

Communicating to a New Generation of Learners: Integration of Text Messaging into the Instructional Setting

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Abstract

How do we communicate with students in the new generation of wireless mobile devices? A noticeable trend on college campuses is the prevalence of cell phones. Text messaging has become a trendy technology used to disseminate information. With the use of existing text messaging technology, instructors can use text messaging as a mechanism for communicating with students enrolled in an eight-week one-hour freshmen level information research skills course. This paper will explore the mobile learning initiative of Southeastern Louisiana University's Sims Memorial Library and its efforts to integrate the use of text messaging into the instructional setting.

Background Information

Text messaging, also known as SMS (i.e., short message service), is a technology for sending and receiving messages to and from cell phones and other handheld devices. The length of a single message can be up to 160 characters, thus forcing users to abbreviate the English language (Hutchinson 2004). Text messaging is more widely used among college-age Generation Y's (i.e., 18-27 year olds), as 63% of those with cell phones regularly send text messages, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Pew 2005).

Anecdotal evidence indicates that cell phones are prevalent among Southeastern Louisiana University students. According to a Student Monitor study, there are a "record number of student cell phone owners" as "5.2 million or nearly nine in ten college students nationally now own a cellular telephone" (Student 2005).

Whether as a requirement or as an elective, *Library Science (LS) 102: Introduction to Information Research* enrolls over 1,800 students per year from various majors and departments at Southeastern Louisiana University. As the course has evolved to reflect the current state of information technology and pedagogy, it has become a more hands-on active learning course. Students enrolled in LS102 classes were given the opportunity to receive class announcements, faculty correspondence and course content delivered to their cell phones in discrete packets as text messages.

The delivery of content to cell phones is a natural progression of using technology to deliver LS102 course materials. A few years ago, the Library discontinued the use of a printed workbook and began providing all course readings to students via the campus Web site. More recently, Library Science instructors have migrated section-specific information and course materials from paper to Blackboard. The delivery of information via cell phones will supplement, not replace, this existing delivery. Much of the LS102 course materials can be reduced to discrete packets of information, and sent as text messages to be stored on students' cell phones for later referral. While SMS message size is restrictive, even relatively lengthy publications have been made cell phone ready. The information sent for LS102 classes would be much shorter, simpler; for example, the format for citing an article from a full-text database could be easily sent as text and saved for later referral.

How does it work

The *Altarama Reference by SMS* (<http://www.altarama.com/refxsms.htm>) is a turnkey package that includes a dedicated text messaging number, the software to translate text messages to e-mail messages and e-mail messages to text messages, a "Send by SMS" tool to facilitate the creation of short messages using phonetic shortcuts, and a prepaid bundle of messages. Startup and first year subscription costs for the text messaging service have been funded through a 2005 Student Technology Fee Small Project Grant. In 2006, the Sims Memorial Library received a teaching initiative grant to renew the service to incorporate text messaging into our information literacy efforts. For the upcoming fiscal year, we do not have any grant money to pay for the subscription, but because the cost is so low, we will be continuing the service using operating funds.

The service provides a SMS (text-messaging) number for the library. If a student wants to send a question/message to the library, the student can send a text-message using his/her cell phone. The library's SMS software will translate the text message into an e-mail message that will be delivered to the Ask A Librarian e-mail address. A reference librarian will retrieve the e-mail message and respond to it via e-mail. The software will then translate the e-mail response into a text-message and send it to the student's cell phone. The software works in conjunction with the campus e-mail system and client. The EmailSMS service that hosts the Ask A Librarian text message service is made available by Redcoal, an Australian based wireless Internet provider. Use the Optimize feature and abbreviate to shorten the reply to fit the 160 character length. The reply is sent to patron's cell phone. After submitting your message, you should receive a notice "1 message successfully sent." The reply is received on patron's cell phone in the form of a text message.

The patron's cell phone provider will treat all messages to and from the Ask A Librarian Text Messaging number as international text messages. Generally, international text messages are priced at 5-25 cents per message. For details on charges, check with your cell phone service provider. The service accepts messages from the following cell phone providers: Alltel, AT&T Wireless, Cingular Wireless, Nextel, T-Mobile and Verizon.

Limitations of SMS Technology

What are the limitations of the text-message service? First, students may view text-messaging as a social interaction, rather than a way to get information. They may not even consider it as a way to contact the library. Secondly, the size limit on the messages also limits the complexity of answers. Only short answers or suggestions can be sent. Sometimes the answer might be that the student should come into the library or contact us by email for a more thorough answer. Finally, there are other, sometimes more convenient ways to get assistance or information from the library. If a student has a phone in hand, phoning the library might make more sense. If a student has found the library webpage with the Text-a-librarian phone number, perhaps an email or chat session would be possible.

Overall the software functioned well and tech support has been helpful when needed. However, there are some limitations to the software package because Altarama is an Australian company, and the phone number is an international phone number. Some plans do not include international calling, and in some cell phone plans, there is an extra charge for international calls. We have been told our vendor, Altarama, is currently seeking a partnership with a North American partner to alleviate this problem.

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