EDITORIAL

i hope you *LIKE* it . . .

Peter Avitabile, *Contributing Editor*

OK . . . so here I am again with another item to discuss that has me concerned. A year ago, there was an e-mail pointing to an article in the *New York Times* discussing technology and the college generation. The main focus of the article was that students do not really like to read e-mail and that texting and other modes of communication are more in line with the way students interact today with smart phones, PDAs, etc, etc, etc.* And there was one faculty member who sent an e-mail around to the engineering faculty that stated:

This article may explain why e-mails to students go unread. Maybe we need to be texting? Or setup Facebook pages for our classes and have the students *like* them?

 Well . . . where do I start to explain what I think about this?

i will tell you what i think i "*LIKE*." i don't think i "*LIKE* "what is in that article.

I am an engineer.
Some may call us geeks.
But we all know we are neat geeks.

I do not LIKE texting and Facebook.
Not as a technical medium.
I do not LIKE them. Pete I am.

I do not. I do not. I will not. Pete I am.
They are not appropriate for a class.
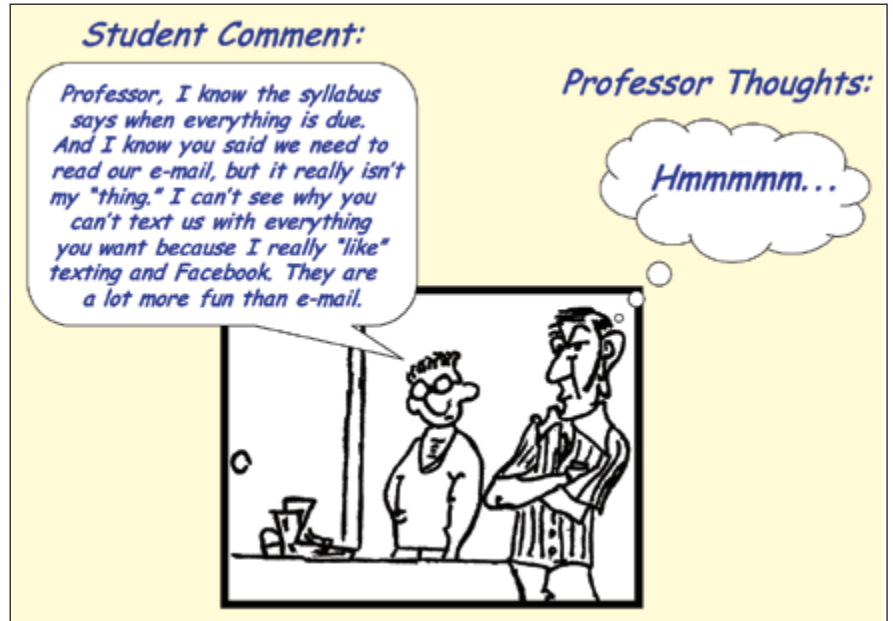*Some think I am a pain in the butt.*
(sorry it doesn't rhyme)

It is not the way to technically communicate.
e-mail is the best way I indicate.

I do not LIKE texting and Facebook.
Not as a technical medium.
I do not LIKE them. Pete I am.

Yes, we do need to set up proper communications with students, and we do need to keep them engaged. But does there ever come a time when we expect them to be able to act like grown up young professionals, like young engineers, in a profession *that they chose*? How long do we keep on trying to keep them "engaged" like I need to do with my granddaughter who is now five years old?

So let's remember that this is not K to 12, where we "require" them to take a firm regimented set of courses to build up their basic knowledge. In that environment,

*http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/fashion/technology-and-the-college-generation.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

Student Comment:

Professor, I know the syllabus says when everything is due. And I know you said we need to read our e-mail, but it really isn't my "thing." I can't see why you can't text us with everything you want because I really "like" texting and Facebook. They are a lot more fun than e-mail.

Professor Thoughts:

Hmmmmm. . .

clearly there is a need to keep them engaged and keep them focused and keep them on task because these are basic rudimentary learning steps that we all feel are necessary and required.

But come on folks . . . when we get to college this is a nonmandatory, extended-learning environment that the students chose to pursue. I am not forcing them down this path. And there is a typical way that we all communicate in this engineering environment. And, yes, e-mail is the most popular way that we do that today, whether you *like* it or not.

What would your boss do to you or say if you sent him constant text messages with intricate details on a design or proposal as a formal way of communicating and documenting a major engineering project? How do government agencies correspond with everyone? How do you receive proposal information and respond to company queries? Yes, there may be some web pages and web portals with information. Yes, there may be web interfaces for uploading solicitations and proposals. But I think the main way everyone communicates, by and large, is via e-mail.

So if anything we should definitely expose the students to this important mode of communication. We need to make them *like* it. And we also need for the students to realize that there is a certain protocol that should be followed. For instance there is a subject line that should contain information that relates to the subject of the e-mail. And for crying out loud, when you reply to a

message that has a now irrelevant subject line, change it to express the current subject of the e-mail so that the reader understands that the subject has now changed to a completely different subject matter.

And of course the text of the e-mail should have properly written sentences rather than a mish-mash of half constructed sentences. And proper identification of yourself and who you are addressing is also important.

For sure, students really need to learn how to properly address people and how to write a short e-mail with concentrated information that is well stated and detailed. This is extremely important and needs to be instilled into the student's thought process. They need to realize that they have to *like* it.

For instance, here is an e-mail I received that was almost trashed for junk because I thought someone broke into an e-mail account and I received this weird e-mail.

From: moon52peace@honky_tonk.com [On Behalf Of LindZ]
Sent: Sunday, October 06, 2013 8:59 PM
To: Avitabile, Peter
Subject: meeting
 Hi Peter i was wondering if i could find a time to meet with you sometime this week.
LindZ

I really almost junked it for trash but then did some searching and found out it was a new student trying to reach out to their advisor. Thanks LindZ. (How cute is that name!)

I am Pete. Pete I am.
I won't reply to a LOL.

No subject line does not bode well.
No Instagram or Facebook for me.
To send me a message just enter to: Pete
I do not like inappropriate spam.
I am Pete. Pete I am.

So maybe I am old (DUH, what an understatement), and maybe I should get with the times (or maybe you can't teach this old dog new tricks), and maybe, just maybe, I am right (and of course anyone who knows me, knows I will say I am right – because I am right – DUH). So maybe, just to be on the safe side, I sent out a few e-mails to a few of my recent students who graduated and are working in important engineering positions in well-known engineering companies but are still all young. And by young, I mean mostly under 30 – you know, the ones who you would expect would be thoroughly entrenched in the social media networks and all that "stuff" in which we old folks may not be entrenched. Now I wasn't worried that I could be wrong – I just wanted to find out how right I was!

Here is the message I sent:

Someone is suggesting that instead of e-mail we should interact with students with "text messaging" and Facebook pages that they can "LIKE."

My first response to the e-mail was >>>>>
R U kiddin me dude?

So . . . what do you former, now-working, students think? How does your real-world work? Somehow I don't think industry works that way, and we would be setting the students up for running into a brick wall when they have to do real work.

Basically all of them clearly stated that e-mail is the mode of operation and that students should be used to using e-mail all the time. They were afraid if we didn't do this, then there would be a cultural shock when they get to industry and don't use e-mail on a daily basis as the mode of communication.

They also had a few extra comments I want to share that I feel are useful.

One former student actually went out and found a site that tells you how to forward your e-mail (on many different e-mail platforms) to text message. So this would be useful if the student needs to receive everything in text message. But this should be up to the students to do this to make sure they receive pertinent information in the form that they most desire. (That's not this old dog's job.)

Another stressed that we also need to make sure they know how to communicate "properly" in an engineering organization with appropriate engineering style.

"*Hey man, R U there,*" isn't really appropriate. Also noted for students was that they should understand when they communicate to a higher level (maybe two or three above them) they need to be sensitive to what they write and how they write it.

A few mentioned that they actually use the old telephone to communicate.

How bizarre. (I know how to use a phone – "*Pete I am. "Hello . . . is anyone there?*")

One former student noted this:

"The issue you directly alluded to is whether you merely need to get them information to pass them along to the next class or whether you are trying to teach them life skills to be a good engineer. If you merely want to rubber stamp them along then by all means texting, Facebook, Twitter, smoke signals, etc., will all work. If you want to prepare them for a career where not answering your work e-mail means you don't last long on the other hand, you have to set the expectation that students have to check their e-mail, even if it's not blatantly stated in the syllabus."

But there were actually a few who said they use social media/smart phones to message their work associates. But here was an example of what that text message might be.

From: Bubba9523
Hey Dude – its after 5 and I am at the brew pub – where the #$%@ are you

Now I will say that is a text message I can *like* to which I replied

From: PapaPete
Hey Bubba – have Paul pour me a tall Sam's and I'll be there in a few

But "*like*" everything in this world, there is a time and place for everything, whether you *like* it or not!!!

Now to go get that brewski!!!

Ciao Amigo   S&V

The author is a professor of mechanical engineering, Structural Dynamics and Acoustics Systems Laboratory, University of Massachusetts Lowell, and he can be reached at peter_avitabile@uml.edu.