

Wazzup? Trying to communicate effectively with US study abroad students with ever changing communication preferences.

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Abstract

In 2005 all our US study abroad students studying in New Zealand had land lines and no one bothered with a cell phone. By 2007, nearly every student was buying a cell phone on arrival. By 2010, we set up a whole new website that we could update constantly and also began working more with students through Facebook while maintaining usual communication lines of email, texting, phoning, and face-to-face coffee meetings. This year we realised staff were stretched trying to communicate everything in three or four different media. So to better understand where students go for different information and their preferred methods of communication, we carried out focus group research with students studying with Arcadia across NZ. In this session we share our findings which are a snapshot of communication preferences in a constantly changing environment of communication technologies.

Key words

Study abroad, communication

Background:

Arcadia University brings students from universities across the US to study for a semester, or sometimes two, at universities across the world. This paper focuses only on our students in New Zealand and the challenge of communicating effectively using the best of the technologies available.

The way we communicate with our students has changed over the last decade. Let us think back to 2001, the year Arcadia University started bringing students to NZ, the year of 9/11 and also the year the first of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy hit the screens. In 2001 most of us were sitting behind big cream coloured computers with chunky sized cell phones. US students in 2001 were no doubt just as computer savvy as today's students (a study by Junco and Cole-Avent in the US as far back as 2003 found that 97.9 % of US students owned their own computer, and 95.3 % had internet access (Junco and Cole-Avent , 2008)) but pre-arrival 2001 students were told that the NZ voltage could ruin their laptops and that cell phones were expensive so most arrived in NZ with only a camera and MP3 player. There was no expectation of having a cell phone and they saw the lack of

computer access as part of their study abroad experience. We need to also remember that the first ipod came out in 2001 and iphones, blackberries, and ipads did not yet exist.

Over the last decade we have seen not just changes in the cost and availability of communication technologies and gadgetry but also an increasing expectation of both parents and students to:

1. Have easy access to all information instantaneously on the web,
2. To be connected by cell phone 24/7 from any point on the globe,
3. To be able to interact with social networks continuously either by computer or smart phone.

These expectations are not surprising when you look at communication trends in the US:

Cell phones

Texting is very popular. A study at Indiana's Ball State University (Shamoon, 2009) surveyed 300 university students and found that 99.7% had a cell phone (everyone but one) and 59% preferred text, 17% preferred calls, 9% preferred instant messaging and 7% were likely to use their phone to email. A recent study of the slightly younger age bracket (12 -17 yr olds) i.e. our students of the future (Lenhart, 2010) found that *"the cell phone has become the communication hub for the majority of American teens"*. 75% of 12-17 yr olds own cell phones (up from 45% in 2004). Most (69%) are on phone plans paid for by their parents and 98% of parents say their child has a phone so they can be in touch no matter where their child is. 94% of parents and 93% of students see the cell phone as making them feel safer. A study in 2008 (HarrisInteractive, 2008) found that 80% of over 2000 teenage (13 – 19 yr old) respondents said their cell phone provided a sense of security. These teens, who are cell phone dependent for communicating with friends and family and feel safer with a phone, are likely to expect to use a phone in a foreign place, though interestingly enough teens also moan that they feel tethered to their parents and parents moan that they are constantly interrupted by their children's requests (Lenhart, 2010).

The trend is not only that every student will buy a phone on arrival but there is also a trend for texting over calling. The study by Pew Research (Lenhart, 2010) found that teens use cell phones for talking to parents but they prefer to send text messages to friends, 50% of teens will send over 50 texts a day. Interesting to note that there is a gender difference, girls usually send 80 or more a day while typically boys send 30 or more. The study by HarrisInteractive (2008) also found that texting was replacing talking and was the preferred method because it allowed them to multitask, it is faster, they can avoid verbal communication and because it is fun.

Email

The main trend with email is that web email usage by teens 12-17 yr olds has dropped by 59% (Yoskowitz , 2011) but has remained pretty much steady for university aged students (18 – 24). The ComScore report on digital trends found that young teens were social networking instead. This is backed by research by the Nielson Company (Ives, 2011) which shows that across the US the percentage of internet time spent social networking has increased by 43% and emailing is down 28%. Though in another article, Morgan Stewart (2009) points out that the largest increase in email use in the US occurs when students enter university and continues as the student graduates and enters the workforce. It could be that younger teens are using Facebook rather than email but that email remains an important method of communication for university aged students who need email often for task-driven reasons rather than entertainment.

The other major trend in email use is an increase in the use of email from mobile phones. Mark Donovan, ComScore senior vice president of mobile at ComScore commented that, *"what we have seen in the smartphone era is the rapid acceleration of data consumption, which has helped drive*

mobile usage across multiple categories including email. In a relatively short period of time, adoption of mobile email has reached 78% of the smart phone population.” (GMA News, 2011)

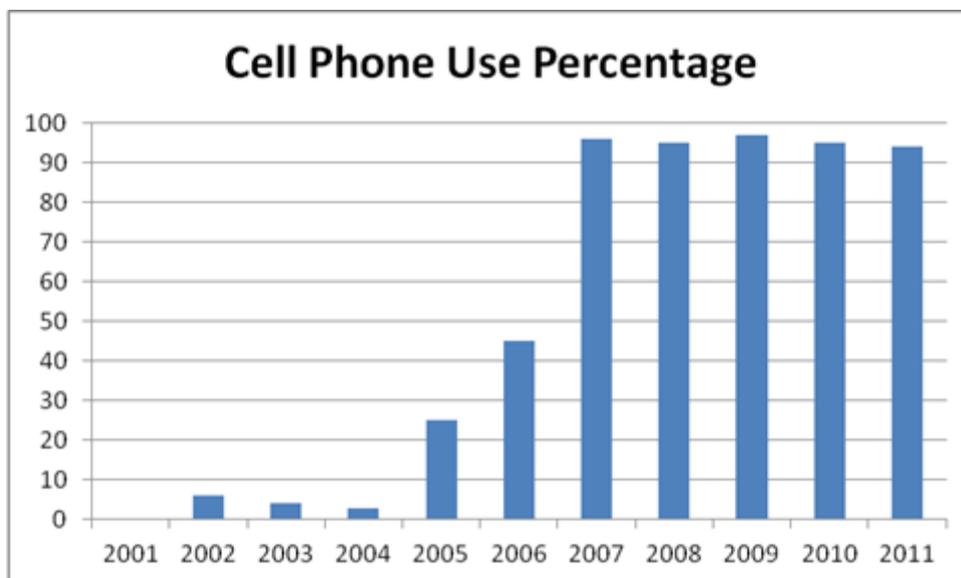
This trend is backed by Stewart (2009) “Smartphones are also changing how email is used among college students. Professor Mike Hanley, director of the Institute for Mobile Media Research has been tracking the interactive and mobile habits of college students for more than five years. While email use has been declining among college students for several years, this trend has reversed in 2009. The reason? Smartphones. As students get access to email capable phones, they are using email more. As Hanley explains, “The ability for students to have email on their smartphones fits their mobile lifestyles perfectly. Mobile email untethers them from a computer and a smartphone gives them email access everywhere.”” So we can safely assume that email is still an important communication channel for students from US universities.

Facebook

According to www.facebook.com (2011) Facebook came into being in 2004 and has grown rapidly with now more than 800 million active users worldwide, of whom 50% log in on any given day. The average user has 130 friends and is connected on average to 80 communities, groups and events. With 156 million users residing in the US, it is extremely likely that not only will every US student be active on Facebook but will be more likely to check their Facebook page more often than their email.

The communication trends we have seen in our US students

As previously mentioned, in 2001 students arrived with a camera and MP3 player and were allocated a landline and cheap calling card. Over the next few years occasionally a student would buy a NZ cell phone but the change in computer and cell phone usage by US students did not really become noticeable to us until 2005 when there was a definite increase in cell phone usage with 25% of students buying phones. The trend continued and by 2007 96% of our students were buying cell phones or sim cards on arrival with little change since.



As students moved to a NZ cell phone, land lines became obsolete (and with them went the ability to contact random flatmates when a student did not respond to emails). Along with the shift to cell phones, was a shift to smaller, lighter, cheaper, laptops and by 2005 nearly every student was

bringing their laptop from home. The other major change was Skype (started 2003) and Social Networks like Facebook (2004)

As students have turned more and more to their computers for information and communication, universities have also developed better websites and Arcadia has been no exception. In 2010 we built up a new in-country site for our students. We had decided this would be our 'communication hub'. We developed a site students could log into so that we could share information and maintain student privacy. We took on Chandra Leenheer as an intern and made her responsible for keeping the site alive and dynamic. The site went live late in 2010 and for the first half of 2011 the site was extremely active with new photos placed on flickr, video clips on you tube, constant 'notifications', a calendar of events, a weekly photo competition and even a 'recipe of the week'.

Despite declaring the site as our communication hub, we were aware that students would only receive key information if they bothered to log onto the site and so we found ourselves still emailing and texting key information because we could not be sure they were going to the website. Aware at the high usage of university students on Facebook we also encouraged students to 'like' our Facebook page and Chandra was given the responsibility to also communicate key information on the Facebook page and encouraged to create discussion with students and make the site more active.

So here we were at the beginning of 2011 communicating with our US students through the following channels:

- Email
- Texting
- Our NZ website
- Facebook
- Messaging a person on facebook
- Phoning to cell
- Face-to-face (coffee meetings and activities)

Communication with our students is extremely important with the following key functions:

- To share static information e.g. schedules of events, information on insurance, health and safety, travel, orientation etc.
- To remind students about compulsory events/courses/important dates
- To share information on optional events/fun activities/good deals
- To monitor their well-being
- To resolve issues/concerns/emergencies and provide pastoral care
- Discussion amongst themselves – usually a request for information or a service

By May 2011 we realised that in most cases we were communicating the same information in quadruplicate (facebook, email, website and text) which was a drain on staff time and proving to be ineffective rather than effective communication. We were curious to know the channels of communication likely to be the most effective – would they vary depending on the type of information we were giving? Or were some channels just not being used by our students at all?

Focus Group Research

Chandra Leenheer, our visiting US intern, carried out five focus group sessions in May this year 2011: Two in Dunedin, one in Wellington and two in Auckland. A total of 44 of our 82 students that semester participated in a focus group session (13 males and 31 females). The smallest session had 6

students and the largest had 11 students. The sessions were held in an informal cafe environment off campus and lasted no more than one hour. It was hoped that because Chandra was close in age and also American, the students would see her as one of them and would be able to engage in open and honest discussion about the various communication channels.

Each session began with Chandra handing out a short questionnaire asking the students to rank their preferred methods of communication and they were asked to write 'N/A' next to those that they did not use at all. The choices were:

- Email
- Facebook
- Texting cell
- Calling cell
- Calling landline
- Notifications on the Arcadia NZ website.

Chandra asked a series of questions with each group on Communications, Materials used at orientation, Orientation, and our Activities throughout the semester i.e. the focus was not just on communication. Chandra allowed for open discussion on all topics and made sure she made eye contact around the circle on each question to be sure everyone had the chance to answer.

Results and Implications

1. Email and texting - 59 % (26 students) ranked email as their most preferred method of communication between us and them and text as their second preferred method.

39% (17 students) ranked text as their most preferred method of communication and email as their second preferred method.

This means an overwhelming 98% preferred communication to be by email or text. It was generally agreed that email is best when there is key information that needs to be conveyed. Text is best for quick reminders, updates and emergency situations. Students pointed out that it was very important for us to be aware that many of them have more than one email address and that we must find out from students which email address they would be more likely to access, rather than assume that the email address they made the application with (often from their home university) would be the email address they would be using while studying abroad.

2. Calling students' cell phones – follows as the third best method of communication for reaching students. This is particularly favoured for any personal communication.

In the US cell phone owners are charged for receiving calls so it is important to explain to students on arrival that in NZ this is not the case. Once they realise they are not paying for the call, they are happier receiving calls.

3. Facebook – using Facebook was ranked as either 4 or 5 or N/A by all participants. This was the most surprising result from the focus group research.

We had assumed that because students are constantly engaging with Facebook to communicate with friends and family that this would be their preferred method of communication but what we had not realised is that students use different channels of communication for different functions. For students email is for serious matters, for tasks, for university linked notifications and Facebook is for fun. The students have so many 'friends' and are connected to so many groups and friends of friends that there is a constant scrolling of information and anything placed on there is fine if it is for fun but can easily get lost in the stream of updates. Students made it clear they do not expect Facebook to be a place to get detailed information from us.

4. Notifications on our NZ website – this was also ranked 4 or 5 or N/A by students. Despite all Chandra's efforts to keep the site alive and vibrant, students did not see it as a place for active

communication. They liked the site. They found it user friendly and full of useful information and encouraged us to continue to focus energy into the website to make it useful for pre-arrival information and as a major reference tool for students once they got here. They found it helpful for downloading insurance claims forms and checking out activity schedules. But they said to not waste energy putting up constant notifications (better by email) and regular updates or a recipe on the week (better on Facebook).

The implications of these findings were immediate. We now double check with students their preferred email address while in NZ. We are only sending detailed information out in one format i.e. email and then sending little reminders and updates by text message. For individual/personal matters we call the student's cell phone. We use the website as a reference point only and we keep the site updated but have stopped putting up notifications or recipes. And we still use Facebook but for the non-essential and often more 'fun' communication especially photo competitions, cheap deals and reminders of cultural events.

We are aware communication trends are changing constantly and that this is a situation that will require constant monitoring but for now we feel we are putting our time and energy into the communication channels preferred by our students and in doing so we are promoting a more effective use of staff time and resources.

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