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Report from the Field

Retention Through Texting

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Like many programs, at Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) Adult Education program, we struggle to retain learners. LCCC offers an Adult Education program that serves the riverbend region of Southern Illinois. Our main campus is roughly 30 minutes north of St. Louis, Missouri. We offer free, multi-level Adult Basic and Adult Secondary Education (ABE/ASE) non-credit classes that can be attended in person or via Zoom. In fiscal year 2024 (FY24), we served 429 adults who attended class for at least 12 hours. While we have an ESL program, the majority of our learners are adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are enrolled in our high school equivalency (HSE) program. We have noticed that learners who make it past the first 12 hours of participation are more likely to stay enrolled. In this paper, I describe an action research project that I conducted to explore a more systematic approach retaining students in the early days of their program participation.

In FY23, about 18.5% of our learners never made it to 12 attendance hours. Even though 81.5% of our learners completed 12 or more attendance hours, nearly half did not earn the required 40 attendance hours to take the post-test in reading and math using the CASAS GOALS. In all, 57.4% of learners who enrolled in our program stopped out before they had a chance to achieve a Measurable Skill Gain (MSG). We are not alone in facing this challenge. An Illinois Community College Board Retention Specialist reported that an analysis of FY20 and FY21 enrollment data indicated that 40–50% of learners in the state leave their programs before reaching 12 attendance hours.

At LCCC, there are two types of staff who are most likely to reach out to learners with poor attendance: pathway advocates and class coordinators. Advocates do initial intake and contact learners periodically through their enrollment. Coordinators often teach the classes they coordinate and are responsible for overseeing day-to-day class operations. Because coordinators record attendance, they are the staff members most likely to become quickly aware of a drop off in participation. However, we do not have a standardized approach to contacting learners who start missing classes. Keeping track of whose attendance is lacking and when, and then reaching out to each learner individually, can be a challenging task for anyone. This is especially true when coordinators are part-time employees. A solution is necessary that will enable educators to contact new learners regularly without it being burdensome.

Guiding Research: "Teacher Immediacy"

In his study on learner retention, Quigley (1998) observed that helping learners stay past the first three weeks of enrollment is crucial to their longer-term retention. As a way to address this, he draws on the work of Christophel and Gorham (1995, as cited in Quigley, 1998), who identified the importance of "teacher immediacy," in which the teacher works quickly and explicitly to develop a relationship with learners. The term also implies that learners have the space and time to communicate their own personal learning needs to their teacher and receive the support and help they need. Quigley found that teacher immediacy plays a critical role in retention. While it might not be equally important for all learners, it is especially crucial for learners "who probably have the highest chance of dropping out in the first few critical weeks by virtue of the dispositional barriers they must overcome" (Quigley, 1998, p. 9). Quigley's study largely focused on barriers as they relate to motivation. Using a three-step interview process, Quigley and his team attempted to ascertain factors that may lead to a learner

becoming unmotivated and ultimately separating from the program. Among the factors that were identified were "skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty" (Quigley, 1998, p. 9). Quigley attempted to link these behaviors to a learner's prior educational experiences. He then sought to use teacher immediacy as a way to mitigate the impact of negative past experiences on a learner's future education. Surprisingly, he found that the means by which teacher immediacy was established was less important than simply receiving some kind of targeted intervention aimed at developing teacher immediacy. Despite using a variety of interventions—counselor support, small class sizes, and one-on-one tutoring—Quigley determined that learners who received any of the interventions were more likely to remain in their programs. The priority is to immediately provide support for learners with potential barriers from the start, especially during the first few weeks of class.

Despite its age, Quigley's research correlates with more recent research. Fong (2017) and his team found "motivation and self-perception to be the strongest predictors of achievement and persistence for community college students" (as cited by Schneider, 2022, p. 31). Schneider, in his article that evaluates community college retention efforts, concludes that community colleges need to be cultivating "institutional attachment" through "embedded retention and early intervention" (2022, p. 33). Schneider observes that "community college students make their strongest connection in the classroom," and that, because of this reality, educators are on the front lines for creating and sustaining these connections (2022, p. 35). The implication here is that educators are building relationships with their learners and that these relationships play a critical role in student perseverance.

Establishing Teacher Immediacy Through Texting

Admittedly, Quigley's research is dated. It is striking, however, that despite the nearly 30-year gap, Quigley's observations still seem timely. This inspired me to develop an innovation that would not only bolster retention but also be sustainable. I decided to try fostering teacher immediacy through texting and conducted an action research project to understand the impact of this effort. Although Quigley identified specific learners upon enrollment for special attention during their first three weeks, for simplicity I texted all learners in week one and then focused on those showing attendance difficulties during the next two weeks. Retention rates were then evaluated for the learners who were texted and compared with learner data from a previous semester.

In choosing this innovation, I recognized that one major change since Quigley conducted his research is the potential of technology in developing teacher immediacy. In my experience, learners prefer texting to phone calls or emails. Phone calls may go unanswered, especially if learners do not recognize the caller number. In a text, however, I am able to identify myself, thus making a prompt response more likely. While this is also true of emails, learners who were interviewed during this project found texting to be more convenient and personal.

Some studies have concluded that individualized texting to learners can contribute to their academic progress (Alamprese et al., 2022). Academic progress is less likely if learners are not retained in programs. The first step is to improve attendance. My approach was to establish teacher immediacy by texting learners. In this way, I could build personal connection, offer support, and answer questions using a convenient and sustainable strategy.

Action Research Procedure

Based on Quigley's research and the affordances of texting, my plan was for learners to receive interventional texts from me when they missed three or four classes in a row, and again if they are dropped from the class. The hope of this proposed strategy would be to foster teacher immediacy during the first three weeks of a learner's enrollment in class. I anticipated that this would increase learner retention rates and course completions. Because our program already had a shared Google Voice (GV) account to call or text learners, I had a texting tool at my disposal.

GV has several advantages. Teachers do not need to use their personal phone numbers to keep in touch with learners. It also keeps our text and call history in one place, accessible to our entire staff. Moreover, GV can be used via a computer or phone app, so it is easy to access.

Unlike Quigley, who focused on learners with potential barriers, I first texted all new learners in one of my classes

that meets four mornings per week. Texts were sent during the first three weeks of our Spring B (March–May 2024) and Summer A (May–June 2024) semesters. Although I taught as part of a team during these two semesters, I took responsibility for texting learners during this action research project.

At the end of the first week of class, I sent learners the first text: "Hi Chris, this is William at Lewis & Clark. Thanks for joining our class! How was your first week?" My hope was that they would view this text as a personal invitation to start a conversation with me and feel encouraged to share any needs or questions they had. Then, if the learner missed a few classes in a row, they would receive another text: "Hi Chris, this is William at Lewis & Clark. How are things going? Is there anything we can do to help you?" And finally, if a learner had been dropped from the class, having missed it at least six times in a row, I once again encouraged them to return to class: "Hi Chris, this is William at Lewis & Clark. We miss you in class! Is there something our program can do to meet your needs better?"

After three weeks, I invited learners to discuss, either in person or over the phone, their experience of being texted. I asked whether they found the texts helpful and motivating. The goal of these interviews was to determine to what extent these texts played a role in developing teacher immediacy and supporting retention.

Results

The learners in this study can be organized into three different categories: those who did not respond; those who responded, and the texts helped them; and those who responded, but the texts did not help them.

A large percentage of the learners who were texted did not respond. In Spring B, 40% of the learners did not respond; in Summer A, almost 62% of learners did not respond. Of those who did respond, I tracked if and when they dropped from the class. In Spring B, about 17% of responders dropped in the first three weeks. 50% completed the eight-week class. In Summer A, early drops were similar, but completions improved significantly: 20% of responders dropped in the first three weeks, and 80% completed the class. For context, I compared this data to learners from the previous semester who did not receive texts. 10% of learners dropped in the first three weeks during Spring A, before the intervention was implemented. 60% of Spring A learners completed the class.

The retention data are inconclusive, but learner interviews told a different story. Every learner who participated in the interviews spoke positively about their text exchanges. For example, JM, with whom I had had an ongoing texting conversation, missed five straight classes during Spring B. After this string of absences, I reached out again, letting him know he was missed in class. He responded positively, indicating that he had "just been busy." I encouraged him to return to class, indicating that we have multiple learning options such as evening and Zoom classes. The very next day he returned to class. In an interview, he reported that our text conversations motivated him to return. "It made me feel good," JM said, "knowing that you guys care. … I'm just glad that you text me to check in." Although I never asked what kept him away, it seems clear that texting brought him back to the program. Importantly, he was one of many learners who indicated that it was important that they heard from their teacher, as opposed to another staff member.

Despite this positive feedback, I was surprised and a bit disappointed by the low response rate that the text messages received. Evidence from student interviews was clear: those who responded to these texts appreciated the outreach. And yet, large percentages of our students did not respond. What could explain this apparent contradiction? It is important to note that lack of responses does not necessarily imply that the texts were unhelpful. For instance, interviews revealed that some learners do not always have their own phones and thus texts may not reach their intended recipients. For example, CR explained that when he first enrolled, he provided his grandmother's number because he did not have a phone at the time. Another learner, KW, was sharing a number with a guardian.

Among those who responded to our texts, not all learners completed. For instance, in Spring B, three learners dropped before the end of class, with only one doing so during the first three weeks. They had various reasons for dropping. For instance, one learner reported childcare and scheduling issues. On multiple occasions, another learner shared via text that her work hours would not allow her to attend class. One positive, however, was that she felt comfortable regularly updating me on her work

schedule. This gave me hope that, if her schedule changed, she would return to the program. For another learner, the class was not a good fit for him because he only needed math assistance to complete his GED, which he could get using an asynchronous online learning platform the program offers. Another learner for whom texting was ineffective, SJ, pre-tested at NRS Level 6 in reading and math. She stopped attending because she did not need our classes to pass her GED tests. These learners' situations could not be addressed through teacher immediacy and make it clear that retention need not always be the goal. This makes it important to distinguish between learners who found getting texts helpful and those who do not need them. Some learners may already have the skills and motivation that teacher immediacy could otherwise foster; text messages may not alter their academic trajectory. For others, however, texting with their teacher may be a source of advocacy and support that they might not otherwise have in their educational journeys.

Based on interviews with learners, it seems that texting does help establish teacher immediacy. Our learners appreciated that they received individualized attention via texting. I think this would be especially helpful for programs that have larger class sizes where it is easier for learners to fall through the cracks. This potential problem can be addressed when learners receive personal communication from their teachers. Although my experience suggests texting might not work for all learners, if the hope is to build teacher immediacy, texting can be an effective strategy that is faster and more convenient than phone calls or emails.

Texting as a Sustainable Source of Teacher Immediacy

Beyond effectiveness, programs that want to adopt an approach similar to mine must develop a systematic plan that determines the logistics of sending these text messages. Many questions must be addressed, including: Who does the texting? What platform is used? When are learners texted? Which learners should receive texts? What content will be included in the text messages? There is no one correct answer to these questions, but once they are answered, procedures can be developed and implemented and then evaluated to engage in continuous improvement. However, as these procedures are implemented, it is vital that programs not create undue responsibilities on their instructional staff. In this study, it was clear that a shared texting account made texting easier.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Even though the quantitative data demonstrated inconsistent results, I believe that a longer-term study could demonstrate effectiveness. Even though it may not be a silver bullet that fully solves retention challenges, it is a relatively small-scale intervention that might be just what some learners need to help them stay on track in reaching their goals.

The importance of providing retention support interventions for new learners in the first three weeks of class is well documented. However, this begs the question: are the first three weeks of class a vulnerable time for all learners, or do potential barriers make some learners particularly vulnerable? For my research, I started by texting all new learners to see how doing so would affect our retention rates. This strategy also provided a baseline of data with which to compare future studies. Nevertheless, it is clear from my research that some learners did not benefit from these text messages. For some, this was due to having fewer barriers. Others never received the texts. And some had barriers that could not be addressed through teacher immediacy. Moving forward, I would like to target our text messaging toward learners who need help the most. However, determining who needs such intervention can be challenging. Quigley did extensive screening to identify learner barriers, but his methods seem impractical and unsustainable for most programs.

One approach would be to develop a system for identifying learners' barriers to perseverance. Our department already collects data during our intake process that may offer insight. For instance, new learners are given the opportunity to share personal academic challenges and resource insecurities. With such information, a list of potential barriers could be drafted. Based on these markers, learners with certain barriers could be flagged to receive text messages. Then, I could compare the data, seeing if our retention rates increase. If not, perhaps the list of barriers would need to be modified.

With that said, there is a chance that our indicators may not adequately identify all of our learners who may need additional support. If we only text learners who identify as having potential barriers, we might miss some learners who

would genuinely benefit from additional communication. Thus, a potential solution would be to start the process by simply observing and acting on the first signs of poor retention. Perhaps a text should explicitly acknowledge that the learner may be having difficulty attending class, and then ask what can be done to help.

No one single intervention can be effective for all learners. For example, when attempting to foster teacher immediacy through texting, we must be mindful that one intervention may not reach all learners and thus consider the importance of a range of strategies to reach them. If it is financial barriers, for instance, that prevent these learners from sending and receiving texts, these same barriers might put them at greater risk for stopping out of class.

Overall, more study is needed to determine the efficacy of alleviating learner barriers through texting. Retention-oriented texting appears promising as one way to foster teacher immediacy, particularly in the first few weeks of a class. From my experience, texting learners seems to be low-cost with respect to expense and time commitments. Furthermore, learners responded more favorably to texting than other forms of contact. However, future studies may gain insight by considering other variables, such as the specific content and frequency of teacher-learner texts and specific learner circumstances.

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