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Text messaging (SMS) and libraries

### Original Citation

Walsh, Andrew (2009) Text messaging (SMS) and libraries. *Library Hi Tech News*, 26 (8). pp. 9-11. ISSN 0741-9058

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## **Author autobiographical note**

Andrew Walsh is a Senior Assistant Librarian at the University of Huddersfield. He is currently chair of an information skills group within the university library, seeking to improve the teaching and assessment of information literacy within the institution. Andrew is particularly interested in information literacy, the use of active learning within library sessions, the encouragement of evidence based librarianship, and the appropriate use of Web 2.0 technologies to make his life easier. Andrew is also studying part-time for an information literacy related PhD at the University of Huddersfield.

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## **Abstract**

### **Text messaging (SMS) and libraries**

#### **Purpose**

With mobile phones now becoming an almost ubiquitous technology the time seems ripe for libraries to take advantage of this maturing technology, in particular text messaging (SMS) which is available to almost all mobile phone users.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

The article outlines some examples of best practice across the world in using SMS to support our users, particularly in teaching information skills.

#### **Findings (mandatory)**

Text messaging can be used for a range of activities within our libraries and some services can be introduced for minimal or zero expenditure.

#### **Practical implications (if applicable)**

Librarians and library managers should be able to take ideas and suggestions from this article to develop mobile friendly services that the majority of their users can access.

#### **Originality/value (mandatory).**

The article outlines some examples and suggestions for services that have not been widely written about or introduced in our libraries to date, including previously unpublished examples from the University of Huddersfield.

#### **Keywords**

Mobile learning, information literacy, web 2.0, text messaging, SMS, communication technologies

## **Article**

### **Text Messaging (SMS) and Libraries**

#### **Context**

Mobile phones now seem to be a near ubiquitous technology, with more mobile phones than people in the United Kingdom and around 9 in 10 adults using one (Intel, October 2007). Most are used for voice and text messaging functionality, with 217 million text message sent each day in the UK (<http://www.cellular-news.com/story/34369.php>). Although slightly further behind the UK (118 phones per 100 people) in terms of numbers of subscribers, the USA (86 per 100 people); Australia (102 per 100 people); and New Zealand (102 per 100 people) still have impressive market penetration (International Telecommunications Union, 2009). Even within the developing world, the use of mobile phones is rocketing, so, for example, there were 28.68 million new mobile connections in India in the first 2 months of 2009.

Libraries are just starting to make their first steps into the world of mobile learning, in particular, learning through mobile phones. This article discusses some mobilephone functionality we could bring into our libraries, particularly using text messaging (SMS), a service available to nearly all mobile users. It focuses on applications suitable for teaching, but also mentions other services, particularly when they can take advantage of the same underlying systems as used for teaching.

Elsewhere, there have been many pilots and small-scale introductory projects on mobile learning, though it has yet to reach the mainstream. There has been some good evidence that planning learning and teaching activities using mobile devices has great potential in supporting learning particularly within Higher Education (for example, Cook et al., 2007) and Further Education (Savil-Smith et al., 2006). For SMS in particular, Jones et al (2008), give a clear overview of this technologies potential within education, along with a detailed case study of the use of SMS to support learning at the University of Bath.

#### **Mobile Blogging for Classroom Discussions**

There is a wide and constantly changing range of free to use web 2.0 services that can be used for library instruction or communication via SMS. These can be used as a free way for libraries to experiment with using mobile phones in teaching without the commitment of paying for commercial services.

Services such as moblog ([www.moblog.net](http://www.moblog.net)) and Jaiku ([www.jaiku.com](http://www.jaiku.com)) allow mobile blogs to be set up and contributed to via SMS. Once registered with, users can post to shared groups or channels. This allows text messages from many users to be pulled together in one place and easily

viewed via a connection to the Internet. An even briefer mobile blogging service, Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)), allows users to “follow” each other, or use keywords in posts (prefixed by a # symbol) that can be pulled together in one place. They can be used as a way of reporting back discussions in class, or as an anonymous way of students answering questions, with the mobile blog group or channel displayed on a screen at the front of the class, much as dedicated audience response systems are used widely in education today.

Text messaging has much more potential with distance learning students, allowing people to contribute to group discussions from any location, whenever they feel inspired to make a contribution. Contributors to these group discussions do not need to be in a particular spot at an exact time, they can take part effectively just as easily on a crowded bus or train on the way to work as if they were sat at a desk or in a classroom. Twitter, especially, with its' very short limit on messages and rapidly increasing penetration over the past year has great potential for use in group discussion. Examples of using Twitter in a slightly different way for a class activity can be found at Ollie Bray's (2009) Blog or the ReadWriteWeb Blog (Kirkpatrick, 2009). This sort of discussion using SMS messages that are pulled together in web based medium for later viewing have been reported as increasing cohesion within groups and encouraging quality discussion (Sillence & Baber, 2003).

A key limiting factor for these microblogging services is getting a group of people to sign up to both the service and the channel or group required. For an effective discussion you need a reasonable proportion of any group to have successfully subscribed to even have a chance of them contributing! Because of this, it is most effective if a group can be asked to sign up when physically together in a set class, even if it is subsequently used for asynchronous distance learning discussions. A secondary consideration, that of mobile phone signal strength, is most relevant when using them in a physical classroom or lecturer theater. The author once tried using this method in a lecture hall where he had perfect signal strength, but another popular mobile phone provider had a minimal or non-existent signal, meaning large numbers of the students could not take part in the discussions.

### **Commercial Discussion Tools**

While microblogging services may be ideal for distance learners, they may be a little risky at times to use in classrooms (relying on good signal strength) and are possibly not as slick as specially designed tools. There are, however, many companies that developed ways of displaying texts on a “wall of text”, able to be viewed or displayed from a webpage. They tend to market these systems for clubs and conferences for one-off events, but will also provide them for longer-term use. You can often control the way the texts appear on the screen and some of the services include the option to run polls and allows users to effectively use their mobile phones as voting pads.

Hopefully free or cheap to run services offering similar functionality will start to appear for

educational institutions to use. At present the author is only aware of one such service, VotApedia (<http://www.votapedia.com/>) which is an Australian system developed by CSIRO (The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization), to encourage the use of audience response systems in Australian educational institutions without the expense of buying dedicated equipment. These services have the potential to largely replace expensive dedicated audience response systems within lectures and classes, though outside Australia they are out of reach of most of us without either the budget to pay for a commercial system or a programmer to develop our own. The author is hoping to use a text wall from September 2009 at the University of Huddersfield that has been developed by a colleague elsewhere at the university. It may be worth networking with colleagues as widely as possible to try and freely obtain these sorts of systems that have been developed for one off projects, where the programmers may be willing to share their systems for only the cost of the mobile phone charges.

### **Delivery of Instructional Materials via SMS:**

One of the key advantages of mobile learning is that it allows users to learn in small, bite size chunks, whenever and wherever they please. A clear example outside of libraries has been to use text messages to teach Italian (Levy & Kennedy, 2005), where students used a web based SMS portal to send pre-prepared text messages to a whole class at set times to complement existing class based learning. Students enjoyed receiving the text messages and felt it improved their learning.

The author is planning to use a similar series to text messages to re-enforce the induction messages most of our students receive at the University of Huddersfield. We plan to send out a series of text messages in the first term of the academic year with tips and reminders to students at relevant points in the term. This will supplement the face-to-face inductions most of the students receive, as well as our on-line induction site, The Basics (<http://www.hud.ac.uk/cls/thebasics>). They will not replace our existing inductions, but act as reminders to the students that they can view at a time and place that suits them, not their course timetable. This is increasingly important for students today, much as Hahn (2008) says: *“For our highly scheduled, commodified, pressured students, there exists a need for anytime, anywhere information...”*. Instruction by text message direct to a student’s phone seems an ideal way to meet this “anytime, anywhere” need.

### **Reference Services**

Giving library users the chance to text quick questions to the library, as a way of complementing existing reference services, is an easy and quick way of taking advantage of text messaging and is often the first mobile phone based service introduced by libraries. There are many ways of introducing a service, from custom designed and programmed SMS reference services; through

off the peg web-based SMS services (such as JANET txt, <http://www.pageone.co.uk/janettxt/> in the UK) that could be used for a range of services, to simply putting a normal mobile phone on the reference desk. A system for answering chat or instant messaging reference from library3hlp (<http://libraryh3lp.com>), provides a hybrid system – integrating a mobilephone using the open source Android operating system with its chat software. An example of a system specifically marketed for this sort of service is “Text a Librarian” by Mosio (<http://www.textalibrarian.com/>).

Many of these systems provide users with a short number to text, rather than a full mobile number, making it easier to remember. Some systems combine the short code with a keyword that must be used at the start of a text message. Sonia Herman (2007) usefully describes how such an SMS reference service was introduced at an Australian library. Several examples are given in Steven Profit's (2008) article, plus several examples can be found at the Library Success Wiki ([http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online\\_Reference#Libraries\\_Using\\_Virtual\\_Reference\\_Services](http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference#Libraries_Using_Virtual_Reference_Services)).

### **Library Notices:**

The sorts of web based SMS systems that are often used for text reference services tend to have the ability to send out texts to large numbers of people at a time, and can often integrate well with other systems. For instance, Laura Naismith (2007) describes how such a service is used to successfully support administrative communication at a UK university. There is no reason why library management systems could not support, or be integrated with, such SMS systems, sending library notices, such as overdue notices, by SMS rather than email or letter. It is a regular complaint that students did not know their library books were overdue because they hadn't looked at their student email account and read the notice. How much more immediate and personal would it be to receive that notice direct to their mobile phone? James Buczynski (2008) describes some of the library management system providers that have already developed SMS capabilities directly into their systems.

Once it becomes the norm to receive notices from the library via SMS for reasons like overdues or reservations, it could then allow us to become much more creative. With the circulation data libraries hold on their patrons it would be possible to notify students of new editions of books that we know students on their course would be interested in, or suggestions of alternatives if the student has reserved a book – that is, deliver relevant, timely and useful information directly to our users via SMS.

### **Summary**

Almost all mobile phones can be used for voice calls and text messages (SMS), so what can libraries do to take advantage of them, particularly within our teaching? We can experiment for free using Web 2.0 technologies such as Jaiku, Moblog or Twitter, especially if we want to develop a way to support ongoing learning and discussion for students over a period of time. For a small financial outlay we can introduce SMS based reference services to support learning in our libraries, with the simplest systems involving using a library manager's mobile phone number being used, up to dedicated online "text a librarian" portals. More involved or expensive options include sending out library notices to our users with systems integrated with the library management system, or delivering instructional material directly via SMS.

Viewed together we can see there are options for all of us to increase the use of this technology within our libraries, particularly to support learning, whether we can afford to invest very little time and money into it, or can afford the significant amount of time and effort involved in activities such as delivering teaching materials directly via SMS.



## Resource Websites

Jaiku - [www.jaiku.com](http://www.jaiku.com)

JANET txt - [www.pageone.co.uk/janettxt](http://www.pageone.co.uk/janettxt)

library3hlp - <http://libraryh3lp.com>

Library Success WIKI - [www.libsuccess.org](http://www.libsuccess.org)

Moblog - [www.moblog.net](http://www.moblog.net)

“Text a Librarian”, by Mosio - <http://www.textalibrarian.com/>

Twitter- [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

VotApedia - <http://www.votapedia.com>

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