1. What is it?
At the most basic level, group texting is an easy means of sending one brief message to many people by means of cell phone text messaging. Because this technology works on any phone with text messaging capability, participants do not need a smartphone. In fact, services and applications that support group texting—Celly, GroupMe, WhatsApp, and others—also allow access to group messages via the web, meaning users can participate with a variety of electronic devices, including smartphones, feature phones, tablets, or laptops. While the value of group texting is clear for campus alerts such as bad weather warnings or campus emergencies, with increasing frequency instructors are beginning to use it as part of the pedagogical toolbox.

2. How does it work?
To use these tools, instructors create a group, or “cell,” for each class or learning team. Each group has its own messaging channel, which students can access from any mobile device, by e-mail, or on the web. Instructors can choose to make channels public or private, assigning each its own keyword access. Individual channels can be set up to support instructor-to-group messaging, group-to-instructor messaging, or all-to-all messaging. In addition, instructors can set up automatic messages, such as reminders of upcoming deadlines, or they can arrange for tracking of RSS or social networking feeds of interest to the group. Depending on the tool in use, it can be possible to route messages using hashtags, to employ avatars or themes, or to send messages that include sound or images. To assist with synchronous meetings, many tools also provide maps that indicate the location of those in the group. The applications may be free or require a subscription fee, and privacy is supported by ensuring users within a group cannot see the phone numbers of other participants. At the same time, these group texting services offer additional features that support collaborative learning. They can turn cell phones, tablets, or laptops into clickers; distribute interactive quizzes with instant scoring; or provide a moderated backchannel for class discussion. The end result is more a mobile learning platform than just a simple notification service.

3. Who’s doing it?
A number of colleges and universities are experimenting with group texting products as part of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) initiatives. The University of Phoenix, for example, recommends students download group texting services so they can use their phones in class as clickers. Group texting services are also popular among grassroots organizations. In one early use case, Celly provided the Portland Occupy
movement with communication and coordination functionality that took advantage of the devices that members of the organization already had on hand. Playing an even more vital role in communication, Ushahidi—a group texting and communications tool used in many developing countries—allows users coping with war or natural disasters to describe the conditions they see unfolding around them and to locate life-saving emergency services. It has been used for this purpose with remarkable success in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, India, and elsewhere.

**Why is it significant?**

Although a variety of technologies used in education have transitioned from computer to mobile devices, text messaging is one technology to have originated on the cell phone and spread to other devices. It provides a surprisingly flexible platform for learning, offering enormous potential for collaborative work. Group texting creates a complete interactive learning environment, whether for polling during class discussions or for instructor interaction outside class time. Group texting can establish a channel of communication with the instructor that allows students to verify assignments, ask questions, or clarify expectations. Discussions within a cell group might be curated by the instructor or left to develop on their own. Where discussion is better served face-to-face, many group texting services offer map support that shows where group members are located so that informal meetings can be called when participants are in proximity.

**What are the downsides?**

Not every student has a phone plan with unlimited texting. Even if they have such a plan, some users might feel the LMS is a sufficient venue for sharing messages with instructors and colleagues and could become frustrated when they learn they must check elsewhere for notifications and reminders. Even though users typically have the option of disabling the location service, some might also have privacy concerns about the way maps can show where group members are located. Although students and faculty with feature phones can still access this technology, these services are more cumbersome without a smartphone or a tablet, and the information might not appear as cleanly. Like any technology used over a wide area, group texting can have hitches in deployment. For example, instructors who use one of these services must ensure they set up the appropriate texting mode for each channel—that is, they must specify if they want to employ instructor-to-group mode rather than all-to-all. For most of these products, all-to-all communication is the default, which in larger or more communicative groups can result in individuals feeling overwhelmed with the sheer volume and speed of text messages from the group.

**Where is it going?**

One feature on the horizon for group texting is probably greater integration with social media services and the campus LMS. In 2011, Facebook purchased the group-texting service Beluga, suggesting that Facebook may be looking at ways to include this technology in its service offerings. Similarly, LMS vendors such as Blackboard and Moodle might choose to extend their service radius by acquiring or partnering with group texting services. In addition, group texting will likely be used with increasing frequency as image transfer becomes more widely available. Greater use can also be expected in worldwide deployment because it can offer free international text messaging for those on unlimited text messaging plans. WhatsApp, which already supports free international group texting, is a favorite among exchange students and those traveling abroad, and the success of Ushahidi in providing support in distressed areas should encourage international use of such services.

**What are the implications for teaching and learning?**

If current experiments in group texting for K-12 are successful in improving access to digital services, higher education can expect to see an influx of students familiar with this technology and with the potential it offers for the creation of virtual communities of learning. Group texting, with its device-agnostic approach and BYOD potential, could help resolve the tricky issue of reaching students who have many kinds of hardware running on a variety of operating systems. Meanwhile, group texting services are seeing use in outreach, particularly with regard to tutoring or counseling help lines. In class, group texting provides a backchannel that anyone with a device can access, and where this is set up to allow users to remain anonymous, it may encourage participation by reticent students who have questions they are uncomfortable asking aloud. Finally, these tools offer a workable group-based communication option for fieldwork or internships that can keep instructors and students in communication with one another while working in areas where cell access is available but wireless access is not.