Communication Management for Large Modules

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**INTRODUCTION**

This article addresses issues concerning the suitability of particular media as mass communication tools in an UK higher education setting. It looks firstly at the use of e-mail as a communication method whilst managing large modules. The article then goes on to examine the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to provide a mass communication method more suited to the needs of both the staff and the students.

An in-depth case study will look at how a large module is managed through the use of a Virtual Learning Environment, discussing the pros and cons of using such technology. For the purposes of this article, distance learning will not be considered, as the university in question has no plans to follow or adopt such an approach for the courses that undertake these modules.

**BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The University of Westminster is a large, modern university operating on four sites across the centre of London and West London. It was Britain’s first polytechnic, established in 1838 in Regent Street, and it still uses these original buildings for lectures and seminars. It became a university in 1992 and is now recognised in the *Financial Times* annual survey as the top English 'new' university.

The university has a population of both full-time and part-time students drawn from the local surrounding areas, but also has a large population of international students. Many of these students are studying post-graduate or post-experience/professional updating courses.

The Westminster Business School operates out of the Marylebone campus, which is situated close to Regents Park and is thus a very popular location for students to attend courses, as not only is it in the centre of London, but is also easily accessible by public transport.

**COMMUNICATION MEDIA**

This section discusses the theoretical background to communication studies looking at ‘fitness for purpose’ for the media.

To begin, a brief overview of the communication process and its constituents would be useful. A basic theoretical model of the communication process states that messages are ‘sent’ and ‘received’, confirmation of receipt and interpretation of the message indicates that it is a two-way communication process (Warner, 1996). The efficiency of this process is subject to a variety of issues such as:

- **Effectiveness**: How do we measure this when using e-mail or a Web site?
- **Simultaneous reception of information by recipients**: The information is available simultaneously, but how do we measure if students have accessed it?
- **Acknowledgement of receipt**: With e-mail, a receipt can be provided, but how is this addressed using a Web site?
- **Speed**: How quickly does the information reach the recipients?
- **Cost of the process**: Is it cost effective?

All of these factors will be considered in the case study section of the article.

It can be said that one of the major benefits of the growth in the use of the Internet has been the ability to communicate using e-mail as a medium. E-mail is still the most regularly used aspect of the Internet, and the level of usage is growing. Sands (2003) argues that e-mail is now as accepted a communication method as the telephone within just a few years of its introduction. E-mail has become a common mode of communication for many people, though exceptions must be made for those who do not have easy and regular access to the technology required. Adequate access to the technology is assumed...
in this article. However, communications theorists argue
there are problems with the use of e-mail as the sole
communication medium. Culnan and Markus (1987) sug-
gested that a lack of face-to-face communication changes
the intra- and interpersonal variables because of a lack of
social context. Sproull and Kiesler (1986) argued that e-
mail was devoid of social cues, and this would seriously
affect communication patterns. E-mail provides neither
audible nor visible cues to the communication process
and as such can be seen as a relatively impoverished
communication style. Hirschheim (1985) argued that one
of the major benefits of using e-mail is to support commu-
nication between people who are geographically distant.
This leads us to the initial premise that although widely
utilised, there are significant problems with the use of e-
mail as the sole communication medium.

There are further problems with an e-mail system in
that it is not always possible to ensure that the recipient
has received and read the message in an appropriate
timeframe. This may be caused by a variety of problems,
both technical and human. These issues are discussed in
more detail and possible solutions posited in Willis and
Coakes (2000).

Further analysis of the current situation indicates that
e-mail lacks the collaborative dimension that is needed in
today’s world. In an academic setting, the ability to
discuss matters in ‘real time’, rather than waiting for a
reply from a tutor via an e-mail system, may be of great
importance.

IS E-MAIL A SUITABLE MASS
COMMUNICATION MEDIUM?

A traditional view of the mass communication process
would have the university providing content and it pass-
ing to the students via the e-mail medium as shown in
Figure 1.

This model allows no interaction. We posit that what
is required in the modern communication environment is
a more interactive model which allows students to influ-
ence the content, as well as be recipients of, information.
In our article, the aim of mass communication is to provide
information simultaneously to a large number of students.
We have to seriously question whether e-mail is the
correct option given the problems outlined.

Further analysis leads us to the model suggested
below which, while offering limited interaction, we feel is
likely to be more effective and more satisfactory than the
traditional model outlined above.

The model outlined as Figure 2 gives students the
option of simply gaining information via the medium, or
engaging and interacting with it by influencing the con-
tent. From the preceding arguments, it is doubtful that e-
mail can fulfil the role of the appropriate medium in the new
model, so an alternative has to be found.

The ability to interact is an aspect that has acquired
great importance in the communication process, and a
method must be found that does not have the weaknesses
of e-mail. What is required is a medium that can have input
from both staff and students, and which can change
rapidly to respond to these needs. As the staff and
students are already familiar with e-mail and the Internet,
a move to a more directly Web-based approach using a
VLE is likely to provide a viable solution. This is sup-
ported by the fact that students have better access to
Web sites and are more used to using this medium now
than in the past. Additionally, many organisations limit
the size of e-mails that can be sent across the network,
which can cause real problems when disseminating large
amounts of information, which can cause issues with part-
time students who use their workplace e-mail systems for
their prime communication access. The authors feel the
use of a Web site accessible from any location and
requiring only a browser offers a realistic alternative.

In terms of the ability to interact, asking students to
access a Web site is not necessarily more effective than
the simple use of e-mail - it is the add-ons of lecture notes,
seminar notes, and feedback that will make the medium
more successful.

Figure 1. A traditional mass communication model
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