Human Expertise and Technical Communication (TC598)
Dr. Jennifer Turns
Spring 2002

Project 1 Information

In project 1, we will focus on the nature of expertise in the composing of email. This document provides a bit of background on why we will be studying this issue.

Email is a modern phenomenon that has changed the way we do business and live our lives. Email is an important form of communication in the modern electronic world. Professionals spend significant portions of their day writing and reading email. Geographically distributed employees often rely on email to collaborate on important issues. Also, email is a form of communication with unique issues. For example, email authors frequently use combinations of punctuation characters in order to express emotion within their messages.

Given such circumstances, it seems likely that there are people with what might be called "email experts" – people who possess expertise at composing emails. Such people might exhibit a fluency at using different email conventions to communicate (or avoid communicating) emotion. They might be very good at avoiding the types of miscommunications that are possible though email. They may be able to compose successful emails with high speed.

However, several sources of evidence suggest that if there is expertise associated with composing email – then that expertise may be unrecognized. For example, consider that students who are taught communication skills as part of professional programs are not regularly taught anything about composing email. Also, some research suggests that employees themselves discount the efforts required to compose email. Consider the following quote from a researcher studying the behavior of professionals:

```
In my previous ethnographic work […], I have found that designers
consistently discounted those aspects of their own work that
involved social interactions or maintenance activities such as
teaching, planning, discussion at meetings, reading and sending
email, or backing up their computers.  While the people I studied
regularly carried out such tasks and often spent a good deal of time
on them, they resented having to do so.  They dismissed these tasks
as "pseudowork."  Such activities were not included when I asked
people to describe their work to me.[1]
```

These observations suggest that an opportunity exists to explore the nature of the expertise in email.

---

[1] Forsythe, D.E. (1999). "It's just a matter of common sense: Ethnography as invisible work, *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 8, 127-145.