

February 21, 2006

To: Professor@University.edu Subject: Why It's All About Me

By [JONATHAN D. GLATER](#)

Correction Appended

One student skipped class and then sent the professor an e-mail message asking for copies of her teaching notes. Another did not like her grade, and wrote a petulant message to the professor. Another explained that she was late for a Monday class because she was recovering from drinking too much at a wild weekend party.

Jennifer Schultens, an associate professor of mathematics at the University of California, Davis, received this e-mail message last September from a student in her calculus course: "Should I buy a binder or a subject notebook? Since I'm a freshman, I'm not sure how to shop for school supplies. Would you let me know your recommendations? Thank you!"

At colleges and universities nationwide, e-mail has made professors much more approachable. But many say it has made them too accessible, erasing boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance.

These days, they say, students seem to view them as available around the clock, sending a steady stream of e-mail messages — from 10 a week to 10 after every class — that are too informal or downright inappropriate.

"The tone that they would take in e-mail was pretty astounding," said Michael J. Kessler, an assistant dean and a lecturer in theology at Georgetown University. "I need to know this and you need to tell me right now," with a familiarity that can sometimes border on imperative."

He added: "It's a real fine balance to accommodate what they need and at the same time maintain a level of legitimacy as an instructor and someone who is institutionally authorized to make demands on them, and not the other way round."

While once professors may have expected deference, their expertise seems to have become just another service that students, as consumers, are buying. So students may have no fear of giving offense, imposing on the professor's time or even of asking a question that may reflect badly on their own judgment.

For junior faculty members, the barrage of e-mail has brought new tension into their work lives, some say, as they struggle with how to respond. Their tenure prospects, they realize, may rest in part on student evaluations of their accessibility.

The stakes are different for professors today than they were even a decade ago, said Patricia Ewick, chairwoman of the sociology department at Clark University in Massachusetts, explaining that "students are constantly asked to fill out evaluations of individual faculty." Students also frequently post their own evaluations on Web sites like ratemyprofessors.com and describe their impressions of their professors on blogs.

Last fall, undergraduate students at Syracuse University set up a group in Facebook.com, an online network for students, and dedicated it to maligning one particular instructor. The students were reprimanded.

Professor Ewick said 10 students in one class e-mailed her drafts of their papers days before they were due, seeking comments. "It's all different levels of presumption," she said. "One is that I'll be able to drop everything and read 250 pages two days before I'm going to get 50 of these."

Kathleen E. Jenkins, a sociology professor at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, said she had even received e-mail requests from students who missed class and wanted copies of her teaching notes.

Alexandra Lahav, an associate professor of law at the University of Connecticut, said she felt pressured by the e-mail messages. "I feel sort of responsible, as if I ought to be on call all the time," she said.

Many professors said they were often uncertain how to react. Professor Schultens, who was asked about buying the notebook, said she debated whether to tell the student that this was not a query that should be directed to her, but worried that "such a message could be pretty scary."

"I decided not to respond at all," she said.

Christopher J. Dede, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who has studied technology in education, said these e-mail messages showed how students no longer deferred to their professors, perhaps because they realized that professors' expertise could rapidly become outdated.

"The deference was probably driven more by the notion that professors were infallible sources of deep knowledge," Professor Dede said, and that notion has weakened.

Meanwhile, students seem unaware that what they write in e-mail could adversely affect them, Professor Lahav said. She recalled an e-mail

message from a student saying that he planned to miss class so he could play with his son. Professor Lahav did not respond.

"It's graduate school, he's an adult human being, he's obviously a parent, and it's not my place to tell him how to run his life," she said.

But such e-mail messages can have consequences, she added. "Students don't understand that what they say in e-mail can make them seem very unprofessional, and could result in a bad recommendation."

Still, every professor interviewed emphasized that instant feedback could be invaluable. A question about a lecture or discussion "is for me an indication of a blind spot, that the student didn't get it," said Austin D. Sarat, a professor of political science at Amherst College.

College students say that e-mail makes it easier to ask questions and helps them to learn. "If the only way I could communicate with my professors was by going to their office or calling them, there would be some sort of ranking or prioritization taking place," said Cory Merrill, 19, a sophomore at Amherst. "Is this question worth going over to the office?"

But student e-mail can go too far, said Robert B. Ahdieh, an associate professor at Emory Law School in Atlanta. He paraphrased some of the comments he had received: "I think you're covering the material too fast, or I don't think we're using the reading as much as we could in class, or I think it would be helpful if you would summarize what we've covered at the end of class in case we missed anything."

Students also use e-mail to criticize one another, Professor Ahdieh said. He paraphrased this comment: "You're spending too much time with my moron classmates and you ought to be focusing on those of us who are getting the material."

Michael Greenstone, an economics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said he once received an e-mail message late one evening from a student who had recently come to the realization that he was gay and was struggling to cope.

Professor Greenstone said he eventually helped the student get an appointment with a counselor. "I don't think we would have had the opportunity to discuss his realization and accompanying feelings without e-mail as an icebreaker," he said.

A few professors said they had rules for e-mail and told their students how quickly they would respond, how messages should be drafted and what types of messages they would answer.

Meg Worley, an assistant professor of English at Pomona College in California, said she told students that they must say thank you after receiving a professor's response to an e-mail message.

"One of the rules that I teach my students is, the less powerful person always has to write back," Professor Worley said.

Correction: Feb. 22, 2006

A front-page article yesterday about e-mail messages sent by students to their college and university professors misidentified a Web site on which students evaluate teachers. It is ratemyprofessors.com, not rateyourprofessor.com.