

# Using SMS as a way of providing connection and community for first year students

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Technology provides one means of meeting the challenge of providing for frequent and meaningful interaction amongst students and staff which underpins students' feelings of being valued, leading to deeper and more meaningful engagement university studies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The challenge lies in providing for interaction in an environment where students and casual academic staff are spending less time on campus as a result of busy and complex lives. This paper relates the experiences of one lecturer/tutor using texting to stay in contact with her students and how this contact has supported and encouraged students to persist. It also discusses some of the implications for using mobile telephony to provide connection and community for first year students in higher education.

**Keywords:** SMS, interactivity, texting, mobile telephony

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## Introduction

The first year experience at university has been recognised as especially important, because this is when the majority of student departures occur (Tinto, 1995; Yorke, 1999). It is also key to many student experiences that led to later success in higher education (McInnis, 2001a; Pargetter et al., 1998; Tinto, 1995). The Australian first year student population is increasingly diverse, consisting of equal proportions of adolescent school leavers and older students (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). Students are also leading more complex lives. Increasing numbers of full time students are in full or part time employment; of these many also have family and parenting responsibilities. This increase in the "number of activities and priorities that compete with the demands of university" (McInnis, 2001b, p.4) means that students are spending less time on campus. Tutors are also more likely to be employed on a casual basis, not forming a part of the permanent academic staff and therefore not having a meaningful presence on campus. These conditions together create difficulties for students in maintaining meaningful contact with each other and their teachers.

Universities have adopted flexible learning approaches to provide much of the information and interaction which students once experienced on campus with anytime, anywhere access via a computer and modem. The use of email and discussion forums embedded in learning management is one mechanism to enhance peer to peer communication and exchanges between staff and students on and off-campus (Kift, 2004). Students value personal contact with tutors and lecturers and "being able to contact and interact with academic staff emerged as a critical theme" (p.14) of a recent study of student use of learning technologies (Krause & Duchesne, 2000). Direct personal contact with academic staff can also be achieved through use of mobile phones – providing a mobile phone number to students is a highly personal decision made by academic staff. For casual teaching staff a mobile phone is synonymous to an office phone as they spend much of their time in transit between various workplaces; the home phone is regarded as off limits. For traditional academics, on the other hand, handing out a mobile phone number to students may be a little close to the edges of their "comfort zones". While nearly 40% of students use text messaging by mobile phone to contact other students (Zimitat, 2004), the use of mobiles to contact academic staff is not known.

This paper discusses the experiences of one lecturer/tutor using texting to stay in contact with her students and how this contact has supported and encouraged students to persist. It also discusses some of the implications for using mobile telephony to provide connection and community for first year students in higher education.

## Transition as an issue

Why was text messaging used to establish rapport with students? This approach is influenced by the underlying philosophies of the counselling and communication skills. The importance of the “therapeutic relationship” from Carl Rogers (1961) which underpins the Introduction to Counselling course and the openness and appreciation for difference and diversity from Intercultural Communication have informed, albeit subliminally, the drive to meet the students “in virtual space” not necessarily on their terms, but in ways that resonate with their approaches to social interaction and that accommodate their lifestyles which are increasingly hectic, mobile and flexible.

First year students in higher education often mention the differences between the degree of support they received at school and the support they receive at university where they are expected to rely more heavily on their own efforts (Teese, 2002). It is not only the school leavers who are vulnerable to instructional isolation as a result of this approach. The transition to university, whether from school, the workplace or home presents challenges. Krause and Duchesne (2000) argue that when placed in a new social context such as the university environment, an individual is faced with concomitant physical, emotional and intellectual demands. Faced with lecturers and tutors who are high on information but lower on teaching and interactive skills, in an environment which often favours mass teaching methods, less confident students are less likely to succeed in their first semesters in higher education without support. By providing a more flexible means of communication and building a relationship that fosters learning through empathy, appreciation of the student’s diversity and personal qualities and encourages new learning approaches that are in line with success in tertiary education, the transition to higher education can be enhanced.

## Using text messaging to communicate

Text messaging is an example of a student centred, personal approach to communication – where connection and communication is viewed from a student’s point of view. Text messaging is particularly suited to the 18 to 24 year age group, who are often the most vulnerable. Young people have taken to communicating by text messaging or SMS (Short Message Service) that allows users to send and receive short messages from handheld, digital mobile phones or from a computer to a mobile phone, giving almost instant access. These young people are adapting and inventing language to accommodate the 160-character limit with the result that the messages are mostly abbreviations, acronyms or even combinations of letters and numbers, such as L8, for “late”. As a consequence, the language is informal and the messages are mostly peer to peer (Horstmanshof & Power, 2004). Texting is used as a method of staying in touch, organising social occasions, and generally managing a social life. More than 250 million text messages are sent per month in Australia (Wallace, 2003), most of these by users in the 16-24 age group.

## Why it works

Students were surprised and delighted when they were told that they may send their tutor text messages if they wish to communicate with her. The surprise is probably two fold. Firstly, as one student reported, her mother was aghast that she was texting her university lecturer because the medium is so informal that is it almost disrespectful. Secondly, the students are somewhat surprised that a lecturer is not only willing to send and receive text messages, but that she would recognise them as a suitable communication method. Text messaging works for students because it is a relatively inexpensive way of delivering important short messages. It is also private and handy. Young SMS users have moved away from the idea that a mobile phone was either a luxury item, or something to use in emergencies. It has become an essential tool for managing one’s life and one’s social calendar. Few will leave home without it, and many never switch it off (Horstmanshof & Power, 2004).

Casual university teaching staff may only spend a few hours on campus when not teaching. This is a rather inflexible and unsuccessful way of providing contact and support to students who wish to discuss problems or clarify issues concerning their studies. Both students and casual university teaching staff may have other demands on their time, such as family or work at locations other than on campus. This way, both groups are able to communicate with each other, seamlessly, across different location and across time zones.

Not all students make use of text messaging as a means of staying in contact or communicating with the lecturer/tutor. However, a little like insurance, knowing that this method of communication is available to them does seem to remove concerns about not being able to make contact when they feel they need to do so. Further, younger students are most at ease using this technology, and it is these younger students who are most at risk of floundering in the first year in higher education (McInnis et al., 2000). Older students are more capable of making better decisions and problems solving and are more likely to be independent learners. Therefore this method is very suited to the group who most need it and who will benefit from it most.

### **Why TXT not voice?**

There are several good reasons for texting rather than talking on the mobile phone. It is efficient and time saving for both parties. Messages can be stored and dealt with all in one session. Text messages can be received with minimal disruption, unlike mobile phone calls. It is also cheaper. It costs nothing to read text messages, whereas accessing the message bank for voice messages incurs the cost of a phone call. . It is possible to compose group text messages for the class to alert students to materials on the website.

### **Examples from the field**

Students seem to experience most anxiety at the time of their first assignments. When this assignment also contains a presentation component, it seems to be particularly challenging. Over the period of two first semester teaching periods, 2003 and 2004, the author has used text messaging to encourage and support students at risk of not completing their first assignments, an important, but daunting first hurdle. Often all that was required was a short text message to the student telling them that they had been missed in class.

Student L, an intelligent but anxious student, had to rush down to Sydney to be with a dying grandmother at the time that the first written assignment was due. She was concerned that she would not be able to hand in her assignment in time. She had completed the work, but did not have a way of delivering the assignment to the specified assignment box in the faculty. She sent a text message expressing her concern and circumstances. As a result she was given permission to email a copy of her paper, post a hard copy to the faculty and thus not miss an important first deadline.

Student P was unhappy with the mark she had received from another tutor in the course and sent a text message to the lecturer. The lecturer was able to arrange to review the paper, meet to discuss the matter with the student and thus resolve a matter that might have ended up creating unnecessary problems for all concerned. The fact that the lecturer had indicated her availability and willingness to be contacted on any matter concerning the course gave the unhappy student that reassurance that her mark was not a “personal” matter, but a learning opportunity.

Student W worked in the emergency services and as a result often had to miss tutorials. By being able to stay in touch via SMS, the student and tutor were able to work together to provide the support and flexibility the student needed to complete the assignments and keep track of the course requirements, while still performing an important community service. As this student was studying counselling skills, she felt she was benefiting by being able to apply her learning in the real world. She was relieved that she was able to manage both the job she was committed to and her studies, despite the demands of shift work on the one hand and an inflexible timetable on the other.

The majority of students seem to use texting to service the relationship. Messages received from students over a semester range from apologies for missing or being late for lectures and tutorials, and messages of thanks and appreciation to anxious requests for meetings to discuss assignments.

### **Connection and control**

Older, more traditional colleagues have expressed their reservations to this approach. Firstly, they argue that this will add to their burden, adding that they are already swamped by their burgeoning email inboxes. Secondly, they label the approach as “mothering” and warn that it is likely to lead to

dependency. From the author's perspective, neither of these criticisms militates against using texting in this way. While this approach might seem like "constant availability", with properly negotiated ground rules, students understand that it is "contactability" that is offered, not "24/7 instant access". One does not have the facility to switch off the device at certain times. Further, due to the limited character allowance, messages tend to be context specific, to the point and mostly short, unlike some email correspondence. As for "mothering", while this approach does facilitate the important pastoral role that is becoming a vital part of tutoring, attachment theory posits that securely attached individuals are more able to explore new terrain, becoming more independent as a result (Bretherton, 1991). Thus this method of communication provides the lecturer/tutor with both connection and control. So while students may not have the lecturer "on tap", they do not feel abandoned and know that their issues will receive attention. With better and more communication between student and tutor, tutors are able to pick up on small problems and deal with them before they escalate out of control. This availability builds trust between the student and tutor, often giving the vulnerable first year student the confidence to reach out and ask for help. The method feels comfortable and informal to these regular texters, and is private and immediate. In fact, it addresses at least three of the five factors Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone (2003) believe are associated with a "sense of belonging", theorised by Tinto (1995) to be a measure of a student's integration into the university community. It can be seen as providing "Perceived Faculty Support/Comfort, Empathetic Faculty Understanding" and countering "Perceived Isolation". The remaining factors are "Perceived Peer Support", and "Perceived Classroom Comfort"(p.248)

## Implications

As with all approaches, there are issues of cost and access. How does one harness and exploit the potential of this technology optimally? How does one budget and provide for the additional cost of mobile phone/text messaging for academics? In which other ways can one apply texting to enhance learning and communication? Community programs are exploring ways to use mobile phone technology to engage young people in literacy and numeracy learning (TAFE NSW, Mobilelearn Project, Nokia's Brigeit Programme); the Defence Force provides a First Aid Training (Paterson & Jeavons, 2004). The deaf are mobile phones to send and receive text messages. This is a major break through for communication among the deaf and between them and hearing people (Power & Power, 2004). What else can we do with this technology?

## Conclusion

Communication is regarded as a means of influencing learning motivations. Tinto (2004) emphasises this principle in his work on academic community. Contemporary university life in Australia is a challenge to the provision of community because of the mobility of students, the realities of the teaching portfolios of academics, and other issues of time and space. Using texting to communicate with tutors and other students is a way of providing connection and community in today's on-campus/off-campus university environment where both students and tutors are likely to spend fewer hours on campus and are also more likely to lead busy, complex lives in which work, family and social interactions make demands on their time. Students are managing the rest of their lives with the aid of mobile phones and text messaging, being able to manage their university lives in the same fashion seems to make sense.

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**Please cite as:** Horstmanshof, L. (2004). Using SMS as a way of providing connection and community for first year students. In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer & R. Phillips (Eds), *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference* (pp. 423-427). Perth, 5-8 December. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/horstmanshof.html>

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