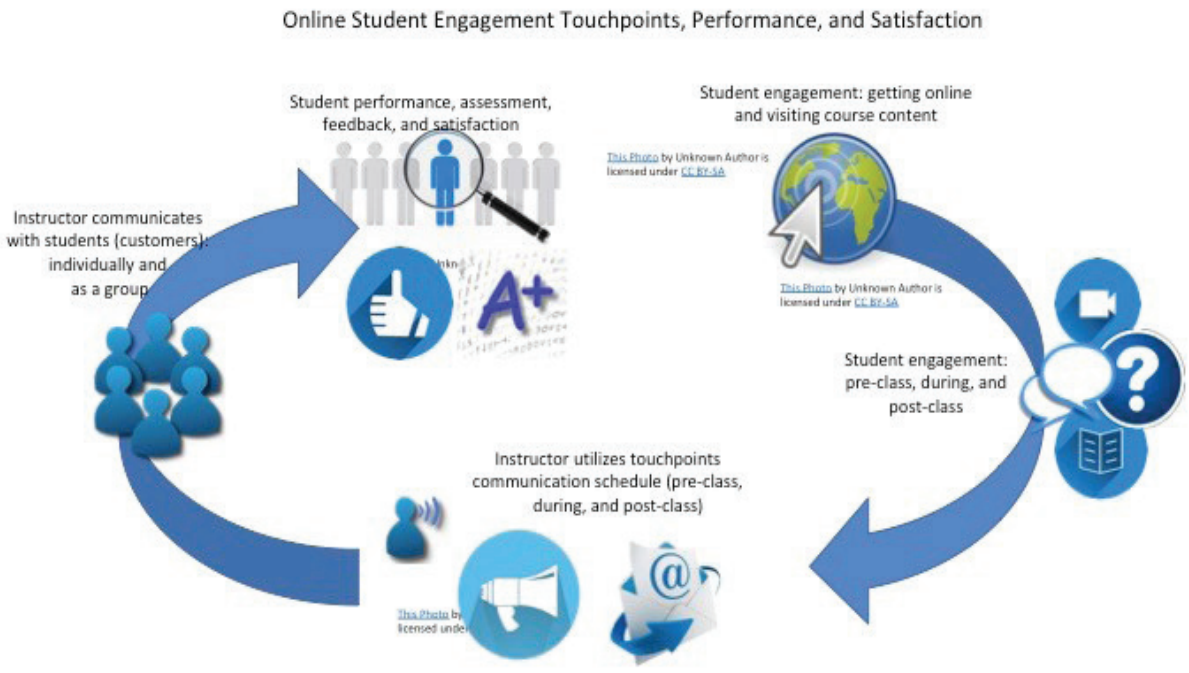

Figure 1. Online Student Engagement Touchpoints, Performance, and Satisfaction

student and student-to-instructor interactions, and

- to increase student satisfaction.

We feel asynchronous forms of online interaction enable the instructor to involve students in the course and course content using any number of communication touchpoints. This interaction helps to build and establish the instructor's presence in the course and engage with any number of students. As noted by Bates and Poole (2003), ". . . learning is a social process, requiring communication among learner, teacher, and others. This social process cannot effectively be replaced by technology, but technology may facilitate, and even enhance it" (p. 35).

IDENTIFYING TOUCHPOINTS

Shostack (1984) suggests mapping customer touchpoints by identifying the points at which you interact with the customer, where these interactions can go wrong, and how and when the interactions should be scheduled. Figure 1 provides a map of these instructor-student interactions in the online classroom.

A touchpoint, as shown in Figure 1, presents an opportunity for the student (customer) to learn, experience, interact with, or purchase from the organization across a variety of points in time (Pantano & Viassone, 2015; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010.) Instructors need to identify and plan these points of interactions with students. According to Rhode (2009), learners perceived the greatest value for student-to-instructor interactions (touchpoints), formally and informally, over all other interaction types. Identifying and understanding your touchpoints when teaching online allows you to create a communication plan to leverage interactions with the greatest value.

TOUCHPOINTS COMMUNICATION SCHEDULE

Table 1, below, shows how and when instructors can utilize touchpoints throughout the three phases of an online course (preclass, during class, and postclass) to create and optimize the use of student-to-instructor interactions. The timing and type of touchpoints that are recommended for an online course as well as the audience are also included. According to Davidson-Shivers, "Instructor-student interactions may occur on a one-to-one, small group, or whole-class basis" (2009, p. 24).

Table 1. Instructor Touchpoints Communication Schedule

Preclass (Prepurchase)	Active Class (Purchase)	Postclass (Postpurchase)
Welcome email and course announcement overview/whole class	Weekly announcement/whole class—schedule of assignments and tips	Student opinion survey/course evaluation/whole class
Week 0 assignment email reminder/individual student or small group	Weekly podcast/whole class—overview of key concepts (video and/or audio)	Postclass announcement/whole class
Week 0 email for students who haven't logged into course shell	Reminder email/individual student or small group—"housecleaning"/assignment due, submission needed	Thank you or appreciation email/individual student
Responses in discussion board to student self-introduction posts/individual students	Praise for performance email/individual student—recognition for achievement on specific assignment (target specific assignments like exams or quizzes automatically graded in LMS)	
	Directed feedback email/individual student or small group—provide tips or additional resources, encouragement, or assistance	
	Email replies to individual student inquiries/ questions	
	Discussion board post/ responses	

Table 1 identifies email, announcements, and discussion board posts as primary touchpoints in an online classroom. It is important to begin using touchpoints preclass and to conclude with one or two touchpoints postclass. The majority of touchpoints will occur during the active class phase. The following section discusses the use of touchpoints based on each phase of an online course.

Preclass Touchpoints

Conventional wisdom suggests a welcome email before the course begins is essential. One or more preclass assignment reminder emails is also important for students and shows them you are "present" and available. Response to random student introductions (e.g., in the discussion board) is an efficient way to show students you are interested in who they are and what they are doing.

Active-Class Touchpoints

Active class touchpoints make up the majority of touchpoints in the communication schedule, occurring once the class begins and before it ends. This includes routine touchpoints such as weekly emails or podcasts that provide an overview and tips for current assignments. A weekly touchpoint (email or podcast) that briefly discusses key concepts or helps focus students on important details of an assignment are valuable for multiple reasons. These routine and informative touchpoints are sent to all students and serve to remind students of the start of a new week in the course, to provide insight on the best sequence for completing assignments, to help students avoid potential pitfalls or miscommunication, and/or to minimize procrastination by students. Incentives can be offered as well to encourage early submission or feedback opportunities.

Using touchpoints that are directed to individual students will create the most effective and measurable student-instructor interactions. There are multiple reasons an instructor can contact an individual student, such as to provide praise for achieving a high score on an assignment, particularly a quiz or test that is automatically graded in the LMS. The majority of students will reply promptly and favorably to the instructor after receiving a "praise for performance" email. Students will often reply to these one-on-one touchpoints with sincere appreciation.

Using touchpoints to provide directed feedback to individual students or small groups is also well received and effective for increasing student-instructor interaction. When an instructor reaches out to a student, recognizing they may be struggling with a concept or skill, by providing unsolicited help, it makes students feel the instructor is

Table 2. Example Touchpoint Messages

Phase	Purpose	Message Content
Preclass	For students who have not logged into course shell	Hey [student first name]—Please be sure to log into the course and complete the Week 0 assignments due xxxx. If you need help or have any questions, please let me know by replying to this email.
Class	Praise for performance—individual student	Wow! What a great job on the midterm exam [student first name]! Nice work!
Class	Directed feedback—individual student or small group	I thought you might find this article on the "Top Ten Proofreading Tips" helpful in completing the next writing assignment.
Class	Directed feedback—individual student or small group	Be sure to check out the punctuation review materials in the Week 5 Resources folder. Check out this great online resource if you want some additional practice with comma usage: [URL]
Class	Directed feedback—individual student	[Student first name]—I'm happy to see you've completed your video presentation ahead of schedule. I noticed your presentation exceeds the four-minute time frame for this assignment. I'm happy to give you the opportunity to revise and resubmit a shorter presentation to avoid the xx pt. deduction. Just let me know!
Postclass	End-of-course message—whole class	I hope you are all proud of what you've accomplished in just a few short weeks. Please take a few minutes to make a list of what you've accomplished in this course and set new goals to continue to challenge yourself. Please have a wonderful holiday/summer/etc. I wish you all the best now and in the future.
Postclass	Directed feedback—individual student	[Student first name] I wanted to tell you how much I've enjoyed having you in this class. Your attention to detail was apparent in all of your work, as well as your ability to think creatively in solving problems. These are great traits that will take you far in your career!

attentive to and cares about individual student's performance.

Postclass Touchpoints

The postclass phase is another opportunity to utilize touchpoint messages to conclude the course on a positive note. Postclass touchpoint messages should include the whole class but can also be used to reach out to individual students with recognition, praise, or appreciation. The timing of postclass touchpoints can be critical because of course evaluations. Instructors need to be aware of their university's policy for how and when end-of-course surveys are administered for online classes and for the posting of final grades. For example, at our institution, online students receive an email with the course evaluation link two days before the course ends. Students cannot see their grade until they either complete the student opinion survey or opt out. If a student neither opts out nor completes the survey, they can see their grade two weeks after the course ends.

TOUCHPOINT ATTRIBUTES: TIMING AND FREQUENCY

Content and frequency of contact by the instructor to students or an individual student requires an understanding of what communications work and what communications do not work. For example, a study by Woods (2002) found more frequent personal emails (1/week for a total of 15 messages between 40–50 words in length on average) sent to specific groups within the class did not result in statistically different student perception of overall course satisfaction. Therefore, while we propose a frequency of sorts with weekly, whole class messages, the important focus is on the quality and relevance of messaging combined with personalization.

Examples of Touchpoint Messages

Table 2 provides specific examples of touchpoint messages to demonstrate the purpose and content an instructor can use. This use of effectively planned communication demonstrates that you, as the instructor, are as involved in and aware of your

students' individuality their progress, and their success in your online course as if they were in a face-to-face course.

Table 2 shows specific message content for a variety of touchpoint messages identified in Table 1. We found the best way to consider student engagement attributes would be to look at and utilize marketing research on touchpoints, such as marketing research from Hubspot, a developer and marketer of software products for inbound marketing and sales. Frost (2017) provided a number of relevant statistics on understanding what works and does not work when using email. We used this information to help shape our recommendations. We also researched the key attributes of effective email strategies and best practices. These findings are discussed in detail in the next section.

EMAIL STRATEGY—BEST PRACTICES

In a post on the Student Success Insights Blog by EAB, a company that offers best practice research, technology, and services for educators and educational institutions, Miars (2017) explains that to solve student communication challenges, educational institutions need to "think like a digital marketing expert . . . There's a science as well as an art to getting people to respond to emails. It's called email marketing, and the halls of academia aren't exactly teeming with email marketing experts."

Digital marketing companies assess email performance based on measures like "open rates" and "response rates." Miars (2017) and her team wanted to determine how institutions can improve their communication strategies in order to reach more students. In other words, how can higher education benefit from utilizing out-of-industry email best practices? They found that "a number of out-of-industry best practices for email could be powerful when translated to higher education" (2017). These best practices focus on increasing response rates by utilizing effective email subject line strategies along with the most effective email salutations.

Research on Subject Line Effectiveness

Essential to positive email performance, according to Miars (2017), is "a well-crafted subject line." EAB's in-house web team provides guidelines for creating highly effective subject lines. Their guidelines are based on research that shows a subject line is more effective when it is catchy, direct, urgent, conversational, mysterious, or when it poses a question (2017).

Megahan (2016) provides an analysis of subject line effectiveness for Mixpanel, a web and mobile analytics company, studying 85,637 subject lines from their email campaigns. This totaled 1.7 billion emails sent and 232 million opened. Their starting benchmark open rate was 13.5%. Megahan (2016) wanted to test what, if any, of the email best practices really made a difference. For example, the standard recommendation for subject line length in the digital marketing industry traditionally had been between 40 and 60 characters. But Megahan's (2016) analysis of open rates by characters in the subject line showed the 40–60 character "standard" was no longer effective. Figure 2, below, provides the results of Megahan's (2016) analysis on how subject line length affected open rates.

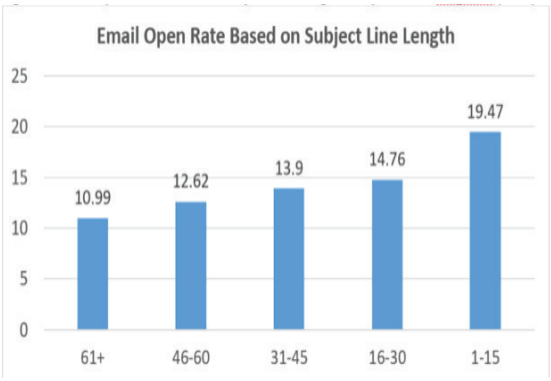

Figure 2. Email Open Rate Based on Subject Line Length. Adapted from Megahan (2016).

Figure 2 shows the correlation between increased email open rates and shorter subject lines. Megahan (2016) found that short subject lines (30 characters or fewer) performed better overall. The shortest subject lines (1–15 characters) had the highest open rate at 19.47%. The lowest open rate was 10.99% for subject lines that were 61 characters and longer. What was once the "standard" length recommended for subject lines of 40 to 60 characters received the second lowest response rate of 12.62%.

Megahan (2016) also analyzed how a specific element included in the subject line affected email open rates. These elements included the use of exclamation points and question marks. Other elements included the phrase "how to" and courteous words like "please," "thank you," "thanks," or "sorry." He also analyzed the effect

of creating urgency by using words like "today," "tonight," "tomorrow," or "now." Figure 3, below, provides the results of Megahan's (2016) analysis of the effect of each element on email open rates.

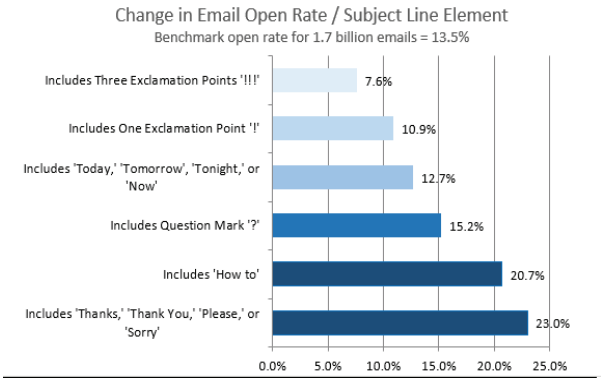

Figure 3. Change in Email Open Rate Based on Subject Line Elements. Adapted from Megahan (2016).

Figure 3 shows interesting results for the impact on open rates for specific subject line elements. The poor performance (10.9% open rate) of subject lines that used one exclamation point was exceeded only by those with three exclamation points for the lowest open rate of 7.6%. Creating urgency by using time sensitive words in a subject line (today, tomorrow, tonight, or now) also failed to outperform the benchmark open rate of 13.5%. Subject lines that posed a question outperformed the benchmark open rate at 15.2%, as did emails that began with "How to" at 20.7%. In the end, including a polite word or words in your subject line (thanks, thank you, please, or sorry) had the largest impact with an open rate of 23.0% (Megahan, 2016.)

Additional research analyzed 300,000 publicly available message archives from an estimated 20 online communities that included tech support to college course discussions (Greenley, 2017). According to Greenley (2017), analysis found that an all caps subject line decreased response rates by approximately 30%.

Research on Email Salutations

Greenley (2017) also analyzed the effectiveness of the most common email salutations: "Dear," "Hello," "Hey," "Hi," and "Greetings." The email salutations that earned the highest response rates were not the same as the most common salutations; e.g., "Hi" was the most common email salutation, followed by "Hello," "Dear," "Hey," and "Greetings." Figure 4, below, shows the response rates for each of the five most common email salutations.

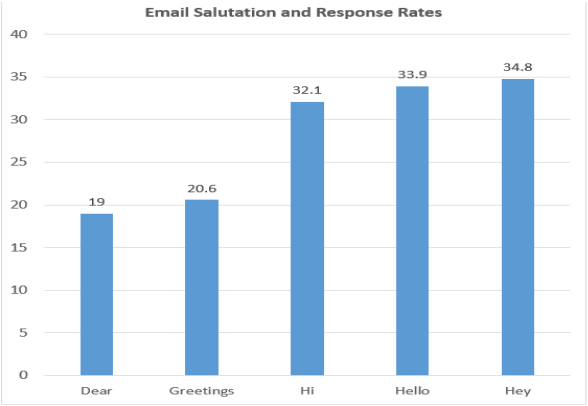

Figure 4. Email Salutations and Response Rates. Adapted from Greenley (2017).

As shown in Figure 4, the salutation "Hey" was the most effective with a 34.8% higher response rate than the general sample. "Dear," the third most common salutation, came in last place (19.0% response rate) but still earned a higher response rate than no salutation at all. An email without any salutation was the least effective.

Research on Email Content

Measuring the open rate of an email message focuses on effective subject lines and salutations. The next measure of success or failure is the "click through rate." The "click through rate" is used to measure the success of an email campaign in the world of digital marketing where only 24% of sales emails are opened (Frost, 2017).

When it comes to email content, two strategies are key: keep it short and make it easy to read. If your objective is to get the student to act, keep the message "student-centered and jargon free with clear and urgent calls to action" (Miars, 2017). For example, the longer the email, the less likely you are to get a response (Frost, 2017). Hubspot's research found that longer messages (more than 2,500 words) received only one-third the responses of shorter messages (Send, 2016). Boomerang's 2015 analysis of users found that people are more likely to respond to messages between 50 and 125 words (Greenley, 2017).

Greenley (2017) found that email messages written at a third grade reading level were 36%

Table 4. Summary of Standardized Regression Coefficients and Estimates for Student Personality Factors and Perceptions of Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence

Variable	Social Presence	Cognitive Presence	Teaching Presence	
	ßª	ßβ	ββ	Estimate[b]
Extraversion	-.011	-.012	.061	.175
Agreeableness	.068	.065	.039	.178
Conscientiousness	.315**	.286**	.233**	.990**
Neuroticism	.056	.061	.057	.183
Openness	.183*	.262**	.140*	.665*
N	372	372	372	372

Note: N = 372

[a]Standardized regression coefficients from the multiple linear regression.

[b]Estimates from the ordinal regression.

*p < .01, ** p < .001

more likely to get a reply than those written at the college reading level. Students also want to know why or understand what the purpose of the email is up front. One last tip is to be expressive. According to Boomerang, "Emails with neutral language are 10 to 15% less likely to receive responses than ones with words like 'great' or 'bad'" (Send, 2016).

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK ABOUT EMAIL?

A study conducted by Bowling Green University that was widely reported in higher education news suggests that students' use of email in academia is tied to what they perceive as worth reading (Straumshein, 2016). Worth noting is that 85% of students reported they check their email daily. These students also said they are "very likely to read any emails sent by professors" (Which, 2016). Only 11% of students reported that they *sometimes, rarely,* or *never* open emails from professors. Students also reported that they often disregard email communication from academic advisors and student groups that they believe is unnecessary or unimportant (2016).

Research on Students' Perception on Email

We conducted an exploratory study to better understand what students perceive as an important email from their instructor. Twenty-four students in a 400-level business communication course were asked to conduct research on email effectiveness and to complete a written assignment on what communication strategies faculty can implement to encourage students to read the emails they send to students. Content analysis was used to analyze the data submitted by the students.

Content analysis is used to "develop objective inferences about a subject of interest in any type of communication" (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002, p. 225). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Three types of content analysis are identified: conventional, directed, and summative (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

In this study, we used a conventional content analysis approach and the data (the assignments) were coded to identify themes. This is consistent with Holsti (1969) and Krippendorf (1980) who suggest that conventional content analysis is useful in exploratory studies. An obvious limitation of the research is that the study did not use a large group of students (n = 24). Participants were asked not to collaborate with others so that, consistent with Holsti (1969), we could see if trends emerged across the assignments. The data were analyzed consistent with Holsti (1969) and Krippendorf (1980) whereby axial coding was used to identify themes.

Several themes emerged across the assignments; one theme that was present in all but two of the assignments was coded as "academic." Almost all the students addressed the issue of the content of the communication as a key component of email effectiveness. Several students cited studies on the number of students who ignore emails from advisors or student organizations—because they are perceived as spam. One student cited research that found, "Almost 40% of students do not always open emails from their advisors, 54% said that they do not always read emails from their advisors, and 72% said that they treat emails from student organizations like spam" (Which, 2016). This provides additional evidence for the importance of an effective subject line.

"Communication length" was also a key theme that emerged in the coding; longer is not better. For example, one student assignment said, "A web and mobile analytics company found that a short subject line, 30 characters or less, caused a 1.5% increase with a benchmark open rate of 13.5%" (Megahan, 2016). Another student indicated, "Keep it short. Use bullet points, lists, and pictures." Students all suggested in one way or another that long emails or emails that take too long to get to the point are among those that are least effective.

A third theme that emerged was "email use." Many students addressed the idea that they don't use email as a primary mode of communication, stating that they prefer Facebook, Google Plus, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn to email. One student suggested that faculty should encourage students to set email up on their cell phones while others discussed message content and referred to research on writing "student-centered messages."

How are Students Reading Email?

We also need to consider that students are reading our emails on their mobile devices. This adds to the importance of a concise, effective subject line. Megahan (2016) points out the importance of understanding what we don't have control over. Apps like Google's in-box truncates subject lines at 27 characters. Truncating concerns are also relevant in Learning Management Systems (LMS.) The subject line of messages distributed by an LMS, such as Blackboard, automatically generates additional course-identifying information that appends the subject line. This additional information can consist of any combination of identifiers, including the course designator, course number, term or semester identifier, and course section number. All of these identifiers will precede your subject line.

Each institution determines what identifiers will be included automatically for their LMS system. This information can account for everything a student sees for a subject line in their in-box, especially for a mobile device. For example, sending an email with a subject line of "test this week" may arrive in the student's in-box as "MKT 310 Marketing Communicatons-18500–22340000: *test this week*." If this subject line is truncated at 27 characters, the student will not see the actual subject of the subject line.

CONCLUSION

We know that communication is key in an online course yet challenging because of the complexities of context and technology. We propose that faculty can and should be proactive in their communication with students in the online classroom. One way to do this is to think about instructor-student communication from a touchpoints perspective and to intentionally blueprint strategic communication in the online classroom. By organizing communication into preclass, active class, and postclass phases, faculty can identify a list of communication modes (email, announcements, discussion board posts, etc.) for each phase in the course and then plan the message content. By planning communication in an online course, faculty and students benefit with increased instructor-student engagement that can lead to increased learning and increased "customer" satisfaction.

Another way faculty can and should be proactive in their communication with students in the online classroom is to approach email like a digital marketing expert. Faculty can benefit from understanding the art and science of getting people, including students, to respond to email. Becoming more knowledgeable of the research, understanding the art of effective email design, and utilizing this knowledge on what does and doesn't work is essential for improving communication in the online classroom. Effectively communicating with students has always been a challenge. The changing learning environment will continue to evolve and so must faculty in order to achieve success.

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