

Using Texting Tools to Reinforce Communication in the Online Classroom

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Interaction between students and the instructor is an integral part of online learning [1, 2]. Texting tools facilitate communication by allowing instructors to send instantly accessible messages to students or guardians. Many texting tools are application-based and/or browser-based and allow for messages to be sent and received using a mobile phone app, tablet, or computer. Texting tools utilize "push-pull" technology, which is similar to email. For example, notifications are sent (or "pushed") to students immediately and end users do not have to "pull" the text messages manually [3].

Texting tools are often chosen by instructors not only because they are low- or no-cost tools, but also because they are secure and prevent fellow users from accessing the private phone numbers of students or faculty. Students in the class can communicate with each other without sharing their personal phone numbers, making this a valuable tool for collaboration.

There are several two-way texting tools used in academia by instructors to share content, alerts, and reminders with their students [4]. For example, Edmodo is a two-way texting tool that can assist instructors with creating groups for two-way communication. Another tool, Voxer, can assist instructors in sending messages to groups in the form of text, voice, or text-to-speech messages.

Texting tools like Edmodo, Voxer, Remind, and ClassPager open the doors of communication in a few ways: (1) the teacher and student can have a one-to-one synchronous or asynchronous conversation, (2) students can be placed into groups to ask each other questions throughout the semester, (3) the teacher can send periodic reminders and announcements to the entire class using text, voice messages, or images, and (4) updates and reminders can also be sent to parents if used in the K-12 setting. According to Ziden, Rosli, Gunasegaran, and Azizan [5], students who received text message reminders throughout a course reported that they felt connected to the instructor and learning was more personalized. Furthermore, the use of texting as an instructional device has been found to positively impact students' perception of learning [6].

Implementation of Texting Tools in Online Courses

Texting tools are useful in online courses because students often report feeling isolated [7]. Schein [8] suggests organizational culture may embrace innovation, such as texting tools, to help individuals feel connected. Many texting

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tools allow for messages to be translated into different languages, so using this technology supports a diverse group of learners [8].

The Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) faculty involved in Project COMPASS (Constructing an Online Model to Promote At-risk Student Success) selected Remind, previously referred to as Remind 101 [9], to enhance student engagement. Remind, like other texting tools, has features that allow teachers to schedule office hours and facilitate group conversations and file sharing [9].

The creators of texting tools including Remind, Edmodo, and ClassPager provide a PDF that instructors can give to students or guardians to encourage them to enroll. Other tools like Voxer use email invites, requiring the instructor to input each student's email address. It can be helpful to include the sign-up information in multiple locations of the course, especially within introductory announcements. Some instructors at Wake Tech have more success with student sign-up by offering extra credit or quiz hints to those who participate. Instructors can create student and guardian 'buy-in' of the tool by describing its benefits to the student.

Wake Tech COMPASS project faculty used Remind to send students friendly reminders about assignment due dates and school events such as live webinars, guest speakers, or club meetings. Texting tools are also used to give students words of encouragement, tips for success, share interesting facts, or provide questions about course content for reflection. Other effective uses have been documented such as providing assessments, grades, and feedback to students [10].

Many texting tools like Remind, Edmodo, Voxer, and ClassPager allow instructors to create messages in advance and setup a time in the future for them to be sent using scheduling features. Time zones of students should be taken into consideration when scheduling the messages, especially for higher education online courses in which students may be learning from a distance or other parts of the country or world.

A business instructor at Wake Tech had a notable experience working with one student who is blind. Like others, she came to Wake Tech without prior knowledge of online classes, so she faced a steep learning curve. The first day of class she signed up for the Remind application and notified the instructor that her mom and educational support person would be assisting her with reading and responding to messages. Remind has recently added a voice messaging feature, similar to that of Voxer, so not only can the instructor leave voice announcements for the class, but students can record short voice messages or questions. Jessica and her instructor used voice messaging whenever she had questions about grades, Blackboard setup, or school-related issues. This allowed Jessica and her instructor to voice-memo in a two-way format similar to texting multiple times. This tool aided the instructor to review, assess, and monitor her progress.

Texting tools may also be utilized for collaborative activities. Tools such as Edmodo and Voxer offer grouping features so that students can easily be divided into small groups. Small (2-5 person), subject-based discussion groups could be

created by the instructor to encourage collaboration about a current event, social issue, or case study etc. and report back to the entire class to share their ideas. Within small groups, students can coordinate roles for group projects and share files with each other. One Wake Tech instructor, who used Voxer, assigned students into small groups at the beginning of class and encouraged them to share ideas, questions, and offer support to one another throughout the course. In K-12 settings, instructors or guardians coordinating a special event like a class party or field trip could use a texting tool to brainstorm ideas, coordinate plans, and confirm RSVP's.

Challenges Faced to Using Texting Tools and Suggested Solutions

As with any technology, implementing texting tools has its challenges. Many texting tools allow for private communication between instructor and student and there may be school districts that have banned this type of communication. It is also possible that some students in the class may not have access to a smartphone and will not be able to use this technology. In addition, not every student in the class will sign up for the reminders, which could result in students missing information. For this reason, instructors should ensure that the information distributed using the texting tool can also be received via email or as a course announcement. Many texting tools include the option for students to receive messages through email or web browser in addition to text application, so this could be emphasized when introducing the tool.

When using texting tools, discretion should be used as to the number of messages to send. Too many notifications could become bothersome to students. While the ideal number of messages per week may not have been determined, Wake Tech faculty typically send 1 to 3 messages per week. In prior studies about the use of texting tools, instructors sent text messages to students anywhere from once per week [6] to once per day [11]. In addition, it is important that instructors show they respect students' personal time and avoid sending messages during early morning or late night hours. Instructors may consider sending messages only during business hours, avoiding weekend messaging, and accommodating for students who may be in different time zones.

It should be noted that messages sent using texting tools have limitations. For example, Remind and ClassPager messages are limited to 140 characters, as are Edmodo alerts. This may be preferable, considering that online learners tend to favor simple and brief language in text messages from instructors [11]. Voice messages are often limited to 90 seconds or less. Remind is limited to 100 classes per account, but allows for unlimited participants, while the free version of Voxer allows for up to 500 participants in a group chat. Edmodo has no limits on number of groups or participants.

Like other technologies, the novelty of using a texting tool may be motivating for students at first. However, it is possible that if many instructors use this tool, students may be less interested in engaging with it. This loss of interest could be mitigated by varying the types of messages that are sent. For example, an instructor could send reminders interspersed

with affirmational messages, quiz hints, or use the tool to engage students in a reflection activity.

Summary of Recommendations for Successful Implementation of Texting Tools

Successful implementation of a texting tool may ease frustration associated with exploring content within a course [9]. The following best practices are recommended for successful implementation of texting tools:

1. Review district or college policies on communication with students and consult with a school administrator to ensure compliance with all guidelines. This recommendation may be more significant to K-12 education, but higher education professionals are encouraged to review institutional communication policies and consult with a supervisor or communications staff member, if applicable.
2. Invite students to sign up to participate at the beginning of the school year, course, or semester. Promote the tool by justifying its benefits to students and consider offering an incentive such as extra credit for signing up. Consider embedding a "secret word" in voice or text messages to encourage students to check their messages each week. For example, the instructor might send an important message about an upcoming assignment. They could include a phrase like 'the secret word is amygdala'. Students may be required to enter the secret word within the online classroom before they are able to access or submit the assignment to assure they reviewed the message.
3. Review guidelines for texting etiquette with students and add instructor to all group chats so they can supervise the appropriateness of conversations. Ask for student input on texting guidelines to give them ownership of the learning activity and post the final guidelines in the classroom. The instructor could offer models of "good" and "bad" communication so that students understand the expectations. In addition, provide clear instructions on how students should report inappropriate private communications from other students. Reassure adherence to free speech policies for students and instructors, remaining in compliance with school guidelines. These practices will promote quality and positive, professional interactions.
4. Plan ahead and schedule reminders or other messages in advance, considering time zones of distance learners. Instructors may save messages and re-use them for future semesters. However, not all messages should be automated. It would be best to tailor messages to the class to make the information more personalized and meaningful.
5. Send text messages consistently throughout the course. It is suggested to send 1-3 texts per week to avoid overuse. According to Swartzwelder [6], students who received text messages throughout a course reported that this increased critical thinking and it nudged them to increase their participation in the course.
6. To keep students interested, vary the types of messages sent such as reminders, quiz hints, reflection questions, and affirmational messages.

7. Ensure information sent using the texting tool is available to all students by placing the information in another area of the course.

Conclusion

Texting tools contribute to the personalization of learning and support communication in the online environment. Texting tools are valuable both to instructors for quick and easy communications and to students or guardians who are able to receive reminders and other course-related information from their smartphone or other device. There are many free texting tools that are easy to use for instructors, students, and guardians. Instructors can choose a secure, accessible texting tool to embrace new modes of communication in online courses. It is important to consider challenges to using the tool, such as getting permission for use and student participation. Instructors who use the tool will likely achieve better results if they use multiple techniques to encourage student participation, schedule messages in advance, and vary the types of messages sent. It is recommended instructors share the information conveyed using the texting tool in additional locations in the course to ensure all students receive it.

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