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Exploring Mindsight via Email Communication in Learning Environment

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Abstract: This paper explores mindsight in virtual communication, examining problems people face while communicating in virtual spaces with a focusing on email communication. Many have documented the problems encountered when they are communicating with others on email. Face to face communication includes facial and interpersonal clues that enhances interaction. Other problems people face include misunderstanding in communication and information overload. These problems disrupt workflow, and can cause stress among workers, which in turn reduces job satisfaction and production. These problems are common in academic world, especially among people found in learning environment, who have to use email communicate continuously because of the nature of their job and activities. It is believed that every learning environment utilizes one form of email communication or the other on several levels and for different purposes. Scholars have put forward suggested technical solutions that are mainly software and policy inclined. This paper attempts to understand the human in-depth factors to the problem. Data collection for the study commenced by sending questionnaires to students to assess the levels of their communication in relation to their environment, personal tendencies, being understood and understanding others during email communication etc. Evidence in the data analysis suggested that most of the students found it difficult to retain attention while doing their emails and they were unable to understand how others felt. It was also discovered that people do not necessarily seek to be understood when they send email communication. Based on the findings, it was concluded, that an intervention, such as mindsight, might enable people to retain attention with some level of personal and environmental awareness that might enhance their ability to understand their feelings and that of others while communicating on email. Therefore, it is recommended that a more rigorous application of mindsight exercise should be explored by students who engage in virtual communication in learning environments.

Keywords: virtual communication, learning environment, email communication, mindsight, reflective practice

1. Background

Email communication is popularly used for business and personal communication despite the existence of other forms of communication technology, such as mobile applications, social media and other types of electronic communication (Mujtaba 2017). Email has been in existence for a couple of decades now and it gives individuals the privilege of having independent space and time to do work (Sobotta 2016). It also provide individuals with the opportunity to interact and share work together (Brown et al. 2016). It is mostly straightforward to use and it gives rapid means of information exchange in organizations and around the globe (Soucek and Moser 2010; Brown et al. 2016).

However, there are challenges that come along with the use of email communication that cannot be ignored (Browns et al. 2016), the increased use of email communication has seen the multiplication of emails received by individuals. An average email user receives 40 to 50 emails in a day, while others receive hundreds of emails per day. A significant amount of users' time is used in sorting out email communication (Mujtaba 2017). Having to deal with these tasks causes more difficulties and scholars have explored and addressed the phenomena.

1.1 Email communication issues

Other problems of email communication include the absence of interpersonal clues (Morgan et al. 2014; Sampson et al. 2016), these hints are present in face to face communication. People gain more contextual indications through interpersonal interactions and body language in face to face communication. Meaning and depth are gained because, the receiver is able to decode the feelings of the sender (Morgan et al. 2014).These signs are missing in electronic communication, because replies are delayed and with a lack of face to face interaction, receivers are often not being able to see physical hints which leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In addition, people in a face-to-face communication have the opportunity to interact and develop a shared understanding about the processes they need to undertake to achieve their shared goals. However, the case with electronic communication, is that, the frequency of interaction is limited and as such the capacity to develop a shared knowledge of processes is distorted due to distance and time differences and

as such having a shared knowledge and feeling connected to one another becomes a problem (Morgan et al. 2014).

Another challenge with email communication is information overload, with the dependence on email communication, employees have to deal with a rapid increase in the volume of emails they receive. It has been reported that information overload is affecting workers (Soucek and Moser 2010; Hanrahan et al. 2014; Sobotta 2016). Information overload increases the levels of stress among workers as they receive great amount of emails due to their work (Jerejian et al. 2013; Sobotta 2016). This occurs when individuals receive information that is beyond their processing ability, it happens when there is a distribution of countless messages that an individual is able to cope with, and this disrupts workflow (Soucek and Moser 2010). It is also described as an excessive supply of information that overwhelms the receiver (Sumecki et al. 2011) this reduces the quality of communication (Gupta et al. 2016), for example, employees could lose course of their workflow due to the mixtures of emails that need their attention. This mean that employees can also lose concentration on work because of constant inflow of emails interruption, making them to lose direction on their communication (Soucek and Moser 2010; Hanrahan et al. 2014). Similarly, having many unnecessary messages reduces people's effectiveness in communication as they have to separate important from less important messages (Gupta et al. 2016). This ultimately cumulates to job dissatisfaction and acute psychological problems in employees (Soucek and Moser 2010) that affects wellbeing (Hanrahan et al. 2014).

For example, a research carried out by Jerejian, Reid et al. (2013) on university faculty members found out that, academic staff members had high level of burnout because of the high volume of emails they had to encounter. This happens because they depend on email communication as part of their work, they use email communication both in and out of working hours to meet up with the demands of their work. The reason is that, teaching professionals are expected to be accessible at all times by their students and also because they conduct researches all over the world, in different time zones. That is the reason they have to be approachable anytime, this creates a great deal of stress and workload. The above study was based on the premise obtained from Hole's (2008) research, where he reported that the stress faculty members experience from email communication is partly due to overload from high volumes of email, emails that have not been read and the need to take decisions because of emails received and anticipated responses from email communication were the main source of stress triggers.

These cumulate to deficient communication, this occurs because of an overflow of emails and that makes people to often think that email communication is impromptu, so they consider it as an informal method of communication compared to other business printed letters. This casual disposition toward email affects the quality of messages written so that most times, they are often sketchy and inconclusive without sufficient information for the reader to take decision to act upon and that causes misunderstanding. It leads to ambiguity, where rules of communication, contexts and societal clues are misplaced as a result of obscure messages, and then leaves a gab in communication. So that the receiver is unable to take the desired action that the sender expect within a particular period (Soucek and Moser 2010).

1.2 Methods of reducing the stress of email communication

Some of the authors above, put forward suggestions on how people interact with emails and gave solutions to overcome stress and overload issues. Soucek and Moser (2010) suggested that, people should be taught how to apply certain techniques that would enable them to manage their emails. This include processes that decrease the number of messages an individual receives, which makes a great difference. Some organizations provide intervention in the form messaging filters that helps to separate important emails from unrequested emails. While others draft guidelines on how a company's emails should be utilized. The same authors tried to address email information overload in their research by providing ways of increasing people's capability to processing information. They provided training in relation to improving communication proficiency that enable people manage great volumes of email communication and provided ways of enhancing the flow of their work and to also improve email articulateness. Additionally, Jerejian et al. (2013) also suggested that, people should embrace the email management techniques of filtering and filling by people manually and that emails should be monitored constantly.

These processes seemed to be successful measures because; it was reported later by Gupta et al. (2016) that reducing the number of emails employees receive in an organization improves their work quality and it reduces

their levels of stress. The researchers claimed that, older publications tend to focus on the recipient of email issues. Therefore, Gupta et al. (2016) focused their research on addressing the senders of email by a way of suggesting email optimization, where the sender will have to determine if the email they are about to send is more or less important to the receiver and then suggested to tag emails according to priorities.

Our own research addresses cognitive problems, it is assumed that, if people thought carefully about the necessity of a message, and then there will be less emails in circulation. Levy (2016) suggested that emails should be read from the receiver's perspective. He claimed that individuals are constantly email checking, and proposed that emails should be done at set times in a day, in order to harness better attention from the individual. He added that individuals should fit technologies that will automatically empty their inboxes at the end of the day.

This paper puts forward the investigation that attempts to explore the non-technical issues the receivers of emails encounter and possibly proposes an intervention that is mindsight driven that will enable people to connect and execute emails with the right focus and attention. Therefore, Mindsight is the ability to perceive opinions and distinguishing them as activities of the mind. In addition, having the capacity to appreciate or note the thoughts of others, in order to genuinely comprehend their views, enables responses to be compassionate and effective. This help individuals to direct their feelings and thoughts and not to be driven by them, and are then able to balance their emotions (Ogwu et al. 2016).

2. Method

The study is a preliminary research situated among undergraduate engineering students in a learning university environment who relied on email communication for their studies. The email communication of the students were examined by giving them a mindsight baseline questionnaire to complete in order to assess their levels of affective communication using email. The blueprint of the research represented by figure 1 shows the plan of activities that was performed.
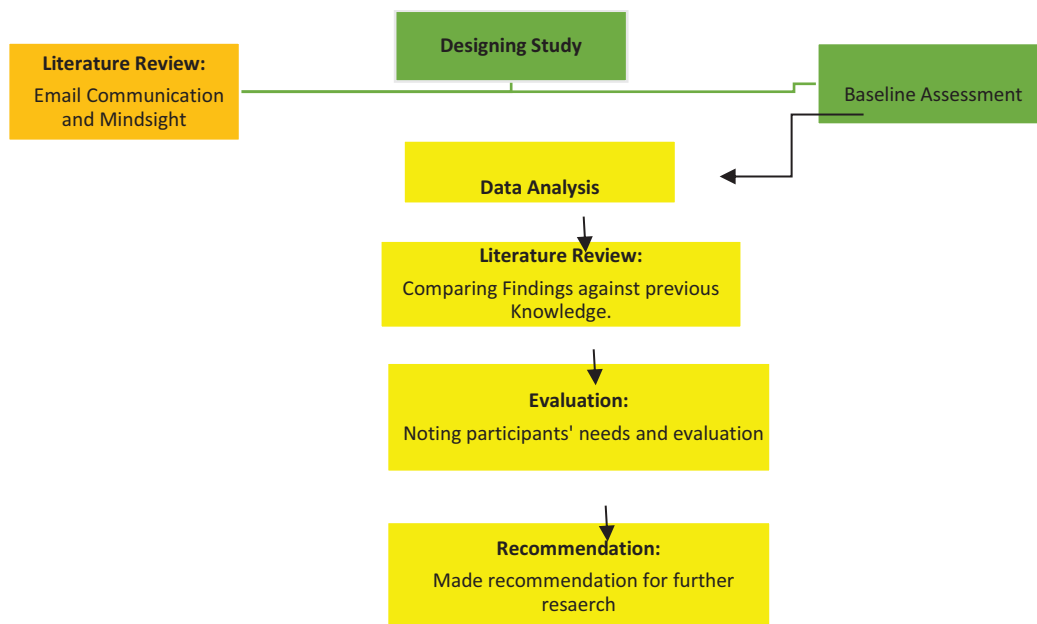

Figure 1: The plan of activities

A simple spreadsheet and thematic analysis were employed to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaires. Many rounds of reading the completed questionnaire was performed to capture emerging themes. First the responses were read several times to understand and capture clues and meanings, then the emerging themes and statements where underlined. Then the underlined sentences and themes where categorised according to what, how and why things happened. These where later represented on tables and maps, to sort out relationships. Thereafter a narration of the categorizations were used to present the data in a narrative format for anybody to understand. Elliott (2005) claims that narrative analysis is a discourse that have a sequential order that is clear which connects events in a meaningful way for a distinct audience; therefore the analysis of the study provides an insight into the impact of the exercise on the students.

3. Implications

It was deducted based on the evidences presented at the end of the study that, first the environment used for virtual communication has an effect on the quality of communication. It is important therefore; to have an environment that is void of noise and distractions in order to communicate effectively, because respondents tend to be distracted in noisy environment. They find that some activities within an environment was strong enough to pull them away from their email while communicating. There is therefore need to enable people strengthen their attention and awareness levels or techniques. Being aware of communication without the environment and verse vasa is a problem that affects the communication process and the communicator. Additionally, respondents were aware of their bodily sensations pointing to the fact that email communication had the tendency of triggering uncomfortable bodily sensation. The body sensations show the negative effect email communication poses to individuals if not properly managed to enhance the reason why they are using email communication in the first place. It seems email communication, has the potential of affecting the mind and body. Therefore, there is need to teach people that some sensations and emotions come from the workings of the mind which comes as a form of reaction to things, hence people should understand and not be carried away by such sensations and feelings, but to acknowledge and let go (Siegel 2010). Some form of awareness practises can be developed for individuals through mindsight that might integrate people's state of awareness of mind, body and emotions in order to achieve some sate of equilibrium.

Secondly, making others to understand an email is a direct function of going straight to the point. This sends a clear message and the receiver is able to respond accordingly; that was the view of some participants. It was discovered that for someone to get others to understand them, then the person has to go straight to the point without including unnecessary details that will confuse others and at the same time making some effort to understand the person they are communicating with. This can be achieved by focusing on what the person is saying so as to understand them. This kind of approach and disposition seemed to generate positive results among the participants. Other ways participants explained how to be understood, was by structuring communication in ways that ensured readers understood. First, they only send what was relevant for the communication and then ensured that their thoughts were outlined properly for the other person to understand. It was concluded that such participants have unique connection with themselves. Such connections with self brings out thoughts and ideas that would enable others to understand them. Others thought that getting some understanding from recipients involves giving explanations and words, and also focusing on the main deal of what is important. It can be claimed that an effective communication happens when an individual understands others and others understand them by giving clear information and correct answer to the person they are communicating with and they also getting an expected response from the receiver.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study concluded that most people do not have the ability to focus attention on email communication in an environment that is noisy and full of distractions. Evidence that supported this conclusion was derived from comments from participants on attention, awareness, understanding and getting understood. In addition, respondents are overly distracted by their environment and situations; therefore, it is important to suggest a further study that would include an exercise that would enable people to integrate their attention, awareness and interpersonal relationships while communicating on email. The study used a sample of eight individuals, this has given the researcher the opportunity to engage deeply with the responses and to extract both manifest and latent meaning, which may not have been possible with a large sample. The research study provided the bases for an in-depth exploration of the concept of mindsight among students. The participants did not have knowledge of mindsight at the outset and it is clear from the findings that by using mindsight interventions participants may be able to develop high levels of attention, awareness, empathy and interpersonal relationship techniques as the people communicate online. It is recommended therefore, that a more rigorous application of mindsight through an exercise should be adopted for students when they engage in virtual communication in learning environments.

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