

Conversations with Email

Email makes me crazy. Email makes me sad. Email makes me work too hard. Email takes up too much time. Email is not my friend.

Also, email is not animate, not personal and not the actual problem. Email is shorthand for the people who send email and the email systems that have been established such as email software, email etiquette and email servers. To my way of thinking email makes interpersonal communication distancing. The strangeness is confusing and I use the writing of conversations as a way to inquire into the culture of email.

Some time ago I found myself carrying on conversations in my head with the software that brought me the email, the lists that represented the email I was about to read and the actual email messages themselves. I wanted email to represent real people and as a creative writer and a person who studies communication technology I carried on imagined conversations to help me manage the disorientation that email caused. [As an aside, I believe that people who write email are working more in a second stage oral communication mode.]

Conversations with Email: Forwarded Messages

“Oh my god, not another message from him/her. I am so tired of deleting 4, 5, 10 messages a day that are of no interest or value to me. Why do you send these things out to all of us?”

He/she replies (in my head): “Well, as the head of this unit I need to make certain that everyone has all the information they need. I, as head of this unit, am sent many

more messages than you are. Since I don't know which you get or don't get, I send them all on to everyone to be sure that you are all up to date."

"O.K." I respond and go away to think about it for a while. This is a public service. It does take time to send the messages to us, so it must be worthwhile. I can live with that.

Then I open my email and discover 15 email messages forwarded in the past 20 minutes. I remember that the head of the unit is on vacation and doesn't have computer access. "Where are the messages coming from?" I decide to check into it. All the forwarded messages were being screened from the unit head's email and sent on by a low level assistant. This created a revised conversation.

"I understand that you believe you receive information that we may not, such as a subscription to the Chronicle or other electronic journals. I also understand you may be on some organizational listservs that not all of us are privy to. But why don't you have the assistant find out what we would like or need to have? It would not take up your time."

The reply (in my head) is: "Yes, but it *would* take up too much time. Each item would need a different distribution list. It only takes you a few minutes to delete unwanted email. It is easier for *you* to do it."

"Easier." I say.

"EASIER!" I repeat a bit more loudly.

When I am able to marshal my thoughts I say, "It's not easier. It's a waste of my time. It interferes with other more important things that I want to do and these forwarded messages clog up my email when I don't get around to doing something with them."

“Stop complaining. It’s a little thing.” comes the response (in my head).

There I am, no further than I was when the conversation started in my head, but somehow I feel better. I have expressed my dissatisfaction with something that is happening to me and if not a “real” conversation at least I think I understand the situation. As I review the conversation, I think about what the imaginary dialogue represents.

I seem to believe that my colleagues and I have our time wasted on needless email review and deletion. What does this represent in terms of social structures, in terms of actual “conversations?” Well, power for one thing. It appears that the head of the unit is the only one doing this mass distribution, what would happen if we all decided to do the same thing? The dialogue in my head says that the rest of us would be told to stop. I am not certain if that is true but it seems like it might be true. At the organizational level in a hierarchical system it appears that the way email is used may echo other types of top-down power relationships.

The flow of email through a low level assistant is also annoying. “Why is the assistant’s time and effort worth more than ours?” While I don’t have an answer (in my head) to this yet, I am concerned that the flow of “conversation” is managed in a way to diminish choice. One recourse is to delete the messages and just get on with it: To stop worrying about something that is apparently so small and meaningless. A technological strategy would be to develop a filter to eliminate messages from this address and automatically delete them. Occasionally, however, an actual message or question is contained. Sometimes the forwarded messages are actually forwarded by the head of the unit.

When I am feeling critical, or petulant, or perhaps when I am putting myself in the manager's place, other responses to my questions play out:

- ◆ “My time [the sender's time] is more important than the mass set of the receivers' times.”
- ◆ “You are not smart enough, aware enough, important enough to have access to the information that I do, therefore I need to make certain that you get it, whether you want it or not.”
- ◆ “You are not even important enough or significant enough to spend my time on. An assistant is good enough, but even an assistant's time is more important than yours.”
- ◆ “Everyone should have all the information available. There is no need to consider who might want or need what.”

In counterpoint I think that it is my disappointments, time management issues and anti-email sentiments that get in the way. The internal monologues that run through my head go:

- ◆ “Maybe it is not really as bad as I think. Perhaps I am just overwhelmed at the moment.” When I have this thought I often count and organize my email messages. This process of trying to figure through a quantitative approach whether or not my feelings are valid was part of the beginnings of my email conversations.
- ◆ Sometimes, I get mad. “My time is valuable. I have work to do, such as reading, writing, thinking.” I am spending almost one day a week reading, deleting and managing email. Of 100-200 emails I have received most recently—two of them were of significance. The annoyance is related not only to the broadcast email but to all the other email.

- ◆ “Why does this person/these people think so little of me and my colleagues that we are treated like ignorant children, incapable of finding the information we need”.
- ◆ “What is this person/these people getting out of sending all of these things? What is the advantage?” Is it that if we are kept tied up with small insignificant details that it will be harder for us to focus on the important issues and this is an advantage?
- ◆ Sometimes I wonder about what my colleagues think about forwarded messages. When it first started to happen, I heard a few rumblings. Now I hear nothing. No one else seems to be complaining.

If that were the only issue that I have with email, I could probably live with it. Heads of units, chairpersons, deans, department heads, CEOs, always wield power and often in a way that their employees are not completely in agreement with. Different managers, administrators, people in charge work differently and you learn to adjust or move on or take some action. Interpersonal communication avenues are part of that power structure and if it was not broadcast email it might be piles of photocopied paper or monthly, weekly or daily meetings. A glut of unwanted and unneeded information received through forwarded messages is only one component of an overall dissatisfaction with email and the culture that has developed around email communications.

Conversations with Email: Software, Oh MY Software

One of the ongoing, never ending, and often frustrating conversations that I have is with the software that I use to access my email. It is not even the email itself. I don't need “software” to open my regular mail. Sometimes I use a letter opener to stop from getting paper cuts, but I do not actually need it. I could just be more careful. The

conversation I have with email software often starts with me yelling at the top of my voice.

“WHY CAN’T YOU DO WHAT I WANT YOU TO DO?”

In my head I hear this sinister little voice whispering, “Because I am doing what *I* want to do.”

Now I know that there are no sinister “little people” in the email system stopping me from doing what I want to do. I know there are servers that slow down or get clogged just when I need to retrieve an important message. I know each email program has its idiosyncracies and limitations. For example, in order to accomplish the various tasks that I want to with my email, I use three email programs and two different operating systems.

The email software (in my head) might respond in this way. “You are creating your own problems. If you just used one program, *me*, there would not be so much variation. It takes so much more time to use all those other programs.” And then that sinister little voice again, “If you just used *me* it would be much easier for you.”

I can inadvertently create problems by using the tactics for one program with the wrong piece of software. Each software program I use has at least one thing that it will not do that I want to do. And all three are different in their limitations and features. At the moment, until better software comes along, I use three. “I will NOT let the software limit my actions.” At least I will not let the software limit me in the instances of the three things that I want to do with my email. However, email software does limit the type of communications that I am willing to conduct.

Hence the second type of conversation that I try to have with my email software is this, “Who is checking in on us today do you think?”

The sinister little voice of email software (in my head) is silent on this point.

While I understand that readers might believe I mean governmental or even organizational overseers are checking in on what we do, what I actually mean is that the software itself allows regular users to know more about each other than we might wish. I am going to tell a short story about one of the first email systems that I worked with as cautionary tale.

An Email Tale

At one point the organization I worked for used a proprietary email software system. When it was introduced, as an expert in educational communications and technology, I decided to become familiar with all of its features. It was touted as the most advanced and user-friendly system available. We would be able to do our email faster and with better results than ever before. We would have access to features that our “old and clunky” system would not allow. This was in many respects true. However, there were also additional new features introduced that concerned me. The one I found most problematic was the “history” function. When anyone was sent an email, the sender could find out, by checking “history” when the receiver opened the email.

I started talking to people about this feature. “What did they think?” For the most part, my colleagues, including my educational technology colleagues, did not know it existed. They did not seem to think much about it one way or another. A few people started to use it and a lot of outside customers also started to use it. Conversations (both in person and via email) would start with: “I see you read my email last week but you haven’t gotten back to me yet. What’s going on?”

For the most part my colleagues responded to this by increasing their speed of response to the email they received. It became more and more an unspoken tradition to read and respond to email in a “timely fashion.” I responded by wondering whether or not this feature could be disabled in some way. I spoke to the systems operator (sys op). I was told, “Yes, there is a feature to turn off the ‘history’ function for each person with an email account. Why would we want to do that? How would users know if their message has been received if they can’t check?”

I responded by saying, “How do people know when the regular mail they send is received?” No one I talked to about this seemed to think it a valid analogy. Somehow “email was different” because it could be sent and received quickly (whereas regular post, or notes in company mailboxes could not). The receiver should be able to know that their email was received and opened quickly. Speed of reading and speed of responding soon became an unspoken standard in email communication. Features of software programs support this increased speed.

I kept following up on the “history” function. I asked if the organization had formulated a policy to keep the function on for everyone. I was told, “No, it is just the way the software came.”

I asked, “Could we make this a policy level discussion and have a formal decision made.” I was told by an upper level manager, “It isn’t that important. But if you want the function turned off for your account, the sys op will do it.” And it was done.

It seemed to me that there are issues regarding personal freedoms that were being abrogated so I started talking to my colleagues, not only about this feature but about the overall qualities of email. It is not private. It is not secure. Messages sent appear to

belong to the company which owns the software or the hardware or both, not the individual sending them. My colleagues, at that time, did not seem to think these issues were a problem or worth talking about. Nor did they believe it required group discussion or explicit policy. Times have changed for some people, but many still feel a sense of (unwarranted) privacy in the email they send. It appears to me that much less email would be sent or more care would be taken in the construction of messages otherwise.

The Moral of the Email Tale

Is there a moral to this story? Not in the traditional sense. There are a few lessons to be learned. Email software has features, functions and processes that affect how users may communicate. It limits some ways of behaving and encourages others. The moral in a less traditional sense is to become more aware of what you do and the way you do it is because these things are influenced by software constraints and restraints.

Email Conversations: At Last, a “Real Person” is the Focus

I use email. I am required to. I use it and craft responses in the sense that I would have crafted a memo: carefully choosing words, composing reasoned and organized responses and relying on formality to indicate I believe this to be a literate rather than an oral medium.

This brings me to another type of conversation I have with email and an exchange with the writer of an email message. I am puzzled, confused and confounded every day by the email letters/messages I receive. They appear to be some combination of oral and written communications traditions. In their construction they resemble in-person oral conversation, starting like this:

Hi!

I'm apply for a job with the XYZ Corp. Would you be a reference?

I am not a terribly formal professor and if students do not want to Dr. me, that is fine. However, when requesting job recommendation, it seems to me more pieces of information are required and more formality. This email message is more like something people would say if they walked into your office. They also would probably have gotten all the words correct in person. I might actually know who the person was by recognizing their face. The email from hellcat201@netform.com with no signature and no name attached substantially hinders the formal request for a recommendation. Separated by only a few feet of desk, I could have asked and received answers to pertinent questions: “What type of job? Who do I send the letter to or will someone be calling?”

Part of my confusion with email comes from writers of email not being able to figure out when formality is required and when informality is OK. Informality seems to be the tradition. This may seem to some an etiquette issue but to me it is at the center of email culture. Traditions have developed regarding email communication that position it more closely to oral than to written communication.

Email is a cultural system which has developed traditions and values about who, what and how to communicate. The traditions include issues of etiquette, e.g. do not “reply all” on a discussion list unless you really want everyone to know about your lunch meeting. One of the unspoken values relates to speed of reading and speed of responding to email. A corollary has become decreased time between when an email is sent and when one can expect completion of work, attendance at a meeting or any of a number of

other actions where because regular mail or notes or speaking in-person required a longer time frame a longer time frame for responding was also in effect.

There are constraints, restraints and hidden messages that permeate the email culture. These are reinforced by everyday usage, by those who create the software and by those who consciously use it as a tool to control or manipulate. This culture of email often is being built with no awareness by users of what they are losing. Almost no one questions the need for responding to and reading email in a “timely fashion.” That time has become shorter and shorter. What once was a week, became two to three days and then 24 hours. Now it is hours or even minutes. Speed of response is conventional in oral communications, but not necessarily desirable in written communication.

The time and effort consumed to process email is seldom factored into a daily workload. It is possible that the average office worker (faculty member, student) spends as much as 4-12 hours a week with email. This is NOT responding to email. This is the time necessary to read, review, manage, delete, organize, save, print out and process email. In a year that is the equivalent of 6-16 weeks.

The response (in my head) to you the reader is: “Yes! Yes! I know the counter-arguments about access, speed, and cost reduction, etc. etc. etc. What I am upset about is that it is always the benefits that are accepted without closely examining the detriments. Technology is not value free.”

When someone tells me, “It is easier. Don’t worry about the little things.” I worry. I worry about not asking the relevant research questions. I worry about accepting this oral/literate email culture without examining its effect. I worry about the controls and

constraints email software creates. I worry about the use of email as tool of power and manipulation. These are significant concerns.

For as much as I worry, I am also intrigued by this development of a specific (and somewhat) hybrid communication structure. It appears to combine oral and written traditions, formal and information communication modes and these are applied in ways that are different from functioning in an oral situation or a written encounter. Some writers of email, no matter what the message, write as if they are “talking to a friend.” Other writers, such as myself, use only a formal “memo” mode. Others choose their structure, words and tone based on to whom and what they are writing about.

From the limitations imposed by email software, to the confusing culture of email communication, to the email imperative of speed at all costs there is a need to critically examine the intended and unintended consequences on human communication and work. This is created by the mass spread of email technology. As my husband says, “Email creates the illusion of a community but is actually a society.” Fortunately I often have real conversations with my husband so I asked him, “What do you mean?”

He said, “Community represents the personal. With email there is an illusion that something personal is occurring. Society is a set of systems with impersonal rules and structures.”