

PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING

Connecting with students using SMS

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Abstract

In this article Ian Broinowski explores creative and interesting ways to incorporate text messaging (SMS) into his teaching practices. Using a computer he is able to send messages related to classroom activities and share ideas and resources with students. He also examines some of the protocols associated with the use of mobile phones and draws the conclusion that used wisely it is a useful and effective adjunct to teaching.

Recently I asked my class of adult students, "Who has a mobile telephone?" Every student raised their hands except of course for me. Their great teacher and mentor has yet to delve into the wonders of the ever present communication through mobile telephones. Things have changed rapidly in the five years when mobiles were few and far between in the class. Today few students can live without the ever-present companionship of their mobile. This perspective on teaching is about using the most readily available and widely used technology, Short Message Service (SMS), for education and learning. Short Message Service is a text feature which allows brief messages to be sent and received on mobile phones.

I teach in the area of children's services at a Technical and Further Education College in Hobart, Tasmania, which is roughly equivalent to Community Colleges in the US. We offer certificate and diploma level programs, leading our graduates to work in childcare centres, home based care, and outside school hours care. Most of our students are women with varied educational backgrounds in their late teens - early forties, many of whom are returning to study.

Being a progressive, forward thinking teacher, I spent the last few years learning how to incorporate the use of computers in education. In-service training, seminars on Web-CT, emails, and on-line learning were the way of the future, or so we were told. Students would flock to on-line learning; no longer would they need to come to college, read books, or listen to their teachers.

Eventually the technology caught up to the futurists' predictions only to find that computers were not really part of our students' culture. Interestingly, older students use email and still find computer technology a novelty and a challenge, but for the microchip generation it is just a little passé.

Computers are more of a nuisance, an inconvenience really and they take much too long to use. That is longer than 45 seconds. I mean you have to sit down, turn it on, wait and wait to actually write something!

So, I changed my approach. I began to wonder how I could incorporate the technology that students actually use in their everyday lives. Mobiles are something that they are addicted to, almost obsessively in some cases, so why not use them to our advantage.

Introducing SMS

The problem was that, firstly, I neither had nor particularly wanted a mobile. Even if I did, I certainly would not have the patience or dexterity to punch out messages from a microscopic keypad. SMS is by its very nature restricted to very short messages and must be written in less than 160 characters. Usually SMS are sent from mobile to mobile by punching in the message on a phone which requires patience, skill, and extraordinary self control, attributes which I am afraid to say are seriously lacking in my character. However, I did find a solution with my cell phone provider, Telstra, which allows me to send SMS messages to students via computer. More importantly groups of students can be sent the same message. It is cheap. Letters cost several dollars each to compile, while telephone calls take time and are more expensive. It is simple and easy to use. The system does, however, require a mobile or a mobile number. It is free for the receiver of the message but costs are incurred if they reply. Replies can be received either as a text message, an email, or on the SMS online system.

Using SMS as a Teaching Tool

I am still exploring different approaches to using SMS, including the following:

1. Administration. The most obvious and immediate value in SMS is class administration, for example, to send students changes in timetable, notes to collect assignments, and notifications of meetings. This is valuable because it is recorded on both the outgoing systems and the mobile.

2. Resource information. A second use is to let students know about new articles, internet sites, books, or readings. I also encourage them to pass on information they find and then I can forward it to the rest of the class. Sometimes, it is sent to one student who may be researching a particular topic or to the whole class for generic resources:

“Great new site on families is”

or

“I found this book in the library yesterday – worth a look for your assignment.”

3. Coursework follow-up. A third use is to send a summary of the main points of a lesson. For example, we had a discussion on the functions of the family. I then used SMS later by saying,

“Hi everyone, great session. Functions of the family are: primary socialisation, procreation, sexuality. Bye Ian”

or

“Interesting discussion today on what disabilities are. Go into your Resources CD and read section on children with additional needs.”

4. Provoking thought. A fourth use was found when I read an article on the idea of setting exams for kindergarten children in a weekend newspaper. The article was relevant to my teaching, so I sent an SMS saying,

“What do you think of the idea of exams for kindergarten children? Read ‘Weekend Australian’. Class discussion next week. Ian”

and again on the issue of the proposed changes in working conditions for workers in Australia:

“What effect will the new workplace relations changes have on families? Discuss this week”

5. Photo is for evidence. Another use is the possibility for students to take photos of their activities as part of their portfolio of evidence. Photos can be sent from a mobile to your email. I have yet to use this, but it seems to me to have great possibilities for a variety of study areas. There are many occasions when students are in their work place or on practical placement and there is a chance to capture the moment. Photos of food preparation for chefs, activities in childcare, and building site examples could be sent immediately to a teacher’s email for part of their assessment.

Protocols for Using SMS as a Teaching Tool

1. Permission. It is interesting how new technology challenges convention. We use telephone numbers and addresses for mail and even email once students have completed an enrolment form. However, when I mentioned using SMS in class, the IT managers made it clear we had to get written permission from students. We do this on our induction forms and students can stop it at any time. It is very important that students feel comfortable with the way they learn.

2. Timing. The other issue I had to consider was when to send messages. I found a really good site one evening at home and decided to send it. Then I realised it was nearly 10 p.m. On another occasion all the phones would have gone off during a colleague’s class! While young people seem to SMS each other 24/7, I thought it would be intrusive. However, the system has a time control, which is brilliant. So, I wrote the message and timed it to be sent at 8:00 am the next day. It worked. One student said her mother asked her who would be phoning so early and her reply was, “just my crazy teacher.”

3. Swamping. My concern also is that I could inundate students with SMS messages, and they would simply turn off both literally and metaphorically. I am, therefore, very selective about what I send and also constantly monitor student reactions. Technical and Further Education College students are usually very blunt and will tell me in no uncertain terms if I am over stepping and intruding into their lives.

4. Beginning and Ending. This tool is part of a teaching program. Therefore, it is important to start using it only when the program commences and stop immediately when it ends. Students know that it is part of their learning, like lectures, seminars, and other teaching strategies.

5. Ownership by students. I find it is important to include students in the process prior to commencing using SMS. I begin by openly discussing why I want to use SMS and how and when I would like to use it as part of my teaching. I think it is respectful to involve adults in their own learning.

Conclusion

The jury is still out on using SMS in teaching. It is however just one more teaching tool. Teachers are like artists. They have a palette of tools they can use for each and every occasion. Just like artists, we all have our favourite techniques and approaches. The choice of technology is no different. I find SMS to be a useful adjunct to my teaching, but I am also

very comfortable with computers. For me, SMS via computers makes sense, while others might simply see SMS as just the latest trend and an additional pressure they could do without. Used thoughtfully and skilfully by teachers, however, it can provoke, inform, and stimulate thinking in a world of instant, micro learning. It may well go by the wayside, but for now SMS is a useful and I believe valuable way of adding to education and learning. Maybe try it and decide for yourself.

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