

M-learning: texting (SMS) as a teaching & learning tool in higher arts education

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Dr Loykie L. Lominé

Programme Director, MA in Cultural and Arts Management

Loykie.Lomine@Winchester.ac.uk

**44 77 47 87 51 58*

Faculty of Arts

University of Winchester,

Winchester SO22 4NR

UK

Chris Buckingham

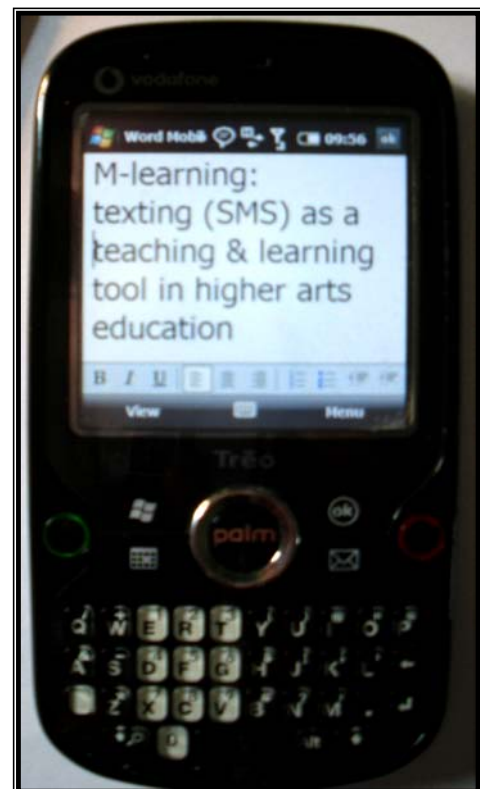
Student on MA in Cultural and Arts Management

Faculty of Arts

University of Winchester

Winchester SO22 4NR

UK



Introduction

To text or not to text...

Text messaging has become a mainstream form of communication. Few students are not avid texters – but how can we use SMS (Short Message Service) to support teaching and learning in higher arts education?

This paper outlines key aspects, both conceptually and pedagogically. It suggests a range of opportunities for us to integrate texting into our teaching and learning strategies. It also answers frequently asked questions in order to demystify the use of SMS in an educational context.

Conceptualisation: what is m-learning?

M-learning (mobile learning) refers to the use of mobile devices (mobile phones, PDAs i.e. Personal Digital Assistants such as palmtop computers and “pocket PCs”, mini media players such as ipods) for pedagogical purposes. Phrases such as “handheld learning” and “handheld technology” are also encountered; their semantic focus on the hand stresses the shift from traditional e-learning (through desktop computers) to a more flexible paradigm (through portable “high tech” devices).

M-learning can rely on podcasts (audio contents, usually in mp3 format – or even video contents in MPEG-4) or more simply on texting (SMS). The aim is not to challenge nor replace other forms of interactions (face-to-face in classrooms, lecture theatres and studios, or virtually in online learning environments): it is a supplementary method that can support, enrich and enhance students’ learning experience.

M-learning is already popular in some subjects such as languages (see Levy & Kennedy 2005 or Thorton and Houser 2005, amongst many others); it is appropriate in many situations (for example in geography fieldtrips, as well summarised in Maskall 2007) and it can be used administratively (for example to notify students of book availability or of examination results). Several cases studies of Universities using SMS have been published (for example in the UK the University of Wolverhampton has been using targeted bulk SMS to enhance student support, inclusion and retention, see Riordan and Baxter 2005) – but m-learning still is not very common in higher arts education.

The scholarship of m-learning

The scholarship of m-learning is still in its infancy, yet it is steadily developing, with a growing volume of publications, seminars and events (for example the Handheld Learning Conference in October 2009 in London). A few books are on the market, such as Kukulka-Hulme and Traxler (2005) *Mobile Learning: A Handbook for Educators and Trainers* and Metcalf (2006) *M Learning: Mobile Learning and Performance in the Palm of Your Hand*, but dissemination in this dynamic field is principally carried out through online publications as well as conference presentations and proceedings. Anecdotally, the *British Journal of Educational Technology* did not publish any article about m-learning until January 2009 – but it then had two peer-reviewed articles about m-learning in that issue (Cavus and Ibrahim 2009, Wang, Wu and Wang 2009); this emblematises the fact that m-learning is becoming “the next big thing” at the interface of education and technology.

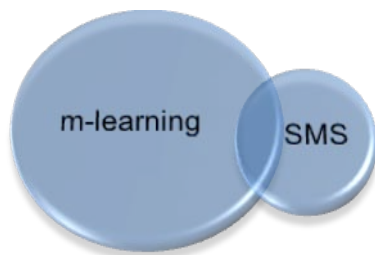
As a new area of research, m-learning has the following four characteristics:

1. The important role of commercial providers (as many private organisations already appreciate the underpinning business opportunities, be it to provide ready-made contents, to develop targeted software applications or to train users/teachers in the pedagogy of m-learning)
2. A truly global dimension, with case studies and examples from all around the world: m-learning actually transcends the socio-economic boundaries between developed and developing countries
3. Not an established canon yet, no key model or founding text, but rather the emergence of comparable practices and conceptualisations from a range of educational settings (at all levels: primary, secondary, tertiary)

4. The potential to address other contemporary educational agendas such as lifelong learning and continual professional development for mature learners and established practitioners.

SMS and m-learning

SMS is only one part of m-learning. SMS is already popular outside academia: we are mainly importing and adapting a tool that successfully exists elsewhere. This partly explains the doubts expressed by some people (students, tutors, outsiders) when they first hear about the pedagogical use of SMS. The same is true when students are asked to use Web 2.0 tools such as wikis and blogs: firstly, one needs to adapt the tools, and secondly, ones need to reassure everybody that this pedagogically sound.



SMS is mainly (though not only) sent through mobile phones. Mobile phones have become “high tech” devices, often with built-in cameras, web browsers and the ability to run a wide range of applications (it is often said that there is more processing power in most mobile phones than was used to land man on the moon). SMS itself is “low tech” though, compared to the use of sounds, images and videos that can make m-learning more creative and more dynamic, especially in the arts. Based on short texts (160 characters – 150 characters on some older phones), SMS has three advantages: (a) it forces users to express themselves concisely; (b) texts use little memory which keeps costs down, (c) no extra technological training is required.

How can SMS be used in higher arts education?

This section proposes a typology of possible uses of SMS, with three categories/purposes: direct teaching; teaching-related; contact & communication with students.

(i) Direct teaching

- Interactions: asking questions or sharing views/information (tutor to students, students to tutor, students to students) -- before/during/after class
- Learning activities (e.g. quiz questions, instructions, even mini theoretical input)
- Tasks for consolidation, suggestions for revision

(ii) Teaching-related

- Personalised support
- Motivational messages sent to students
- Feedback on lectures, ideas or projects
- Alerts to check email (with longer message) or to visit webpages (newsfeed)

(iii) Contact & communication

- Timely information:
 - Reminders of key dates, homework, preparation, deadlines
 - Cancelled/rescheduled classes (or change of room, late arrival etc)
 - Update (on marking, assignments available for collection etc)
 - Overdue library books

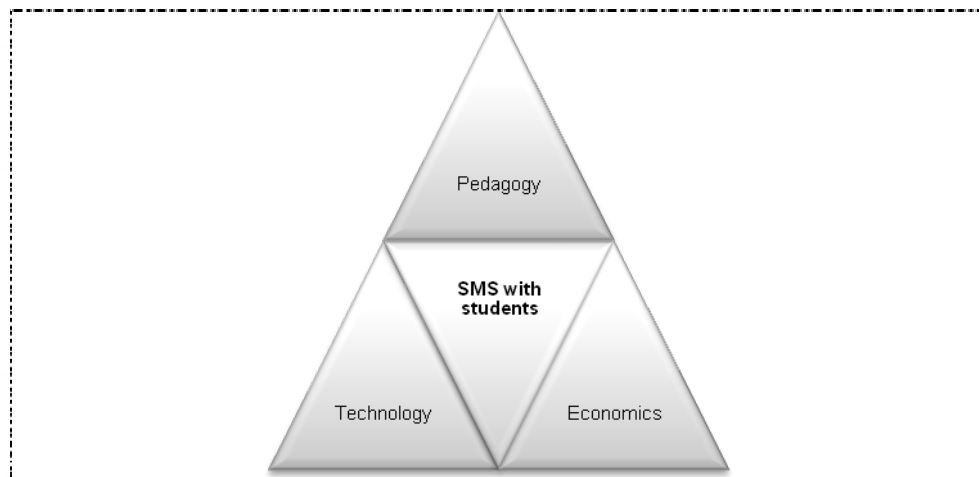
- Contacting students:
 - Late/missing students
 - Off-site students (e.g. on placement, at workplace, distance learning etc)

The bullet points above show that m-learning can be applied to all arts disciplines, from design to media and from dance to architecture. SMS has no intrinsic value per se – it is a flexible aid that can be adapted to the context and the contents, for example:

- Sending a reminder to students to read an article about Antonin Artaud for next Wednesday class
- Asking questions to students who are visiting a museum and are required to find specific information
- Sending task-based texts to students during a seminar to guide their group discussions of post-Hegelian aesthetics
- Telling students of a last-minute change of plan because a guest speaker from the Arts Council has cancelled
- Keeping in touch with students working off-site on a creative partnership
- Congratulating a nervous student just after their presentation/performance

Proposing a practical framework: how to start with SMS?

In order to preempt and prevent problems, three key areas should be taken into account prior to starting with SMS with students. For mnemonics, they start with the letters P-E-T.



- Pedagogy → What is the pedagogical aim, what are the (intended learning) outcomes? The rationale must be anchored in pedagogy, as opposed to using the available technology just because it exists. Pedagogical considerations also refer to students' demographics ('digital natives' vs 'digital migrants', to use a phrase from Prensky (2001) often encountered in the e-learning literature) as well as their learning needs/styles. SMS may not be suited/suitable to all types of students but some may find it refreshing, innovative, beneficial.
- Economics → What are the cost implications for users – both teachers and students? Some networks provide packages of unlimited texts; others have schemes of "bulk purchasing of SMS". Any investment would remain minor though, unlike the implementation of large scale learning management systems or virtual learning environments. Parameters and expectations need to be clarified in advance e.g. are students supposed to reply.
- Technology → The vast majority of current phones, if not all, can receive and send SMS; this would be different for other aspects of m-learning involving images (where quality would highly matter), sound (playing music or teachers' explanations) and videos (to watch some podcasts

of mini-lectures for instance). Technology is unlikely to be a problem but this must be checked (e.g. some students may not always have access to a mobile phone).

Dealing with myths, resistance and reluctance

The following issues are often raised by people new to the idea of SMS in an educational context.

Question 1	Isn't it expensive?
Answer	With regard to resources, SMS saves time and money, compared to the cost of post or telephone, let alone expensive tools of e-learning and blended learning.
Question 2	Is it really appropriate for me and my students?
Answer	Irrespective of the subject, any cohort of students can benefit; it is a flexible learning aid, it is not subject-specific.
Question 3	Students use SMS for social networking and their life outside their studies; isn't there a risk to have the two areas mix?
Answer	This is a false problem. Many students themselves already blur the distinction between 'the social' and 'the academic', for example using their phones as diaries. Experience shows that students are willing to text their tutors as they text other people. This is an extension, an overlap, not a conflict.
Question 4	What if students are unwilling to use their phones for their studies?
Answer	This question is often asked – but again it seems to be a myth that students will be reluctant to use their phone for their studies. They must be asked first – but if the purpose, aims and benefits are clear, why would they refuse?
Question 5	Should we use abbreviated 'txt'?
Answer	Because of the 160 characters limit, the language of SMS (sometimes called textese, txt, txtspk) relies on abbreviations (b4, 2mro, hmwk) – this aspect remains controversial though, as some tutors are reluctant to use abbreviations they would not accept in students' assignments.
Question 6	What about issues of privacy?
Answer	Students would need to grant their permission to receive SMS – though ultimately this is not different from using a postal address to send a printed letter.
Question 7	Do students need to know when they will receive texts?
Answer	This ought to be clarified and stipulated (e.g. Tuesdays and Thursdays between 10am and 8pm), bearing in mind that technological delays may always occur.
Question 8	What is the biggest risk?
Answer	The biggest risk is to appear to use technology just because it is there. There must be a pedagogical rationale explicitly articulated. SMS and m-learning need to be integrated in wider learning strategies.

Summary

SMS in educational contexts incl. higher arts education presents the following advantages:

- Quick, discreet, to the point and inexpensive
- Can improve student motivation and retention
- Can involve students more actively/interactively
- Can contact any group or individual immediately
- Students can text in for help and advice
- No need for familiarisation or training

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