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TECH RESEARCH BRIEF

Using Texting to Promote Learning and Literacy

Center for Technology Implementation

Overview

Although research into texting as an educational tool is ongoing, many educators have found it beneficial to incorporate students' love of texting into classroom instruction.

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

Texting and "text speak" can be used to help build foundational reading skills, such as word recognition and phonological awareness. It can also be used to generate discussions around formal and informal language and writing for different tasks, audiences, and purposes, all of 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 are frequent texters are therefore frequent writers. As such, it makes sense to harness all of this energy to help your students build their writing skills!

In Your Classroom

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

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

- Use texting to launch discussions around formal and informal language by comparing the syntax, language, grammar, and usage of text messages and instant messages (IM) 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 and 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, instant messaging, texting, blogging, or another medium—and 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 whether to use mobile phones and texting in your classroom, it is important to ensure that your students understand that texting may incur 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, but it is important to keep in mind that many families may have limited texting plans. 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, there is limited research on the educational benefits of texting for students (both with and without disabilities), but there are some applications that have promising uses for struggling students. Some teachers now allow students to text answers and comments during classroom discussions. An educator in Texas, for example, asked her ELLs to text responses to her and their classmates. Discussing the benefits of this approach, she explained: "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).

Outside the United States, it is not uncommon to use mobile devices and cell phones for learning, especially in nations where home computer ownership is unusual. In these instances, mobile devices can help serve as a bridge between school and home, and they can function as an "anytime, anywhere" learning platform (Shuler, 2009). As such, 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 (Wood, Jackson, Hart, Plester, et al., 2011; Wood, Kemp, Waldron, & Hart, 2014). In one study of language exams written by 16-year-old students in the United Kingdom between 1980 and 2004, researchers found that the quality of writing had improved (Massey, Elliott, & Johnson, 2005). Thurlow (2003), meanwhile, 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). Wood and colleagues (2011, 2014) also found that texting did not appear to adversely affect primary and secondary school students' grammatical understanding or elementary students' literacy skills development.

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; Hsu, 2013; Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009). In a recent study, the researcher found that elementary-aged students with dyslexia who used "textisms" had the same level of performance in word recognition and meaning recognition as their typically developing peers (Hsu, 2013). In another study of 10- to 12-year-old children, 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), meaning that students who used text speak 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).

It is important to note, however, that these studies focus on teens and young adults who have 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). It will also be important for teachers to provide learning opportunities to help students develop digital literacies (Ortlieb, 2012).

More research is needed to determine whether texting has educational benefits, and to frame the conversation about texting in terms of evidence and data rather than the anecdotal mass media commentary about 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.

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