Centre for Higher Education Practice

Project 140 - *Student Communication with 140 Characters or Less*

> **The aim of the project was to investigate the use of text messaging and microblogging (Twitter) as communication tools in a large year one module.**

Overview

COMMUNICATING WITH STUDENTS A two-way SMS texting service has been implemented in a year one semester one introductory chemistry module using the services of TxtTools.co.uk. Students (n= ca.200) were encouraged to send questions and queries to a dedicated text number (88020) prefixed with the module code both during lectures and at other times when support with the module material was required.   Questions were answered either in the lecture theatre, at a subsequent tutorial or via a reply back to the student's mobile phone. Announcements to the class group were sent via bulk text messaging as well as by email and using a dedicated Twitter page for the module.

COMMUNICATING STUDENT RESULTS SMS texting was also used as a rapid system for communicating results of a class test following a peer assessment exercise. With knowledge only of the student's registration number a text message can be sent to a dedicated TxtTools number and then forwarded by mail filtering rules to the recipient student's phone as shown in Figure 1.
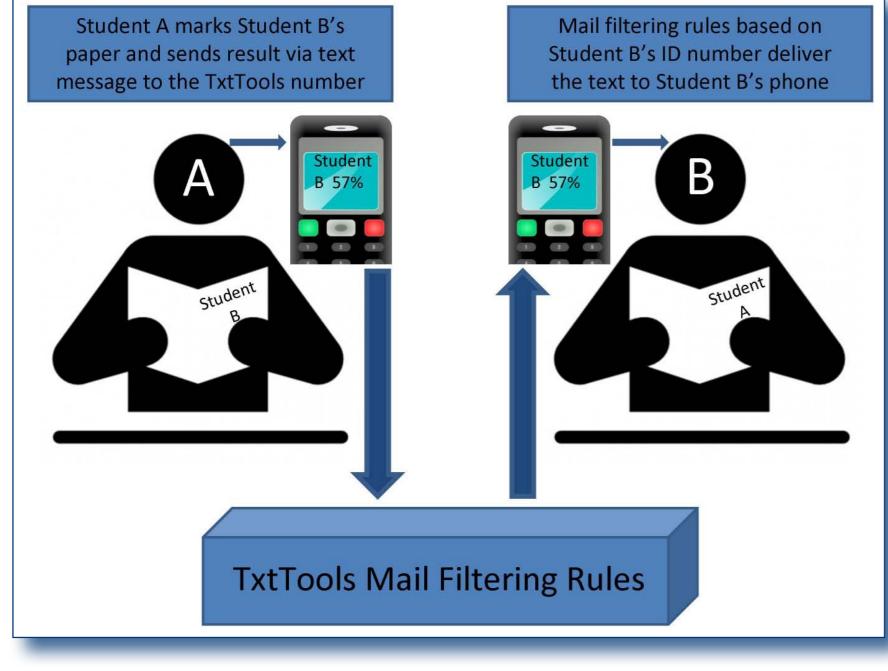

Figure 1: Process of directing text messages to a student's phone by mail filtering rules based on student registration number

VOTING Text messaging was further evaluated as an in-class voting system to conduct short multiple choice quizzes on material being covered in a bioanalytical chemistry lecture. Such quizzes can take place without the need for bespoke handsets or specialist software and students may be automatically sent a text message with additional follow-up information dependent on the answers they provide to questions.

Evaluation/Impact/Results

During the course of the semester some 66 text messages were received from students with the content varying from administrative queries about timetables and room numbers to specific questions relating to lecture content. A few texts were sent during lectures but the bulk of the messages were received after lectures or tutorials had taken place. The Wordle in Figure 2 provides a representation of the main themes texted by students.

Figure 2: Wordle of themes of queries sent by text message

COMMUNICATING WITH STUDENTS To evaluate the texting service students were provided with an anonymous questionnaire at the end of semester and 123 responses were received. When asked if texting provided a useful platform for asking questions 89% of students agreed while 11% neither agreed nor disagreed.

One student claimed to have sent in excess of 10 text messages as part of the module while two students sent between 7-10 messages. 11% of students sent 4-6 messages while the majority (55%) sent 1-3. 31% of students did not send any messages at all. Of those who did send a text message 72% agreed that they received a prompt response.

COMMUNICATING RESULTS Responses to a question regarding the use of texting to provide feedback of marks following a class test saw 14% of students expressing indifference while 8% disagreed that this was a useful exercise. This view was precipitated by the fact that not all students attended this post-test peer assessment event and so not all scripts were marked. The issue was not related to the technology but rather lack of student engagement with the peer assessment process.

VOTING Three short multiple choice quizzes were interspersed throughout a three-hour lecture, two relating specifically to the material and the third as a reflective question to gauge student confidence in their understanding of the material at the end of the class. Approximately 45 students engaged in each quiz and a pie-chart of responses may be generated as a visual representation of how the class has voted as shown in Figure 3.
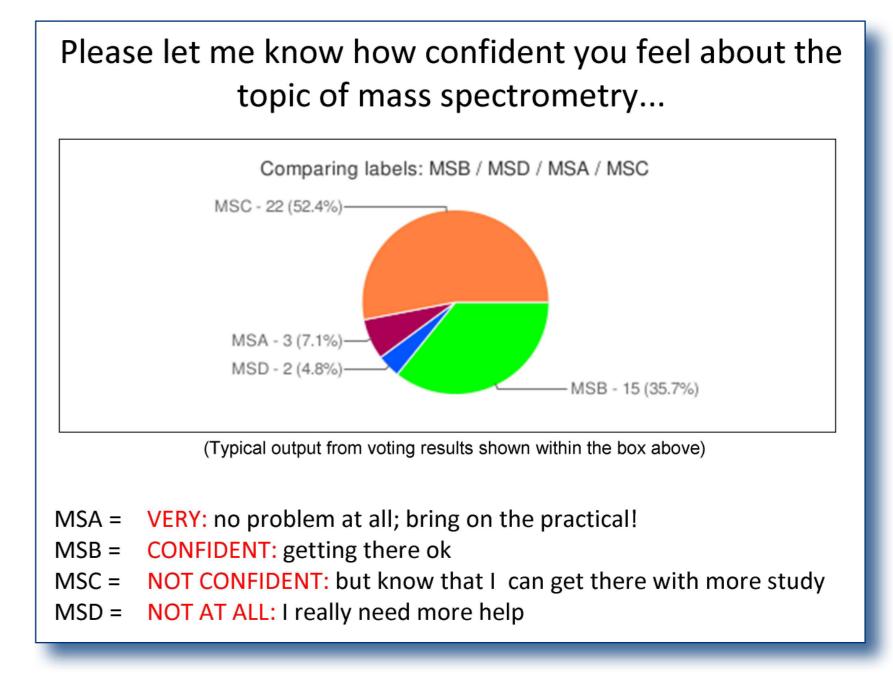

Figure 3: Typical question used for in-class voting exercise and the output produced

The results of the evaluation of the voting process showed that students generally agreed with the following statements:

> ✓ **Voting quizzes are a great way of keeping attention in class**
> ✓ **Found the voting procedure straightforward**
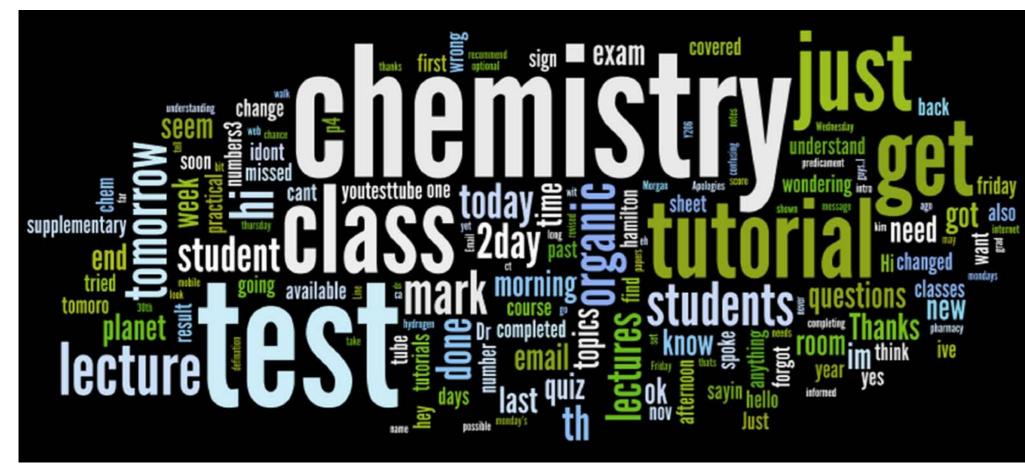> ✓ **Didn't mind sending a few text messages to take part in the quiz**
> ✓ **Would be happy for text voting to be used in more classes or modules**

Interestingly only 45% students agreed that they would prefer to use a handset for voting instead of their mobile phone.

TWITTER A Twitter page for the module facilitated broadcast of relevant announcements rather than any discussion of module content and only attracted about 10% of the cohort as followers. When asked about how students would prefer to receive information about the module, email was the preferred option followed by text messaging and then the module website. The Twitter page was rated fourth, however some students expressed interest in a Facebook page being established for the module instead.

Transferability

A two-way texting system can be readily transferred to other disciplines. A licence is required to use the TxtTool system and text messages need to be bought in bulk so that communication with students may be facilitated. For in class voting events students pay to send the text message at their normal rate so this cost to the student must be taken into consideration when designing the assessment. The process could also be used for distance learners to assist with inclusivity issues and to enhance communication.

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