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## Email is for Old People – LOL!

**By Tom Cavanagh**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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My 13-year-old son is a Boy Scout. He is supposed to frequently send and read email messages to arrange scoutmaster conferences and patrol activities. He has two different email accounts that I set up for him.

He never looks at either one.

He's not alone. According to various studies, today's millennials consider email the way that I might view semaphore flags. *Sure, that was a great and effective means of communication "back then," but about as relevant to my modern life as a buggy whip repair kit.* They view email as antiquated. Redundant. Reserved for old people.

Instead, they choose to communicate via text messaging and social media. My son will read texts. He will check Instagram. According to a 2010 eMarketer study, 43 percent of 18-24-year-olds say that a text message exchange is just as meaningful as a live conversation over the phone.

But here's the thing: Despite how the messages accumulate in my inbox, reproducing like a virus, I love email. Well, sort of. Love is a strong word. I greatly appreciate email - a lot.

I am in my mid-40s. I am old enough to remember having a job before email existed and, frankly, I can't even comprehend how I would function today without it as an administrator at a metropolitan research university where my job is overseeing online learning. Email is an occupational necessity.

But that would be the case no matter what I did. The efficiency of email is staggering. I have literally had instant global conversations with people via email, everyone on each continent working from the same information, the asynchronous aspect of the medium accommodating for time-zone differences. Accomplishing the same thing without email would take weeks.

I understand that email can be a relentless taskmaster. I know that there is a downside to this increased efficiency and productivity. But, on balance, in my opinion, email has been and remains the No. 1 killer app.

So why aren't today's young people as enamored as I am? One reason may be that they don't remember a world before email. They don't appreciate how difficult arranging that meeting in China would be without email. But I think it goes deeper than that.

They are creating their own, new forms of communication. We "old people" may believe that by its very nature, Twitter's 140-character limit encourages surface-level interaction and a shallow examination of topics. We may believe that the conventions of "text speak" such as LOL, ROTFL, and the use of single letters to represent whole words (r for "are"; u for "you") represent the start of the slow demise of the English language.

But let's put it into context. Since man first slapped a handprint onto a cave wall, we have continually evolved the ways that we communicate with each other. At some point, some sour-faced, toga-wearing critic probably complained that the slate and chalk would surely result in the destruction of man's capacity to memorize. Each generation creates its own preferred form of communication, evolving the methods that preceded them, shaping them to fit their own unique contextual needs.

Linguist and political commentator John McWhorter has done some excellent research examining how today's youth communicate in their own unique ways via text messaging. For example, the term "LOL" has lost its original meaning as an acronym for "laughing out loud" and has become instead an expression of empathy akin to "I know."

Those of us who work in higher education struggle to communicate with the students in our classes, whether traditional or online, since our primary means of communication is via email. For some messages, email is the only officially sanctioned communication channel by policy. Yet, like my son, today's college students don't check their email. So we are finding new ways to converse with the students we serve, opening up alternative channels, allowing students to receive grade notifications via text messaging, pushing course work out to social media. This is a new digital frontier that the students themselves are defining and shaping.

One thing is likely, however. By the time my middle-school aged son goes to college, these new forms will already be entrenched and the next evolution will be starting to emerge. At some point, probably long before he reaches his mid-40s, he will have to face the fact that texting will be for old people.

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