As the first generation to grow up with mobile access from childhood, post-millennial Generation Z students currently attending higher learning institutions have shown a clear affinity for touchscreens. According to the Pew Research Center, a whopping 92 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds are thought to own a smartphone — a fact that highlights the technology's considerable value within student engagement strategies.

That said, not all communication methods are equal. While emails, automated calls, and even messages sent through proprietary school-use apps are all part of an effective school communication plan, SMS and MMS messages are especially useful tools to reach eyes in a learning context. Put simply, students are almost certain to look at SMS messages, making them king of all classroom communication solutions.

Additionally, educators don't have to program every student's phone number into their phones to leverage messaging. API-backed solutions designed to make messaging more classroom-friendly negate the medium's downsides, giving higher-learning educators unprecedented access to student eyes, wherever their students happen to be.
The Pros and Cons of SMS Messaging in the Classroom

It is difficult to downplay the unprecedented access SMS messaging and associated solutions provide to tech-forward institutions and their educators. In pre-computer days, dorm phones and localized cable-access solutions were the best possible way to spread a class-specific mass message outside of the classroom. Once PCs became powerful and affordable enough for mass adoption, most institutions moved on to email and web-based portal solutions for quick dissemination.

In terms of driving student engagement, SMS messaging represents a next step from the computer’s revolutionary utility. The above-mentioned adoption rate, combined with the fact that students are more or less programmed to perk up the moment they hear a notification arrive on their phone, makes SMS messages perfect for spreading information both inside and outside the classroom. For example, if an educator wants to send a link for after-class viewing or update students about a scheduling change, SMS offers greater immediacy and access than an email would.

But SMS messages do come with some challenges. First is the simple fact that educators serve numerous students, making it implausible or impossible to program each one’s number into their device. Scrolling through a thousands-deep list of contacts to select 30 or 40 names would quickly become an exercise in endurance. Moreover, many educators would hesitate to use their private devices to disseminate messages to such a large group; between pranks, mistaken texts, and overly chatty students, discomfort with sharing personal phone numbers is both understandable and wise.

_SMS-based solutions are only as flexible as the back-end solutions powering them, and APIs are extremely flexible._

SMS Evolved for Student Engagement Strategies

Because of these factors, tools that shape standard SMS into a powerful set of anonymized communication solutions have immediate value. Instead of shouldering the medium’s drawbacks to embrace its potential, educators can realize all of the good with none of the bad.

This high-level need is what makes SMS-focused application programming interfaces (APIs) so powerful for student engagement strategies. Designed to augment locally developed software solutions with powerful communicative capabilities, these endlessly flexible tools can be used to add all manner of SMS-based functions to existing communication infrastructure.

In practical terms, this means colleges and universities can build tools allowing educators to send a message from a web-based platform, and students — now engaged through their preferred channel — respond with their individual phone numbers shielded from view. For class polls, schedule changes, and other situations where a group of students need to be informed of something quickly, such a solution combines the access of web portals and university email (both of which students may check infrequently) with the immediacy of SMS — a great combination by any measure.

The Flexibility of APIs and Communication Tools
While large classes are one obvious fit for this sort of solution, the flexibility of APIs and the near-universal reach of SMS messaging make custom-built classroom communication tools — such as an anonymous messaging app — useful anywhere one person needs to communicate with a large group.

Consider an instructor taking a small group of high-achieving students to an award ceremony on the other side of the state. Instead of calling or messaging each one individually to share meeting information or request a check-in, the educator can simply use the anonymous tool to send and receive updates. This is faster than individual messages and far less messy than lengthy group messages — the latter of which may require students to share their private numbers with the whole group, whether they care to or not.

Inside the classroom, a similar tool could be highly useful for an educator attempting to track preferences on a certain matter across a large head count. Students can anonymously vote on a classroom matter (the date or content of an exam, for example) without having to raise their hands or expose their mobile number to the entire class. Professors facing canceled classes due to inclement weather could use an anonymized messaging resource to send specific study plans or schedule revisions with far higher read rates than email or messages via a university portal.

On the other hand, students concerned about specific classmates, class policies, or other matters could use an anonymized messaging service to send quick feedback or concerns that only reaches the instructor's eyes — and anonymously, at that.

SMS-based solutions are only as flexible as the back-end solutions powering them, and APIs are extremely flexible. The tools allow colleges and universities to build precisely the student engagement strategies their students and faculty desire, with deep functionality that would take teams of engineers and huge sums of money to build from scratch. With the sheer amount of time students spend staring at their touchscreens, it only makes sense that higher learning institutions would follow — and APIs allow them to shape the medium to their precise needs.

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