

Salisbury College: mobile technology in teaching and learning

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1. The organisation

Salisbury College is a further and higher education college with around 7,000 full and part time students. We have a wide catchment area as the only major city in South Wiltshire, covering rural and urban populations.

2. Overview

Motivated by the high levels of ownership of mobile phones, we wanted to see how we could improve our communications infrastructure, mainly for the benefit of 16-18 year old learners in college. Issues included the ability to contact students at short notice - perhaps due to inform of class cancellations due to illness, or change of venue - and to address the high levels of missed appointments by students for learning support.

As we put together a project proposal, it became clear that there would be many other benefits and uses, for example:

- Our marketing department felt that there would be opportunities – texts could be sent to students informing them of support and advice in college after exam results had been issued.
- Our HR department wanted to provide a text-back facility for job enquiries.
- Course administrators were keen to use texts to invite students to pre-course assessments, where a letter had previously been sent.
- Our education maintenance allowance (EMA) administrator wanted to be able to contact students quickly.
- Our retention officer was keen to use the system to contact students at risk quickly and directly.
- We have some deaf students in college and tutors saw SMS texting as an ideal way of keeping them informed.
- Our enrichment officer was keen to keep students informed of talks from external agencies – sexual health, drugs advice etc.

3. Details

Approach

Having established that there was an internal market, we set about looking at the options. Services seemed to be divided into two categories, the first being free and the second charging for texts and a licence.

The free service was not appropriate for bulk texting and would not link to our management information systems. We then set about finding a provider who could support us through the steep learning curve and found a local company who were willing to give the support required and negotiate on price.

To sell the project to our college management team, we took the seven strands of the common inspection framework and applied the potential benefits to these criteria, as below.

How well do learners achieve?

Learners can fail to achieve for a number of reasons; perhaps they miss deadlines or require additional educational support. Where additional support is arranged, it is not unusual for students to miss appointments – it is a symptom of dyslexia for instance that individuals might forget to attend. In extreme cases learners can drop out their course and then achievement will not take place.

Tutors can text students to remind them of dates for handing in work or send timely reminders of learning support appointments. Students at risk of leaving can be referred to the retention officer who can contact the student by text to work through appropriate solutions. Speed of communication is an important factor. The attendance patterns of learners at risk can become erratic and students can be sent a text message asking why they are not in class.

How effective are teaching, training and learning?

The college has to demonstrate effective teaching, training and learning and evidence can be provided in the form of lesson planning documentation, feedback from students and demonstration of diversity and provision for learners with special needs.

By using SMS mobile technology, records of communications together with dates are logged and can be used as evidence that learners with special needs are being identified and measures taken to provide support. Learners can 'text vote' on issues which affect them and the use of modern technology can help to engage young learners.

How do resources affect achievement and learning?

Resources for learning include the use of technology, computers, Internet, data-projectors etc. can directly affect how well learning takes place. Mobile technology can incorporate many of these features in a portable package, funded by the student.

Whilst this technology is not common at present, we are already seeing digital cameras on mobile phones and internet connectivity is becoming more common. Increased usage of mobile technology by students will free up college resources with the potential for cost savings and the need for less, or less inexpensive equipment.

How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learners' progress?

Assessment and monitoring can be demonstrated by the use of student surveys and quick and appropriate feedback about submitted assignments. Teachers can text results to students and call them in for meetings if needed. Students can be polled by text about relevant and immediate issues.

During the pilot phase of this project, it is expected that students will be sent a congratulatory text as exam results are issued – together with guidance on who to contact (or text) if further help or support are needed.

How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interests of the learners?

Meeting the needs and interests of learners relies on questioning, feedback and demonstration that all needs are catered for.

Learners can text in to college on a special number to raise issues, and views of groups of learners can be sought. It is possible that mobile technology can be the most appropriate form of communication with some groups of learners, for instance deaf students.

How well are learners guided and supported?

Many issues connected to the guidance and support of students are outlined above. The use of SMS texting produces an e-mail record of communication and can demonstrate that reminders have been sent – for meetings to provide guidance and support (such as tutorials) and follow ups if appointments have not been met.

'Textback' help lines can be set up and directed to appropriate support staff.

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

By implementing mobile technology as appropriate, managers demonstrate clearly their support and commitment to raising achievement in an innovative and learner-friendly context.

Scale

When the SMS service was implemented, we focussed on the 16-19 age range, although the service was available to any course administrator who chose to participate - not just for students in the 16-19 age group. The system can reach 95% of students in this age range; however other methods such as e-mail are used to help ensure complete coverage. The service has also proved to be useful for adult learners.

We set up ten phone numbers, each with three users. The exception was our retention officer as the nature of her work demanded confidentiality. All 16-19 year old students were invited to participate – we sent them a text message to inform of the service! Currently the service is used with approximately 2500 students.

The system means that student mobile numbers are captured at enrolment when students are advised they may be contacted using SMS. A confirmation text is sent to all participating students advising them that they will receive SMS messages from time to time. Lists of mobile numbers are updated overnight; however there is no compunction on students to update mobile numbers if these change.

The system can handle individual or bulk messages; staff contact the system administrator to request that messages are sent out to individuals or groups. The administrator sends the message text and the list of mobile numbers to an e-mail address supplied by the service provider; this triggers the generation of SMS messages to each of the numbers listed. The turnaround time for this on average is ten minutes. When the messages arrive on the recipient's mobile it appears as if they have been sent from a mobile number.

If recipients respond to the message using the originator's number the message arrives as an e-mail in the administrators e-mail account. No delivery confirmation is generated unless recipients respond to a message it is also not easy to identify respondents without opening responses and all responses go to a single location regardless of the message subject. A system upgrade will allow respondents to be identified.

The system can also send images to the student's mobiles but this relies on them having compatible mobiles.

Impact

Users found the service of benefit, mainly because of the speed of communication. Some teachers were texting students to find out why they were not in class and attendance at enrichment events increased. Students have found the service to be of benefit, particularly to inform the college of lateness or absence. Previously students were required to phone in – the phone was usually engaged!

Original funding was largely from the LSDA Q Project initiative, but we are now able to charge departments for the service at the rate of £220 per phone number per year and 5p per text. 40% of academic departments are about to opt in to the service.

Beneficiaries have been academic departments and support functions as outlined previously. The website (below) has more information.

Costs and benefits

Our initial outlay for software and texts was around £1,500, £1,000 of which was met in the form of a Q project award.

Savings have been made where texts have been sent instead of a letter which we estimate to be around £800 plus savings in postal costs.. Savings in time and efficiency have had more impact, but this has been difficult to measure in terms of cost. Just one example would be comparing the time taken to phone a class of twenty students individually to inform them of a late class change perhaps an hour - as opposed to sending a group text to all students at the same time which would take a couple of minutes. The use of texting has also had a positive effect on retention although it is difficult to evaluate the exact scale of this.

4. Lessons, caveats and implications

Consideration is currently being given to the use of keywords to direct message to different folders dependant on the subject; this will enhance the functionality by allowing for example text voting to take place. It may also be possible to integrate the system with the college VLE though this would require further work. It may be worthwhile to examine other text systems, in use within other colleges, which may offer greater connectivity with existing systems.

Finally the issue of exclusion requires consideration: if SMS becomes a mainstream communication system then care has to be taken to exclude those who do not have access to this technology. UKERNA figures suggest that a high percentage of students have a mobile telephone but a small minority still do not possess one; consideration needs to be given as to how to avoid excluding this minority. For example should mobiles be loaned, hired, subsidised or supplied on enrolment? Can alternatives such as e-mail fill the gap?

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