"HOW TO IMPROVE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, NEBRASKA"

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is one of the means to establish understanding and solve problems within communities, organizations, and in interpersonal relationships; its importance cannot be over emphasized. However, contrary to popular perception, achieving effective communication amongst people is not the easiest. There are increasing studies like (Civikly-Powell, 1999; Scott & Tobe, 1995) which attempt to figure out various ways of communicating effectively, particularly in higher education settings—at colleges and universities. The need to continue this research for better communication between professors and their students is obvious. This study specifically seeks to engage professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska, through interviews. Its objective is to gather information from both parties, thoroughly analyze the data, and offer profound recommendations for improvement.

Before proceeding further, it is important to explain what communication is from the right perspective. "Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response" (Griffin et al, 2015, p. 6). Certainly there are many other definitions of communication, but the above one fits well for the purpose of this study. In order to better understand it, it is necessary to put its components into context. First, there is definitely a "relational process" between professors and their students as they communicate, and the nature of the communication shapes their relationship. Secondly, as professors and their students communicate, either way, the communicator has to make conscious effort in creating "messages" that would be subjected to "interpretation" by the receiver. Therefore, in trying to achieve effective communication, the sender has to make a good decision on the content of the message, its form, and the way it would be delivered. Finally, as professors and students send messages to each other, their messages should be able to "elicit responses" that would be positive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human communication involves two parties who try to exchange messages in order to convey information within a particular setting. It is important to note that messages can be constructed and sent in different forms; messages can also be nonverbally expressed. On the other hand, the receiver of a message would have to interpret it and try to respond accordingly. The interpretation of messages is sometimes appropriately done. However, there are times when messages are misconstrued and lead to inappropriate responses. Therefore, sending messages, receiving messages, and interpreting messages, all need to be well done in order to achieve effective communication between people. A specific review of studies on the communication process between professors and students at colleges and universities would reveal that there are common themes. For instance, expectations, empathy, interpersonal competence, communication apprehension, among other things, are issues that come up in communication between professors and students at schools; as such, this review takes a thematic approach to discuss some of these issues.

EXPECTATIONS

As professors and students communicate at school, both parties try to meet the expectations of each other, and these expectations help in achieving the very objective of effective communication. In other words, professors and students try to communicate effectively in order to facilitate the process of teaching and learning, and eventually realize academic excellence. Scott and Tobe (1995) suggested that communicating high expectations is necessary in helping students to succeed. They essentially argued that high expectations are important for everyone. At school in particular, expectations should be coupled with a supportive climate, individualizing experiences, tailoring assignments to meet individual needs and interests,

feedback on work in progress, clear expectations of performance, and celebrating success. It is especially important to note that, "A supportive environment encourages students to keep pushing, to do better, to succeed, even if early attempts are unsuccessful. Multiple opportunities for success must exist" (Scott & Tobe, 1995, p. 38). In the same vein, Scott and Tobe (1995) argued that in creating a culture of communicating high expectations to students, there must be a corresponding larger institutional culture that communicates the same to faculty and staff members. The idea of communicating high expectations at schools for success is premised on the assumption that all students have the ability and can learn, what inhibit them is the expectations that are set for them.

Furthermore, Scott and Tobe (1995) emphasized that students who do well at school are those that see themselves as having the ability to do so. These students, therefore, show the ability and willingness to measure themselves against school values and goals, and they feel that they have good chances of success and they are treated as such. However, not all students get into college with high level of confidence in themselves; many students enter college without a positive sense of who they are and what they are capable of doing. So a good relationship between professors and students would be helpful in setting and accepting high performance expectations, where the professors believe that students are capable of achieving and they will be rewarded for success.

Similarly, as expectations are being set, the need for ongoing dialogue is important as Higgins et al. (2001) pointed out, "Discussion, clarification and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them, and develop their understandings of academic terms and appropriate practices before or as they begin to write"

(p.274). So professors set students up for success when they communicate clear expectations that are understood.

EMPATHY

Empathy is an important issue in the process of communication between professors and their students; it will be difficult to achieve effective communication between these two parties in a situation where an empathy gap exists. Civikly-Powell (1999) stressed that there are various factors that could be involved in the development of student-professor relationship. For example, openness is one factor that is helpful in creating more empathy between students and their professors. "The skill of openness involves a willingness to self-disclose, to admit to uncertainty, to give honest feedback, and to take responsibility for one's thoughts and feelings" (Civikly-Powell, 1999, p.63). This assertion clearly indicates the importance of openness as students and professors communicate in the learning environment. Where students are open, empathetic professors have the ability to understand and share the feelings of their students, and this influences the nature of their communication. Chih-Ling (2013) related, "I use a teaching method that allows me to combine practical knowledge with empathy, morality, creativity, and persistence. I also show students how to draw from empathy and compassion in their roles as leaders. Anyone can learn this method to teach any topic—and I believe business education will be profoundly improved if more professors teach their courses with heart" (p. 42).

Showing empathy in communication either from the professor or student shows the receiver of the message that he or she is being understood and felt for whatever his or her situation is. In other words, the person who empathizes tries to feel the situation or reality of another, and this feeling is genuinely expressed in the communication process. So as professors and students empathize with each other, it becomes easier to establish more understanding.

INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE

Interpersonal competence is the ability to choose a type of communication that is most effective in a given situation. This competency essentially empowers professors and students to achieve their goals in communication, because they would use a way that is the most suitable at any given time. For instance, in a study about "Technology and Teaching," Legg and Wilson (2009) found that, "A positive welcoming e-mail sent before the first day of school significantly enhanced student motivation, attitude toward the instructor, and perceptions of the course" (p. 209). This finding is believable because it means that the professor, in this case, is building a communicative relationship with his or her students sooner in the process of teaching and learning; it serves as a good preparation before meeting face to face.

Interpersonal competence encompasses various aspects of interpersonal relationship between professors and their students. Mottet et al. (2004) found that:

> One remedy for the disengagement of students from engagement with their teachers may be to encourage those teachers to produce more frequent and more emphatic verbal messages expressing such themes as personal recognition of students, humor, closeness or inclusiveness with students, self-disclosure, willingness to communicate, responsiveness, and caring or appreciation of their students. (p. 121)

Using humor in particular is one thing that has been argued as a mean of creating a relaxed environment where professors and students can communicate effectively. Civikly-Powell (1999) suggested, "Another relational communication experience is the teacher's use of humor. Though we have little evidence to suggest that humor is a causal agent in students' retention of information, students consistently report finding their classes a more enjoyable learning experience when humor is used" (p. 63). It is crystal clear from the above studies that

interpersonal competence from the side of the professors or students must involve the use of different appropriate means in order to communicate effectively. These means of communication could be verbal or computer-mediated, but either way, recognizing each other as persons would be instrumental in communicating well. Humor is particularly a mean to cement interpersonal relationships, and relationship between professors and their students is no exception.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

There is empirical evidence suggesting that communication apprehension is an impediment regarding students' communication with their professors. "Our society and our teachers continue to examine the fears of communicating in a variety of contexts and ways to lessen these fears" (Civikly-Powell, 1999, p. 65). There are many students who feel rather intimidated to face their professors and effectively communicate. Martin and Martinez (2010) indicated that, "Students entering professional programs are expected to assume greater responsibility for their own learning and academic needs. However, many are not comfortable voicing questions and suggestions to faculty who will evaluate their academic progress" (p. 7). This study further explains that students' efforts to communicate effectively with their professors is a process. As students became more active participants in their learning, they develop an awareness of the difference between their learning needs and wants. Consequently, their communication, particularly recommendations for faculty, became more specific (Martin & Martinez, 2010).

Research suggests that one thing that is helpful in reducing students' communication apprehension is the idea of immediacy:

Immediacy is defined as perceived closeness and support. It includes both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that signal accessibility, interest, and involvement. Verbal

immediacy is demonstrated in expressions of unity ("we," "our") and statements of

interest, liking, support, and encouragement. Nonverbal immediacy is evidenced by

relaxed and pleasant facial expressions and gestures, smiling, leaning toward the student,

socially appropriate touch and eye contact, vocal expressiveness, and interactive

classroom seating. (Civikly-Powell, 1999, p. 63)

This assertion is a clear indication of the importance of immediacy between professors and

students as they attempt to effectively communicate.

MOTIVES

When professors fully understand the motives behind students' communication, it might

be easier for them to respond appropriately or effectively. Professors may have motives for

communicating with students, and their motives would primarily be based on efforts to help

students succeed in their academic pursuit. However, research shows that students have specific

needs that they desire to have fulfilled through communication with their instructors:

Martin et al. (1999) identified five motives college students have for communicating with

their instructors: relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic.

The relational motive represents students' attempts to develop interpersonal relationships

with their instructors. The functional motive centers on students' attempts to learn more

about the course requirements, materials, and assignments. The participatory motive

revolves around students' attempts to demonstrate they understand the course material.

The excuse-making motive considers students' attempts to explain why assignments are

incomplete or not finished. The sycophantic motive focuses on students' attempts to

make a favorable impression on the instructor. (Myers et al, 2007, p. 497)

It is understandable from the above citation that students are motivated by certain needs to communicate with their professors, and it is a fact that they would attempt to communicate effectively in order to satisfy these needs. Therefore, as professors communicate or respond to students, it would be important for them to understand the motives that drive students' communication. This understanding by the professors can be a very instrumental factor in establishing effective communication between the two parties.

FEEDBACK

One of the major pillars in the relationship between professors and their students is communicating feedback on school projects, exams, and other kinds of academic assignments. Most students are usually eager to receive feedback from their professors, especially when it has to do with passing exams. Studies indicate that students are particularly concerned about communication relating to their grades. Higgins et al. (2001) stated that, "We have heard this argument from many academic staff over the last few years: students are indifferent to tutors' feedback comments and care only about the grade. At best, they will read a response to their work only when it provides 'correct answers' for the exam" (p. 270).

Higgins et al. (2001) essentially argued that even if students read comments or assessment feedback, they do little with them. So investigations of this research indicates that, at the very least, feedback does not realize its full potential to become an integral part of the learning process. The question remains, why is this? "Our argument is that we cannot answer this question until we pay more attention to feedback as a process of communication" (Higgins et al, 2001, p. 270). This assertion is, therefore, an indication of the fact that professors and students need to be more aware of how feedback is sent, received, and interpreted. In other words, giving

and receiving feedback is part of the communication process between professors and students, and the process should be effectively done in order to produce desired results.

SOCIAL MEDIA

It is a fact that social media has increasingly become one of the most popular avenues to communicate with people nowadays. The current generation of college students in particular, are glued to social media. Hence, social media is a great tool at the disposal of professors and students for communication in higher education. Evans (2014) noted that:

Social media tools facilitate media and information sharing, collaboration and participation. This makes them obvious technologies for application to higher education. The growing base of online educational resources includes websites, videos, podcasts, blogs and wikis. The challenge for educationalists is to facilitate the connection between learners and relevant resources and to help learners make sense of those resources. (Evans, 2014, p. 903)

On the other hand, while social media—for example Twitter—can be used as a tool for facilitating communication, teaching and learning, it could as well create some issues in student and professor relationship. For instance, "The choice between making educational tweets as opposed to personal tweets should be made carefully as they have different effects on the way tutors are perceived by students" (Evans, 2014, p. 914). In essence, while social media can be so useful in the communication process between professors and their students at school, the tricky point is how to make sure that its content would not be counterproductive.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Initial efforts to gather firsthand information for this study was the creation of questionnaire. There were nine prepared open-ended questions on communication, especially on communication between professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska. However, some probing questions were asked in the process, because of responses during the interviews.

The interviews were based on convenience sampling. A total of 4 professors and 8 students were interviewed. The professors interviewed are all highly educated and well-experienced across various disciplines; they teach different courses. Some of them in particular, have been professors at Concordia University, Nebraska, for several years, and they are very familiar with the institutional culture regarding communication with students. These professors were all interviewed in their various offices.

The students interviewed included both genders. Five of them were females, representing 62.5%, while 3 of them were males, representing 37.5% of the group. Their ages range from 19 to 26. Also, these group of students included all levels of the academic spectrum: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, with various majors. Most of the interviews with these students were conducted at the school library, for convenience.

The interviews with both professors and students were all transcribed with great attention to details. The data gathered has been carefully synthesized primarily from the idea of open coding. There are common themes from the responses of professors and students, and the results from the data is presented and analyzed based on grounded theory approach.

GROUNDED THEORY

According to Creswell (2013), "Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants" (p. 83).

Understandably, grounded theory is different from many theories, particularly those that tend to focus on individual stories told by participants or emphasis on individual experiences. Instead, the intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and generate or discover a theory. So a grounded theory approach attempts to give a unified theoretical explanation. A key idea in this case, is that a theory is not readily available, but it has to be generated or "grounded" in data from participants who have experienced the process of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Furthermore, there are several major characteristics of grounded theory that might be incorporated into a research study. For instance, Creswell (2013) stated:

The researcher focuses on a process or an action that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time. Thus, a grounded theory study has "movement" or some action that the researcher is attempting to explain. A process might be "developing a general education program" or the process of "supporting faculty to become good researchers." The researcher also seeks, in the end, to develop a theory of this process or action. (Creswell, 2013, p. 85)

In short, it is important to note, among other things, that the primary form of data collection using grounded theory approach is interviewing. In this process, the researcher goes back and forth between participants, collecting and comparing data. Subsequently, the data collected is structured, analyzed, and various codings might be used, to arrive at a unified conclusion; the

aim is to come up with a theory. Although this study didn't end with a theory, most of the responses that emerged from participants (both professors and students) gravitate towards certain common themes. Therefore, the results is presented using a thematic approach from the professors' perspective and then followed by the students' perspective:

RESULTS

PROFESSORS' PERSPECTIVE

A. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The first question in this study attempted to find out—what is the participants' understanding of communication? It was important to start at this point in order to fully understand what needs to be improved. From the responses gathered, the professors believe that at a basic level, communication has to do with exchanging of messages in order to enhance interpersonal communication or relationship. One of the professors answered explicitly, "It's an exchange of messages to convey information just on a basic definitional level. Broader than that, it's what our society is founded on." In this case, communication is understood as an integral part of society, and definitely part of school which is a component of the larger society.

The professors particularly have deep understanding of communication. They see how the proper exchange of messages is instrumental to their relationship with students and also for the general progress of people. As one professor responded, "[communication] is the seminal part of the human experience. You know, without communication we don't progress, without communication we don't understand, without communication we don't advance as individuals, as a society, as a species." This response is an indication of how broad the professors' understanding of communication is.

Additionally, this study found that professors see improving communication as a way of building better relationship with their students, particularly in teaching. This fact is emphasized in the response of one professor who said, "…teaching isn't just about, is not like, you know, a hypodermic needle of information that you just inject in a student. Umm, it's about building relationships as well…" Similarly, almost all the professors stressed how effective communication would be instrumental in shaping student-professor relationships.

Furthermore, the most prevalent emphasis on improving effective communication between professors and their students is face to face communication. All the professors interviewed said that they prefer face to face communication, especially when it comes to making clarifications or addressing concerns. It is worth noting a more technical explanation of the importance and effectiveness of face to face communication as one professor said:

> If you look at umm, it's called Media Richness Theory—it's a communication theory, and face to face communication is seen as like the highest, richest form of communication because there is all the cues available. They can see you; they can hear you; you can respond immediately; it's dynamic; it's, you know, what you say to me can influence how I respond to you, the tone of voice, and that influences how I respond to you, how you respond to me. That's not there like in an email where there is a delay in time, and there is few or no nonverbals. So face to face to me is the richest form of communication.

The above assertion gives a clear explanation as to why face to face communication is agreed as the most effective. So all the professors interviewed mentioned that, as the first and best option, they would like to have face to face communication with their students, especially in situations where complex ideas or issues are involved.

B. TECHNOLOGY

Texting

From the findings of this study, professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska, communicate predominantly by face to face, using emails, and the blackboard system. However, with the technology explosion in the current generation, students are increasingly attached to more digital avenues that are handy; they are particularly glued to their cell phones. Therefore, if many students have their way, they would be communicating with their professors by texting more than anything else. But the questions remain—is texting between professors and students workable and acceptable? Would texting between professors and students promote effective communication? The answers to these questions lie in mixed feelings among professors and students. Some professors and students think that texting is fine, but others do not.

Some of the professors interviewed feel that texting is fine if students want to do so, because it is more immediate. One professor said, "I do more texting, umm it seems especially with our current generation of college students, it seems the easiest to connect with them faster." Going by this statement, this particular professor acknowledges the fact that the current generation of college students are more into technology, like texting.

Not only texting but professors understand that current college students are just attached to technology. Commenting on how to more effectively communicate with his students, a professor said, "…this is a digital group umm so using some more of, those kind of digital avenues of, you know, Blackboard is more encouraged throughout the university, so using Blackboard more effectively than I do." From the responses of the professors, they all agree that technology is indispensable in the present educational system. Nonetheless, professors seem not very much into technology usage like students. In fact some professors would not text students,

as one of them remarked, "…I know am not gonna text students, umm that isn't gonna happen. But I periodically try to check with them and say…these emails from me from blackboard, are they helpful?" So texting between professors and students is not completely practiced; even though texting is a quick and easy way of communicating, it is not entirely acceptable by all professors at Concordia University, Nebraska.

Social Media

Social media is a popular tool for communicating in the present generation. This study found that certain social media avenues—like Twitter—could be helpful in improving communication between professors and students. Social media could as well facilitate teaching and learning. However, one of the challenges of using social media is how to control its content. Certainly the content—especially profiles and postings of individuals—can influence how students would perceive their professors.

However, if social media is strictly used for learning purposes, it can have a good impact. Responding to a question on social media, among other things, a professor said, "…I think having a social media like a Twitter feed that students can follow where you post things related to various classroom materials is interesting…" As this remark points out, some of the professors recognize that there is a trend developing regarding social media usage at school, and it can be helpful if properly managed. In other words, social media can enhance effective communication at school if it is strictly used for teaching and learning.

Emails

All the professors interviewed said that email is one way of communicating with their students. Some of them explained how email communication can be effective at times. However, others pointed out that while email is popular and can be a quick way to communicate, it still has

its downside. According to the responses gathered, there are mixed views as to whether email is one of the most effective ways for professors and students to communicate. The emphasis is that emails can be helpful in effective student-professor communication when there is quick response and clarity of messages being exchanged. But this is not always the case.

It is interesting to note that some students would not even respond to emails from their professors. This behavior poses challenges as one professor said, "It's also frustrating because I try to be pretty responsive and umm email back pretty quickly but not everybody does. So like some students are really great and they respond really quickly and others you could send four emails and you don't get anything." Essentially, while email is seen as helpful, some professors pointed out frustrations about it. Emails will greatly help if everyone would swiftly respond.

C. GREATER USE OF OFFICE HOURS

Making greater use of office hours is another way that professors acknowledge as one way to have effective communication with their students. However, many students don't seem to make much use of this opportunity as one professor confirmed, "…students don't tend to come to office hours, and if they do poorly in a test they tend not to dig further to find out why, you know, that kind of thing." It seems that a middle ground may be helpful in student professor communication, as one professor remarked:

> I think most professors are gonna say hey, students come and talk to us more, keep the lines of communication open, come to our office hours, and they're gonna put the emphasis on the students, right! And I think most students are gonna put the emphasis on the professor and say hey, appear open and willing and friendly, and umm, you know, make your classes fun and entertaining and interesting, and let me know exactly what's expected of me; let me know what I need to be doing exactly, that kind of thing.

This above points suggest that instead of putting emphasis on one side, both parties need to be more willing and flexible to communicate in various ways and have meetings based on mutual effort. So the professors' office hours are good times for students and professors to communicate effectively based on shared responsibility to make things work.

D. TIMELY NOTIFICATIONS

In order to promote effective communication, most of the professors stressed that it would be very helpful if all students would give timely notification to their professors about absence. In other words, students should make sure that they properly communicate to their professors whenever they would be absent from school. Doing so will enhance effective communication. Responding to a question on what students should do to more effectively communicate with their professors, one professor said:

> I guess for me it's let me know what's going on. Umm, because sometimes it has nothing to do with class, it has to do with something personal that's going on. I had a student that just again kind of disappeared, dropped off the scene, with having personal issues. I was worried about him; I was worried about his well-being; I was worried about his safety, and so I was doing a lot to try to figure out, and get him to communicate.

It is clear from the above response that when students are absent from school for an extended period of time and fail to communicate, the situation can sometimes be worrisome for their professors. Therefore, in the interest of effective communication, professors are of the view that students should endeavor to communicate if absence from school is inevitable.

E. WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK UP

Most of the professors interviewed pointed out that effective communication would be improved if students show more willingness to speak up. These professors observed that there

are many instances where students tend not to speak up. Compared to other four year schools he taught at, one of the professors mentioned, "...students at Concordia seem to be a little bit more hesitant to share their opinions on things. In many situations they try to—I've had many instances people just trying to, you know, they don't wanna, they're less willing to stand up for something—more willing to just kind of take the cautious approach…" The professors advised that this attitude of some of the students needs to change in order to have more effective communication in place.

Similarly, another professors made remarks about the same subject and he said, "…so I think the big thing for me is just having earlier communication in any uncertainties or anything that need clarification or more information, things like that, and just being umm, not being afraid to speak up, and ask questions…" This remark further points to the fact that students need to be more willing or be more confident to speak up instead of being silent at the expense of effective communication with their professors. This situation is referred to by almost all the professors interviewed. One of the professors also alluded to the same thing and remarked, "So for me coming to an environment where people may be unsure, they lack that confidence, you know, it can be—troubling at times." This professor, however, added that as an instructor it gives him the opportunity to help build the confidence that is needed for students to be willing to speak up.

In addition, one professor indicated that students need to understand that in communicating with their professors, "…at the end of the day it's going to be a conversation; it's going to be a dialogue or in both ways." So students need to feel more comfortable to speak up.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

A. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Just like in the case of the professors, the first question in this study attempted to find out what the students' understanding of communication is. The reason for this initial question was to establish what needs to be improved in the first place. It is worth noting that both professors and students have similar understanding of what communication means, and their understanding largely points to interpersonal communication. For example, one freshman responded, "My understanding of communication is talking to someone, being able to communicate with them face to face or via email or messaging as a way to communicate, and communication takes two people not just one…" Similarly, another sophomore said, "it's how we interact with one another, how we send messages and receive them, and I don't think it's just verbal. I think it happens nonverbally, umm, I mean, also in the digital age—technology is used, if that makes sense too." According to these statements, students understand that communication involves exchanging of messages which could be done in various ways.

In the same vein, students see building relationships with their professors as a by-product of communication. One senior student said, "I believe that communication is the interaction and umm, building of relationships and understanding between two parties." Clearly, almost all the students interviewed acknowledge that they can build better relationships with their professors by communicating effectively. They also understand that the same is true for building relationships among themselves; in other words, communicating effectively with a colleague or group will enhance relationship building. A freshman said, "Communication is multiple people, whether it's anything from two to dozens or hundreds being able to confer ideas or worries or concerns to one another." This response as well borders on interpersonal relationship.

As part of interpersonal communication or interaction, the students also emphasized face to face communication as the most effective way of communicating with their professors. Almost all the students interviewed said that they prefer face to face communication as a first option. A sophomore said, "…the way that I like to communicate with someone is face to face because it gives me the opportunity to express myself better and understand their feedback that they're giving me." Consistent with this response, a senior student also said, "I personally like communicating with other people one on one, so umm just being for example, how we are right now, sitting down having a drink…just sitting down relaxing, being able to take our time and umm make sure that we understand each other and have effective communication." Going by the responses of the students, they see establishing good interpersonal relationship with their professors as one of the best ways of improving effective communication.

B. TECHNOLOGY

Texting

This study found that students communicate with their professors at Concordia University, Nebraska, mainly by face to face, using emails, and the blackboard system (a technology system encouraged throughout the university to enhance teaching and learning efforts). Though these methods of communication are working, students are much more attached to their cell phones than any other technology, and they enjoy texting each other. However, in communicating with their professors, texting is limited. That is, some professors do not mind sending or receiving text messages from their students, and they do so. But this practice is not across the board, because some professors would not engage in texting with their students. Therefore, there is no uniformity in texting between students and their professors.

However, from the findings of this study, many students would be happy to be able to access all their professors by texting, and they believe that it would enhance effective communication. Responding to a question about her favorite way of communicating, a freshman said, "I like call or text because am always on my phone." This statement is true for many students. Another junior student alluded:

> I don't check my emails all the times, so sometimes I'll go to class, and I'll find out that, oh! Class got cancelled so I didn't check my email in the morning. So I feel like it's a very good way for students to communicate with professors. I don't think it's always the best way for professors to communicate with students though.

As the student tries to explain above, it is a fact that not all students check their emails regularly and they sometimes receive information from their professors at a later time. But most of the students would receive information immediately if it is sent via texting. Texting is just more immediate for many students and they like it. A freshman said, "…I like texting and calling because you know we're in a world like—that is more working on technology, technology is good." Just like this freshman stressed, many students are of the same view, they like texting and they are more likely to respond to a text message quickly as opposed to an email. Almost all students are glued to their cell phones and hardly would a text message sent to them escape their view. One freshman who really supports the idea of texting remarked:

> I know a lot of teachers give umm their cell phone numbers to kids, and it would be nice if all teachers would do that because it's an easier way to communicate because once you see a message on your phone, you are more prone to answer a message than email. So I think that would be cool.

With many students, texting is just an easier way of communicating, and that's what they prefer.

Compared to the professors, students seem to like technology more. In fact, a freshman mentioned, "…some teachers don't really use technology that much…" But again, it is not necessarily all the teachers or professors. It appears though, that students send text to their professors depending on the relationship established. As one freshman put it, "I know some of my teachers, sometimes I text them because you know I actually have a good relationship with some of my professors…" So the type of relationship seem to play a part on whether a student would text a professor, but at the same time, professors may just text in the interest of speed.

Social Media

Social media is another avenue of communication that is now part and parcel of students' lives. It is hard to meet a student who does not participate in one kind of social media site or the other. Many students are particularly engaged in Facebook and other social media. This study found that using social media is a potential way of improving effective communication between professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska. The study specifically found that social media is a growing trend that can be especially utilized to help in teaching and learning. For example, Twitter in particular, is one social media that professors and students see as a great tool that can be used to share information.

Emails

All the students interviewed mentioned that email can be one effective way of communicating with their professors. They have all used email to communicate at one time or another. Some students mentioned that emails can be effective in some instances. However, others pointed out that while email is popular and can be a quick way to communicate, it is not always the best. In essence, according to the responses gathered, there are different views as to

whether email is an effective way for professors and students to communicate. On the credit side, email seems to work for some students who use it as a frequent way to communicate with their professors. Commenting on how she specifically communicates with her professors, a junior student said, "I—lot of the times will send them an email but I also talk to them before or after class just whenever I find time. Umm, am not one, where I go to their office unless if I absolutely have to." Similarly, another freshman responded, "…the communication works, it works well umm they normally are pretty quick to respond if you do emails."

On the other hand, some of the students emphasized the downside of emails, as one freshman put it, "Yeah! Some professors will not answer until class the next day and by that time it's too late, and you have to figure out what to do about this problem or umm figure out the question on your own, and sometimes you get it wrong because they didn't answer…" Going by this response, it is understandable that the challenges about emails has to do with lapse in time. Therefore, many of the students interviewed agreed that emails can be helpful in effective communication if both parties would respond swiftly.

C. BETTER USAGE OF BLACKBOARD

Blackboard is one of the most encouraged and popular digital avenues that professors and students use to communicate at Concordia University, Nebraska. It is especially used by professors to upload a lot of information about courses and other learning materials. For better understanding, Blackboard is a sophisticated system with various things inbuilt to facilitate teaching and learning. It is also used by many professors for announcements to their students who may be registered in different courses or classes. Essentially, Blackboard is very helpful in the learning and communication process between professors and their students. However, Blackboard has its shortcomings according to students' responses. One senior student opined:

I think that the grade system that is built into Blackboard that allows students to access their grades at will is helpful, but I think the cons outweigh the pros of that system. It's overly complex, it takes students a lot of time to learn how to use the system and navigate it and professors use the system in such a—unstandardized way, that it's problematic when students simply want to shift courses on that system. So I think one thing professors could do if they keep that system, is make how courses are structured in Blackboard more standardized.

From the above assertion, students acknowledge that the Blackboard system is useful to some extent, but at the same time, it also poses some challenges that needs to be addressed. Making sure that structuring of courses are more standardized in the system is a great idea that would help effective communication between professors and students. In other words, some students feel that while the Blackboard system is a great tool, it is necessary to improve the way it is used in order to promote more effective communication.

D. GIVING REMINDERS

From the responses of the students interviewed, reminders from professors about due dates of assignments, projects, and things like that, was repeatedly mentioned by students as helpful and appreciated. Majority of the students mentioned that almost all professors provide detailed course guides with due dates of assignments; however, the students stressed the need for reminders. Most of them suggested that thoroughly going through a course guide and remembering all its content can be challenging as teaching and learning progresses.

One sophomore said, "…everything is on the syllabus submitted to the student to know within the syllabus. But it's always appreciated when a professor is just like—hey, remember that next week we have this due…" Commenting on the same thing, a senior student

emphasized, "Most professors I think could send more emails reminding students of assignments umm making sure that students have knowledge of what is due in class and when it is due, and be willing to communicate that through multiple methods be it umm digitally, on paper or in person." The responses of the students, just like this senior said, also confirm that sending reminders—particularly in different ways—would be very helpful to students.

The point made by the above senior student can be better understood from the remarks of another junior student who said, "If I don't know something to do at a certain time or if I don't know that we have these specific guidelines, if it's just stated, I need them to like say it to the class, umm say it out loud…" This student is emphasizing that it is not only enough for professors to write guidelines on paper but going the extra mile to make verbal reminders would be very helpful. Although it may not be the easiest for all professors to be reminding students of things that are due, some professors did mention the importance of reminders. In any case, almost all the students are of the opinion that reminders are instrumental in ensuring effective communication.

TIMELY FEEDBACK

Another thing that this study found is the challenges in communicating feedback. Some of the students interviewed expressed the importance of receiving timely feedback from their professors. They indicated that it would make a big difference, a junior student related:

> I would say one thing that I found in all my classes is I don't get feedback right away or if I do it's not always explained to me as to why a grade is this way or why that happened, umm so if they are able to be more efficient like giving me back my grades and really focusing on each, you know—hey this is what you need to work on… I would really love to know like if am not doing something, if I can do something better that'll

help me improve like, that's a great thing to know so if they're able to more personalize

that and really like be able to tell each student that, get feedback on that, I think that

would be fantastic!

Expressing similar sentiments, another freshman said, "…I think that it would be really helpful if

everybody would effectively communicate about what grades you have in the class, and where

you are standing because sometimes you don't know your grades and they're not communicating

with you about how you're doing in the class until too late." According to this response, this

student is concerned about the need for receiving timely feedback on grades.

On the other hand, responses from some students are diametrically opposite to the above.

Some students expressed how effective their professors are in communicating feedback. Like

one junior confirmed, "I like that they are definitely—they stress how open they are, available,

and that they check their emails as often as they can, and I can get a pretty quick response if I

send them an email, umm either within the same day or sometimes within the same couple of

hours." So there are dissenting views among students about feedback. While some students feel

that they get quick feedback from their professors, others feel that it could be better. The fact

remains that students are usually so eager to get feedback from their professors particularly when

it has to do with their grades. In short, this study found that effective communication between

students and professors would be enhanced if feedback is not delayed.

E. CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS

Some of the students interviewed in this study expressed concern about the level of

clarity in terms of what their professors expect. In other words, the students want all their

professors to be very clear in communicating expectations for a class, a project, or any kind of

assignment. About communicating with her professors, a junior student stressed that what she

dislikes is any situation, "…when expectations aren't clearly stated." Another freshman said, "I think to more effectively communicate with them, umm I think professors should make clear at the beginning of the courses what they want out of the students, what they expect from them to communicate…" However, many professors do very well in this respect, and student testimonials are in line with this fact, as one sophomore put it, "I think they do a great job. Professors communicate well, I think they're trained to do that, so I don't have an issue when I communicate with them, I usually pretty much understand what they mean."

Additionally, this study found that many students are just preoccupied with expectations that have to do with their grades. Responding on what she is particular about in effectively communicating with her professors, a freshman said, "Mostly the grades!" In this connection, some professors also mentioned that students should not necessarily be only concerned about expectations on grades; instead, students should be willing to learn much more than getting a mere grade. Either way, many students are of the opinion that clarifying expectations would greatly improve effective communication between students and professors.

F. AVOIDING INTIMIDATION

This study found that there are some students who feel intimidated in the process of communicating with their professors. These students particularly find it so challenging to directly talk to their professors—by face to face. Interestingly, the professors too realize this fact; they noticed that some students have uneasy feeling in talking to them directly, especially about concerns. A sophomore mentioned, "I do know umm on behalf of other students that it's, they're a bit intimidated to go and talk to their professors about things. Umm, they feel like they can't talk to their professors." Another junior student explained how she addresses concerns with her professors, and she revealed, "Sometimes it's better for me when I have a concern to email,

umm, just because I know that then I'll say everything that I want to say, and not you know, my emotions or things like that get in the way when am talking to them." This statement is a typical example of how some students feel when they have to communicate concerns or pursue other issues with their professors. Therefore, making joint efforts to avoid intimidation is one way of improving effective communication between professors and students.

G. ADJUSTING TO THE PRESENT GENERATION

From the information gathered in this study, it seems that the generational difference between some professors and their students—to some extent—affects the communication process. Students suggested that some professors will better communicate if they can connect well with the realities of the present generation. For instance, a junior student remarked, "There is a few I think that could try and like—may be it's kind of like a generational gap, they could try and like may be get more into the, get into more like our generation type thinking versus umm like, this is how it was like when I went to school, and not that way anymore obviously."

Actually, many professors fully understand the trend in communication with the current generation of college students, and making sure that teaching styles and communication methods are in tune with present realities will enhance more effective communication.

DISCUSSION / IMPLICATION

This study first and foremost ascertained the understanding of communication from the perspectives of professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska. It established what effective communication means within this social group. This study found that the participants have a common understanding that communication involves some form of exchanging messages, which means that both parties are willing to either send or receive messages. So this willingness provides a fertile ground for improving effective communication.

In addition, this study explored how communication within professors and students can shape their relationship. Interestingly, the findings of this study indicate the conviction of both parties as effective communication being a way to build good interpersonal relationship. In other words, both professors and students see their communication process as a mean to better shape their relationship. This understanding of communication should be strengthened within the parties, and it boils down to interpersonal competence. This proposition is consistent with Legg and Wilson (2009) about student professor relationship. In essence, professors and students should try to build their interpersonal relationship, and in doing so, they will be improving effective communication.

Furthermore, this study found that almost all the professors and students interviewed agreed on face to face communication as the most effective. They believe that face to face communication is particularly effective in addressing concerns and establishing better understanding. This means that professors and students should make greater efforts to create opportunities for face to face communication. It means that professors and students should be more willing to meet and talk about issues. Also more flexibility should be exercised by both parties regarding where to meet. It should not have to always be at one place.

This study also found mixed feelings among professors and students on the use of technology. For instance, both parties agreed that emails can sometimes be effective. However, there are times when emails create limitations and frustrations in the communication process. As one professor mentioned, among other things, that, "…email, while it's really convenient and instantaneous, it's hard to use to convey anything too complex…" Also, the lapse in time in some instances has been said to be problematic. Therefore, professors and students should be very selective in the kind of information that they will communicate using technology. In the

case of emails, one solution is to set a standard maximum time period within which both parties have to respond, other things being equal.

Another thing that this study found is that, students do not tend to go for their professors' office hours. It is interesting that both parties acknowledge that face to face communication is the most effective; yet, students in particular do not make the best use of the opportunity of office hours which presents itself. This reality needs to be reversed in the interest of effective communication. Students should be more willing to go for office hours.

On a different note, the findings of this study suggest that professors should be reminding students about relevant information or things that are due. Students admitted that though all information regarding due dates is usually provided by professors on syllabi; however, students pointed out that reminders are very helpful. This means that professors should endeavor to be reminding students, and be willing to do so in multiple ways, as suggested by one senior student.

This study as well found that some students feel intimidated in communicating with their professors face to face; it means that they will rather avoid meeting their professors for talking on issues if they can. This finding is in line with previous studies (Civikly-Powell, 1999; Martin & Martinez, 2010) that expounded on communication apprehension. The implication of this reality is that students may avoid going to talk to their professors when important things are actually at stake. So professors should try as much as they can to allay the fears of students about meeting them for conversation on relevant issues. Additionally, professors should be more proactive in creating activities in the classroom or situations where several ice breakers are used to make students feel more comfortable in talking to them.

The Blackboard system is one of the most encouraged for online communication between professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska. It is a helpful system for teaching

and learning. However, this study discovered that Blackboard poses some challenges for students, particularly for newer students. The major concern reported is that the Blackboard system is quite complex, and information uploaded on it is not standardized. Therefore, efforts should be made for Blackboard to be used in a better way, so that it will be easier for students to navigate the system.

This study found that professors and students communicate in a variety of ways. Specifically, they communicate by face to face and by using technology. However, one aspect of technology that is not uniformly used between professors and students is texting. While some professors are fine with texting back and forth with their students, other professors would not do so. The implication of this inconsistency in communication is that, students may perceive their professors differently, in terms of who does texting and who would not. The reality though is that current trend in communication at times compel professors and students to do texting. It is important for faculty and students to have a common ground in order to ensure uniformity in texting between professors and students. One option is to convince all professors to give out their cell phone numbers to students and allow them to text if they wish, and late night texting be prohibited except in a case of emergency.

As part of the findings of this study, students are found to be preoccupied with receiving communication on expectations particularly about their grades, as opposed to gaining solid knowledge. While grades are important too from the professors' view point; however, professors expect students to be willing to demonstrate more interest in learning without focusing only on grades. This finding suggest that professors and students need to work together to establish the understanding that schooling should not only be about grades; the communication and interaction between them should reflect this idea. Additionally, if efforts are not done to make this

clarification, the implication is that students will continue to be thinking about grades as everything and behave as such. Therefore, the finding of this study, in this case, is in line with the study of (Scott & Tobe, 1995; Higgins et al, 2001), which proposed that setting high expectations for students will help them succeed. If students believe that they are high achievers and they work as such, the situation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Communicating feedback on performance is another factor that this study explored as to how it works between professors and students, at Concordia University, Nebraska, in particular. This study found that students are so eager about receiving timely feedback on their performance. At the same time, professors are also eager to let their students know what they need to improve on. The question now is the speed and manner with which feedback would be delivered. This study discovered that students are usually not at ease when feedback is delayed. So professors should do as much as they can to expedite the process of giving feedback to their students; this will promote effective communication about students' performance. However, it is rather sad to note that Higgins et al. (2001) suggested that students will read a response to their work only when it provides 'correct answers' for the exam. This student behavior should be changed in order for them to become better learners and subsequent intellectuals.

This study also found that communication at higher educational institutions, between professors and students in particular, is increasingly gravitating towards social media. However, the difficulty in controlling what is posted on social media remains a challenge. Nonetheless, it is obvious that social media can be helpful in teaching and learning, as well as in communication. Evans (2014), particularly emphasized the importance of social media in higher education. This study specifically recommends that professors at Concordia University, Nebraska, consider using Twitter as part of tools to share academic information with their students. This will allow even

alumni to continue connecting, sharing information, and learning from their professors. It will be interesting if some professors would volunteer as pioneers to incorporate this type of communication in the Concordia experience.

Another thing that this study contributes is findings on the generational gap between some professors and their students at Concordia University, Nebraska. This study found that some students are concerned about the need for some of their professors to be able to connect better with the current generation of college students. This point is necessary to consider because of the striking differences between teaching and learning in the present generation compared to the past. The implication for not considering this fact is that, older professors may be trying to communicate with their students using methods and approaches that are entombed in nostalgia; consequently, it will be challenging to have effective communication in place.

To sum up, this study made significant findings on how to improve effective communication between professors and students at Concordia University, Nebraska. It provides valuable information from previous studies, coupled with current findings, all grounded in common and pertinent themes that are vital for effective communication. Precise recommendations are offered below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Communication should be encouraged between students and their professors; they have a common understanding of what it means.

2. Students and professors should be willing to communicate effectively in order to build better interpersonal relationship.

3. Professors and students should be willing to create more time for face to face communication; it is the most effective.

4. Professors and students should not use technology, like email, to communicate complex information; face to face should be used instead.

5. There should be an agreed maximum time period for both professors and students to respond to school emails, all things being equal, in order to save each other from frustration.

6. Students should make sure that they avoid being absent from school—especially for an extended period of time—without notifying their professors.

7. Students should be more willing to go for their professors' office hours.

8. Professors should endeavor to be available during their set office hours.

9. Professors should endeavor to be reminding students about tests, projects, assignments, or anything that is due; moreover, professors should be willing to communicate such information through multiple ways.

10. Students should be more willing to speak up.

11. If a professor noticed that a particular student feels intimidated to talk to him or her, the professor should try to invite the student and help him or her to overcome that feeling.

12. More activities should be done in class that will encourage students to be comfortable in talking to their professors.

13. Humor should be used in the communication process between professors and students.

14. Structuring of courses in the Blackboard system should be more standardized.

15. Faculty and students should have a common ground that will promote consistency in texting between professors and their students.

16. The school could take initiative to convince all professors to give out their cell phone numbers to students and allow them to text if they wish; however, texting professors at late night should be prohibited except in a case of emergency.

17. The school could also provide cell phones to professors exclusively for texting with their students, if that's feasible.

18. Professors should be very clear in communicating their expectations to students

19. Professors should endeavor to expedite giving feedback to their students, especially, information relating to academic performance.

20. Students should be willing to read and productively utilize feedback from professors.

21. Professors should consider using social media like Twitter; this will help communication.

22. Students and professors with considerable generational gap should try to communicate better, based on compelling realities of the current educational system.

23. Professors should try to understand students' motives for communicating.

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