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Using Texting to Promote Learning and Literacy

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Using Texting to Promote Learning and Literacy

By: Alise Brann, Tracy Gray, and PowerUp WHAT WORKS (2014)

Overview

Although research is ongoing, many educators have found benefits to incorporating students' love of texting into classroom instruction.

Text messaging is one of the more popular pastimes these days, with billions of estimated users worldwide. Given this popularity, many educators and parents have started to wonder whether there might be any educational benefits in texting.

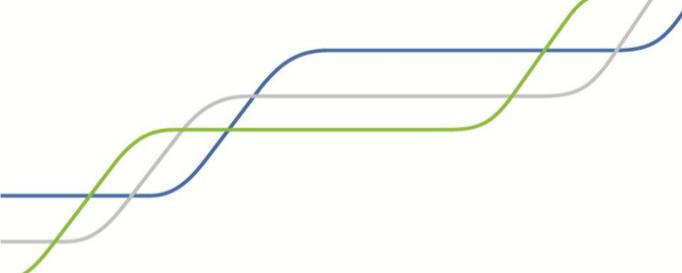
Texting and "text speak" can be used to help build foundational reading skills such as word recognition and phonological awareness. You can also use texting to generate discussions of formal and informal language and writing for different tasks, audiences, and purposes, which are necessary skills for meeting college and career readiness standards in reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening. Although it may not seem like it, texting is writing, and students who text frequently are engaging in frequent writing. Therefore, it makes sense to harness all of that energy and use it as a way to help your students build their writing skills!

Using in Your Classroom

Although texting in schools is often viewed as a distraction, some schools are beginning to look at ways to harness student interest in texting for educational purposes.

If your students are avid texters, consider these activities to build literacy skills:

Use texting to launch discussions on formal versus informal language, comparing syntax, language, grammar, and usage of text and IM [instant messaging] with formal, written English. Recognize that texting IS writing! Although it may not be traditional writing, every text and instant message your students send is engaging



them with language and print. Take advantage of student activities to build relevant lessons on writing for different audiences and purposes.

Have your students use texting to create short summaries of longer, more formal pieces of literature; for example, how would the famous dialogue between Romeo and Juliet in the orchard ("But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun ...") have been different if conducted via text? Do relationships and meanings suffer from the medium?

Introduce your students to Google SMS, ChaCha, or other texting answer services. Users can send a text message query and quickly receive definitions, translations, maps, directions, and other pieces of information that can serve as just-in-time supports for reading, anytime and anywhere.

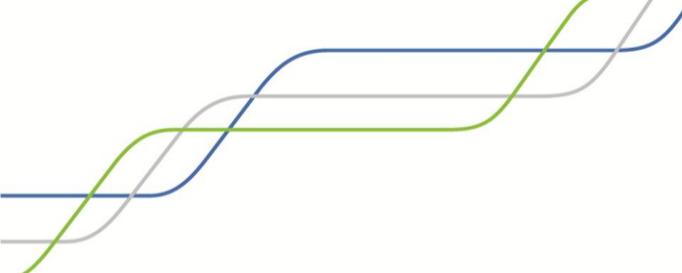
Allow students to text responses during class discussions. This can be beneficial for students with learning disabilities or those who are English language learners (ELLs). Often, these students may struggle to find the right words during high-pressure situations. Allowing them to think about an answer and compose it before responding may increase participation in class discussions.

Encourage your students to write often, whether through e-mail, IM, text, blogging, or another medium; recognize that all writing is important. Recent research has shown that students who regularly use "text speak" have better word recognition, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Consider that in order for students to utilize abbreviations, shortenings, symbols, slang, and nontraditional spellings, they need to have some idea about how language and syntax work.

What the Research Says

When considering the use of mobile phones and texting in your classroom, it is important to ensure that your students understand texting charges and that parents are aware of your plans. For example, you may send a note home suggesting a text reminder of important assignments that both parents and students can sign up for.





However, many families may have limited texting plans, so this should be a consideration. Even if students are not actively texting as part of a lesson, it can be used as an engaging discussion point to draw attention to the evolution of language and how writing may change for different audiences and purposes.

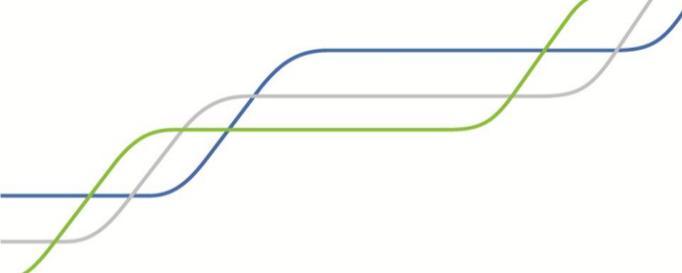
To date, little research has been done about texting and its educational benefits for students (both with and without disabilities), but there are some applications that have promising uses for struggling students. Some teachers have begun allowing students to text answers and comments during classroom discussions. In one example of the benefits of this use of texting, an educator in Texas asked her ELLs to text responses to her and their classmates. She said, "Not only did I have more replies than I expected, but the questions were open-ended so students used more English ... I had students who rarely join in discussions in class share ten or more responses" (Bernard, 2008). This usage could also benefit other struggling students and students with learning disabilities who may not feel confident about participating in class discussions. Allowing students to text their answers means students can take a moment to think about what they want to say and compose their answers carefully.

Having students translate works of literature into text speak is another practice that warrants additional study (Bernard, 2008; Shuler, 2009). Initial anecdotal findings suggest that these activities may help students develop and demonstrate understanding of the content being discussed in class (Shuler, 2009).

The use of mobile devices and cell phones for learning is widespread outside of the United States, especially in nations where home computer ownership is not the norm. In these instances, mobile devices can help serve as a bridge between school and home, and function as an "anytime, anywhere" learning platform (Shuler, 2009). Many countries are exploring the use of texting to deliver targeted educational content to students.

There has been significant concern that the proliferation of informal writing, instant messaging, and text speak has led to a decrease in students' writing quality. Although studies on this topic are still ongoing, early data seem to suggest that this is not the case. In one study of language exams written by 16-year-olds in the United Kingdom between 1980 and 2004, researchers found that the quality of





writing had improved (Massey, Elliott, & Johnson, 2005). Thurlow (2003) reviewed more than 500 text messages sent by British teenagers and "concluded that the messages demonstrated adept and creative communicative ability, and did not demonstrate the corruption of language feared by many" (as cited in Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009, p. 146).

In fact, recent research suggests that "textisms" (e.g., abbreviations, contractions, symbols, nonconventional spellings) are positively related to reading ability, vocabulary, and phonological awareness (Cheng, 2009; Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009). In 10- to 12-year-old children, the researchers found that the "extent of children's textism use was able to predict significant variance in their word reading ability after taking into account age, individual differences in vocabulary, working memory, phonological awareness, non-word reading ability, and the age at which participants obtained their first mobile phone" (Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009, p. 155). That is, students who were using text speak the most frequently tended to be more adept with language. The authors also concluded that use of textisms may be "contributing to reading development in a way that goes beyond simple phonologically based explanations" (p. 155).

However, a limitation of these studies is that they focus on teens and young adults with already developed written language skills. As the younger generation grows up with cell phone ownership and texting, it will be critical to determine the impact of texting on literacy when children are learning texting in tandem with more formal academic language (Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009).

More research is still needed to determine whether the use of texting has educational benefits, and to frame the conversation about texting in terms of evidence and data rather than the anecdotal commentary seen in mass media discussions of teen cell phone use. However, the available research does seem to suggest that, at the very least, texting is not harming youths' writing skills and, in some cases, may actually have educational benefits.

References

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