

## Reflections on experience with using e-mail in teaching of nutrition and related courses

**Farouk El-Sabban\***

*Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Kuwait University, Kuwait*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Farouk El-Sabban, Department of Food Science and Nutrition, College of Life Sciences, Kuwait University, P.O. Box 5969, Safat 13060, Kuwait City, State of Kuwait.

**Received:** February 8, 2015; **Published:** February 19, 2015

Computer technology has become a normal feature of our nowadays life. Academic institutions utilize many facets of modern technology for many purposes. For example, the e-mail system is mainly used for communication among all university departments and units. Recently, some electronic course management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, were developed and implemented by educational institutions. Computer technology is vastly used by both students and teachers - which includes, among many others: preparations of written documents, power point presentations, statistical handling of data...etc. Many universities have adopted and implemented the use of what is known as smart classrooms.

However, the e-mail is still the most widely used among all available computer technology; for familiarity, ease and convenience. E-mail has been reported as being beneficial to education. Integrating e-mail in teaching courses for independent learning situations was proposed nearly two decades ago and more reports on different uses of e-mail in academia have emerged ever since. There are studies that indicate that the use of e-mail can enhance communication between faculty members and their students; thus, enhances the education process.

Being a course instructor for nutrition and related undergraduate courses and who utilized the e-mail system at the College of Life Sciences (formerly known as the College for Women) of Kuwait University for nearly 6 years, I wished to relate my personal experience herein. The academic setting of this experience can be briefly described as follows:

1. The College is small, with a student intake of nearly 250 per year.
2. Teaching of scientific subjects is done in English.
3. Students were all females who have chosen nutrition as an academic major.
4. Number of students per each of the courses of the program (below) ranged from 10 to 18.
5. Students were enrolled in the following courses: Biology (CFW 104), Anatomy and Physiology (FSC 303), Anatomy and Physiology of Hearing and Speech (CSL 323), Public Health Nutrition (FSC 320) and Capstone Project (FSC 499). All courses were taught several times, except CLS 323 and FSC 499 – for one time only.

Use of e-mail was implemented in teaching activities in a unique fashion. A separate e-mail account was set for each course and students were provided with its user name and password. The overall purpose of such an e-mail account was for the instructor to send all relevant course information, electronic materials, articles of interest and announcements to students – as well as to maintain a constant teacher-students communication. In addition to explaining the main purpose of such accounts, students were clearly instructed not to use this course-specific e-mail for communicating with the course instructor or to use it for personal purposes. For a student who wished to communicate with the course instructor, the advice was to use her own personal e-mail account and send any messages to any of the instructor's professional or personal e-mail accounts. This was intentional, so that the course e-mail account would not be congested with many intersecting messages that may be confusing to all users. Also, students were advised not to delete any of the inbox messages, so that the set of accumulated messages from the course instructor would always be available to all. Meanwhile, students were told that they are

---

**Citation:** Farouk El-Sabban. "Reflections on experience with using e-mail in teaching of nutrition and related courses". *EC Nutrition* 1.2 (2015): 49-51.

permitted only to forward any of the messages in the inbox compartment to their respective e-mail accounts for individual use. Additionally, students were advised to frequently check the course e-mail for any incoming messages.

A contrast in using e-mail by the course instructor and students was noted. E-mail messages sent to students by the course instructor were about 95% related to teaching activities, under the main categories of: handouts and syllabi, notices and reminders, assignment-related, materials of interest, examination-related, and field trip-related. The remainder of the instructor's messages (approximately 5%) related to the category of greetings and thank you. E-mail messages that were sent by students to the course instructor were approximately 40% assignment-related and about 60% non-assignment-related - which included: communications from class representatives, requesting appointments, field trip-related, examination-related, and apologies for being absent.

Student feedback on using e-mail in course activities was of interest and has been sought. At the end of each semester students were requested to fill out a simple questionnaire and without revealing their identity. Nearly 85% of enrolled students opted to participate and accumulated responses were 179. Results of this survey were positive and indicated a wide acceptance of this means of communication outside the classroom and off specified office hours. The majority of students (with responses of 80% and above) felt that the e-mail is convenient for communication, preferred to communicate with the instructor by e-mail, felt fully-informed and provided, felt that e-mail saved their time, and that e-mail was a faster way to reach the instructor and at any time. The overall assessment made by students indicated that 72% would recommend communication by e-mail for courses they will take in the future. Students also felt that face-to-face interactions about certain lengthy aspects/matters are of preference. Most of the comments received were complimentary and some students suggested the use of Blackboard.

Benefits of using the e-mail system in course activities, as perceived by the course instructor, can be summarized in the following points:

1. Students have a complete account of pertinent course matters and activities in a sequential manner.
2. Messages from the course instructor remain permanent and available to students for any time accessing.
3. Students are kept engaged in course activities with constant awareness of course materials and announcement relayed.
4. Students can print sent handouts and materials – a matter that is of an economic value.
5. Students can access materials that are sent ahead of time of their coverage in class for their comprehension – a matter that stimulates active learning.
6. Students can communicate with their instructor at any time and place, away from the classroom or the university premises.
7. Communicating with students by e-mail encourages their use of modern technology.
8. Writing messages by students can be a means to enhance their personality, self-confidence, and professional development.
9. Students can receive answers to their inquiries and concern faster, especially with the use of mobile electronic devices.
10. Communication between students and instructor by e-mail can be the best alternative to face-to-face meetings—a matter that can be of help to students who are shy.
11. Encouraging and cordial responses to student messages can foster the feeling of trust and build academic confidence.
12. E-mail can prove valuable in distance learning and to universities in some geographical areas of the world that may not have the latest in course management systems.

While the above points express the positive side of e-mail usage, there can be some inconveniencing situations such as: hacking of e-mail accounts and the serious damage attained by electronic viruses. Replying to every e-mail message received from students can be time consuming at times - however, the benefits of using the e-mail system in student-teacher communication outweigh any adverse or unfavorable circumstances. With all of the students' and instructor's related feedback, perception, and specific considerations, the e-mail system seems to be effective enough in teaching activities and in enhancing student-teacher communication. In this regard and for benefits to education, the following two key points ought to be taken into consideration when communicating with students:

1. All e-mail messages received from students should be responded to within a very short time, preferably not to exceed 12 hours.
2. Teachers must use encouraging and confidence-building tones when responding to student messages.

Some studies show that this enhanced level of communication can be conducive of increased student participation. Also, teachers should learn the etiquette of using the e-mail in communicating with students (netiquette), for a favorable academic environment that would be encouraging for participation and learning. One study expressed that: "caring e-mail messages sent to students provided them with psychological support thereby forgo a bond with their lecturer and provided students with the emotional strength to persist with their studies". As effective communication among students and their teachers can be instrumental in enhancing education, the e-mail can be viewed as a valuable tool. Based on such an expressed experience herein, institutions of higher learning ought to enhance e-mail use and study its impact on educational outcomes.

**Volume 1 Issue 2 February 2015**

**© All rights are reserved by Farouk El-Sabban.**