



Travel and Tourism lecturer Kenny Park has had extensive involvement with the use of ICT at Glasgow's Cardonald College. He was recently seconded to the post of Blended Learning Technologist, as part of the BlendEd project – one of the Funding Council's six E-Transformation projects.

According to Cardonald's Kenny Park, one of the lessons that colleges should be learning from the business world is that if you want your customers to listen to what you are saying, you need to need to find the right way to talk to them.

'At Cardonald College we feel we've taken a step towards finding that new way of communicating with our students with a recently completed pilot project,' says Kenny. 'And this new approach doesn't involve talking at all, but texting.'

The original idea for the Texting Pilot came from the feeling amongst my fellow guidance tutors that there had to be better ways than the traditional phone or letter for getting in touch with students who, for various reasons but most often because of sustained absence, had to be contacted by their guidance tutor.

Intervention

Says Kenny: 'If we could find more effective ways of communicating with students then there was more chance that we could help students with study problems. It's often the case that students who are struggling with the demands of full-time learning use absence as a means of avoiding the problem and of course very soon the absence itself becomes the problem.'

'Early intervention can break that circle - if you can get the student to come in and talk to you.'

The answer Kenny and his colleagues came up with was the mobile phone.

The perfect means of communicating with our students was, literally, at hand.

Top Twelve Message Types

1. Checking the reason for absence
2. Informing students of a room/time change
3. Arranging a meeting with students
4. Reminding students of outstanding or late work
5. Reminding students of deadlines
6. Communicating advice on remediation work to be carried out
7. Checking if the student was OK
8. Public relations messages
9. Checking on the outcome of an event
10. Sending assessment results to students
11. Reminding students of an event
12. Communicating general information

'It was very clear that the mobile had become the 'must have' accessory for most students and that texting, in turn, had become the standard way of communicating with friends. In fact trying to stop students reading text messages, in or out of class, was like asking the waves to stop rolling up the beach. Therefore the perfect means of communicating with our students was, literally, at hand.'

The proposed project was an extension of an idea that had been introduced recently where Divisional Administrators could text to a student phone from a web interface provided by a third party www.textanywhere.net. To take this to a proper pilot phase funding was secured from the College's retention fund and a plan developed with the aim of:

- developing a 'texting' tool that would be integrated within the college's online registration system, UNIT-e
- training staff in the use of the tool
- analysing the way the system was used by both staff and students
- gauging the opinions of staff and students who used the system
- testing both the technology and the administrative systems used for the delivery of text messages
- deciding if and how the scheme should be implemented across the college.

The pilot covered the areas of Business, Retail, Travel and Tourism, together with January start courses IT4U and Access to the Service Industries. (January start courses have traditionally had problems with retention and achievement.) A month into the pilot a second division, Fashion and Design, also became involved.

Technology

'The first stage of the project was to put the technology and infrastructure in place,' explains Kenny. We collected student mobile phone numbers as well as permission to send text messages to the student phone.

'Our Divisional Administrator then collated student telephone numbers and created a spreadsheet which listed each mobile number against a student reference number.'

Senior Information Systems Officer Brian Gallagher and his assistant, Neil Thomson, worked with www.textanywhere.net to develop a tool that would mesh with the student records system. This allowed staff to bookmark classes, use message templates or compose their own messages, which could then be sent to an individual, group or whole class.

The project kicked off in February with a short, 10-minute staff induction. As a pilot it was important to be able to collect data on usage together with other, qualitative indicators. Feedback was collected from four sources:

- the message log that included who sent the message and the content of the message
- a questionnaire completed by staff
- a questionnaire completed by students
- informal discussion with the staff using the system.

Hi *****, just a txt 2 ask y u wer off college 2day? ne probs ring 2*2 3**1, if not, c u 2mrw'

'The message log showed perhaps the most interesting information about the pilot and gave us the best statistical data,' says Kenny. 'Between 3rd February and 26th May 468 messages were sent. This exceeded our initial expectations and was a very positive indicator in terms of the level of staff interest.'

'Our initial assumption had been that the messages would be overwhelmingly about student absences but this was not the case

– for example 26% related to messages about room or timetable changes. This type of communication would have been extremely time-consuming without the text service, as it would involve someone phoning individual students.'

Text Talk

Some staff were able to communicate in the 'text vernacular':

'Hi *****, just a txt 2 ask y u wer off college 2day? ne probs ring 2*2 3**1, if not, c u 2mrw.'

Some messages were written with empathy and used to let the student know that the tutor was concerned:

'Hope you are ok. Remember I am always here to listen, if you need to talk.'

And an example of a message used for good public relations and motivation:

'Hey guys, hope you enjoyed your crème egg, just a wee text to say have a good Easter weekend and I shall see you on Wednesday.'

Nearly 90% of the students surveyed felt that the system had improved communications and 96% rated the information they received as useful. There was a small and unexplained rash of lost phones during the pilot but overall students saw it as a welcome initiative and not in any sense a manifestation of the Big Brother impulse.

Kenny adds: 'Evidence on retention is less clear at the moment but with such a relatively small pilot and with the difficulty of establishing baseline comparisons this is hardly surprising.

'We believe that there can certainly be a retention effect, over time, but more importantly we may have found a new and very powerful way to communicate with our students. This may no longer be just a guidance tool but also a motivational, marketing and service tool.

'Discussion is on-going in the college as to how we take this forward – whether we conduct a larger trial first, perhaps across a whole faculty - before considering a possible roll out.

'There are lots of issues to think about, lots of factors to take into account in weighing up the possible benefits. But one thing this pilot study has shown us and that is – it's good to talk and even better to text!'

www.cardonald.ac.uk