

IM Learning 2 Write?

A Study on how Instant Messaging Shapes Student Writing

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education

in conformity with the requirements for

the degree of Master of Education

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

January, 2008

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of Instant Messaging (IM) among adolescents in North America (Kids' Take On Media, 2003; Lenhart, Ranie & Lewis, 2001; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006) is prompting two educational debates. One debate contests whether IM is more like speech or writing (e.g. Tagliamonte & Dennis, 2003). The second debate disputes whether IM has a positive or negative effect on school writing (e.g. O'Connor, 2005). This thesis addresses these debates from a New Literacies Studies (NLS) stance. It reports on a qualitative study of the perspectives and literacy practices of high school students. The purpose is to examine how IM shapes student writing and perception of literacy.

The study focuses on the communication that transpired between five experienced IM users—one researcher and four adolescent participants—during a six-week IM writing group. Findings indicate the participants regard IM as a space for written slang; a space where speech and writing merge. Sensitive to context, the participants note that they can switch language registers to accommodate their audience, but they think confusion between registers may be a possibility. They demonstrate an attitude of “linguistic whateverism” (as described by Baron, 2002) when writing in the context of IM to increase efficiency, but they do not use as many acronyms as expected. The “whatever” attitude is linked to mistakes in writing, but it also exposes them to a sense of freedom and enjoyment.

In general, IM provides these students with a new purpose for language, which they perceive as disconnected from school literacy. The findings suggests that IM language is a hybrid of speech and writing, and connecting IM with school writing (both

literally and figuratively) may help teachers be more effective in making school writing processes more relevant to students' lives. While making this connection, it is important for teachers to emphasize the plurality of literacies and the importance of revising and editing "finished" writing. In conclusion, this thesis considers new opportunities and concerns for writing pedagogy and new prospects for language research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to a number of important people who helped me complete this thesis. Sincere thanks must go to my participants for volunteering their time and sharing their perceptions. I would like to thank my supervisor, Rebecca Luce-Kapler, for her constant support and valuable guidance.

Warmest thanks also go to my parents, Vito and Frances, my siblings, Lina and Michael, and my partner, Peter, for all their love, patience and encouragement throughout this challenging and rewarding process.

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PROLOGUE

A “Thesis Blog”

As suggested by the title, *IM learning 2 write? A study on how Instant Messaging shapes student writing*, this thesis focuses on Instant Messaging (IM) and student writing. But first, it is important I introduce another digital technology that played a key role in the development of this thesis, known as a “weblog.” Having a weblog (or “blog” for short) is almost like having your own editorial page in the newspaper. Essentially, blogs function as high-tech diaries in the form of a websites. “Bloggers” share their opinions, ideas, videos and designs (or whatever else they might think of¹) with a global audience. Anyone can set up a blog through an online service provider.²

I created two blogs for this thesis—one for my participants and me to have a space to write during and in between our meetings, and the other to help me write this thesis. Because I wish to have a controlled research environment with adolescent participants, the blogs were password protected and not available to the general public. I will discuss the group blog in more detail in the following chapters. In this prologue, I would like to describe the process of blogging my thesis, as it is important to the design of this thesis.

I was not quite sure what to expect when I created a blog for my thesis—up until my study, I had only read blogs, never written them. But I thought it would be an

¹ **Blogs** are typically text-based, but they do not have to be. There are many different types of blogs and popular types have been earning new names. For instance, “photoblogs” focus on photographs, “vlogs” focus on videos and audio blogs are called “podcasts” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>). I like to think of my blog as a “thesis blog.”

² Wordpress (<http://wordpress.com/>), Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com/>) and Technorati (<http://technorati.com/>) are three popular weblog service providers.

appropriate space to analyze my data, given that I had used a blog to collect data and I regard both blogs and IM as “new literacies” of the Internet.³ I went through the steps on Wordpress to design my blog. I have named my blog “The roots of my thesis,” with the subtitle, “Bridging IM and school writing.” These titles lie over a serene picture of a park in the autumn, with a gray pathway, tall, leafless trees and a stone bridge over a glossy river. My blog posts appear under this image—the most recent post always appearing at the top of the webpage.

“The roots of my thesis” began as a space where I could reflect on my data, experiment with ideas and start piecing them together. I posted blogs as I analyzed my data and found it incredibly helpful for the development of my thoughts. I wrote freely on the blog without reservation or pressure.

Lankshear and Knobel’s (2006a) explanation of blogging is useful for summing up what my blog contains. In “[Blogging as Participation: The Active Sociality of a New Literacy](#)”,⁴ Lankshear and Knobel describe blogs as “hybrids of journal entries, and annotations or indices of links, or some mix of reflections, musings, anecdotes and the like with embedded hyperlinks to related websites” (p. 3). The mixture of modalities is not only what makes blogs interesting to read, but also interesting to write. As I blogged,

³ The term, “new literacies,” does not have a precise definition because new literacies are constantly evolving. [Leu et. al. \(2004\)](#) attempt to be as precise as possible in their definition:

The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. These new literacies allow us to use the Internet and other ICTs to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others.

According to this definition, IM and blogging are new literacies. The URL to Leu et. al.’s (2004) paper is <http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/leu/>

⁴ The URL to Lankshear and Knobel’s (2006) article is <http://www.geocities.com/c.lankshear/bloggingparticipation.pdf>

I learned interesting ways of using different modes like hyperlinks and images to help make my ideas more meaningful to my readers.

By “practicing” my thesis through blogging, I felt a greater connection to new literacies than if I were just researching and writing about them. I found this practice so helpful that when it came time to write this thesis, my advisors and I felt I should continue in the same format. I had to take a closer look at the design options of my blog site to conceive how I might incorporate my thesis. I realized I could create new web pages to display the chapters and keep “the roots of my thesis” as the homepage.

I began building the roots and writing my thesis simultaneously. I found that some of my opinions changed, and some of the “roots” found their way into my chapters. If you wish, [you can look](#) for where I overlap or amend my ideas.⁵ By keeping the roots available to you, and to new members of my audience, I offer you an alternative way to read my thesis. You can read into my process and my development. My writing becomes more transparent, more honest. You have insight into the evolution of my thesis.

By developing the roots of my thesis on a blog, I have taken new opportunities in my writing of a traditional thesis. You will notice that blue text appears throughout my thesis. If you are reading an electronic copy of this thesis, the blue text is hypertext.⁶ “Clicking” on the hypertext leads you to related websites. You can choose to follow these hyperlinks or ignore them. They are not critical to understanding my thesis and all of the

⁵ The URL to my thesis blog is <http://imdeb8.wordpress.com>. You can sign in with the username: *imdeb8visitor*; and the password: *imdeb8*.

⁶ A definition of hypertext from *The Free Online Dictionary of Computing* (<http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/leu/>):

A term coined by Ted Nelson around 1965 for a collection of documents (or "nodes") containing cross-references (or "links") which, with the aid of an interactive browser program, allow the reader to move easily from one document to another.

website addresses appear in the footnotes. I believe the hypertext brings richness to my thesis. They offer additional avenues, more points of view and further details to explore. As a result, my thesis is more closely connected to the world (or the World Wide Web to be precise) than a hardcover manuscript sitting on a shelf.

I also noticed that by blogging my thesis, I am opening up possibilities for a larger and more interactive audience. Not only is my research more easily accessible through this medium, but also you have the opportunity to respond to my thesis; you can post comments, questions and opinions (and praise if you wish), to which I can respond. Blogging is, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006a) discuss, a *participatory* new literacy. With your participation, my thesis has the opportunity to grow and live on, even after I have completed my defense.

Although I am using innovative tools to develop my thesis, I still intend to respect the traditional formality of the document. My chapters follow the practices of conventional qualitative research theses, this first chapter being the introduction, followed by a literature review in Chapter 2, my research methodology in Chapter 3, the analysis of my data in Chapter 4, and a discussion of my findings in Chapter 5. I hope you regard this bridging of blogging and academic writing as a prime example of the educational potential of new literacies.

I realize that as a “digital” author, I have less control over what you read and the order in which you read it and I encourage you to take advantage of the new opportunities. I encourage you to pursue what interests you, pay attention to what engages you, and add your comments and opinions where you feel compelled to do so. I

encourage you to take part in my exploration of Instant Messaging and New Literacies Studies by following hyperlinks and participating on my blog.

A Note About Reading this Thesis

A substantial part of the data I collected was Instant Messaging communication between myself and a group of teenage participants. I have used many quotes from the IM sessions, especially in Chapter 4, the analysis. When I quote the IM datum, I include all the abbreviations, shortened words, inconsistencies and mistakes that appeared in my participants' text. In short, the quotes will appear exactly as they were communicated. As a result, I hope to provide you with a flavour for the appearance and the experience of Instant Messaging.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“IM Deb8s⁷”

If you have not heard of Instant Messaging (IM) then you probably do not spend much time around teenagers. IM is a form of computer-mediated communication in which two people (or more) engage in a real-time conversation through text. IM software (e.g., MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Chat) is often free and easy to download with access to a networked computer. It is estimated that over 80% of North American adolescents use IM and most of them use it on a daily basis (Lenhart, Ranie & Lewis, 2001; Taglimonte & Denis, 2006). In the words of researcher Amanda O’Connor, IM is “creating a new generation of teenage writers, accustomed to translating their every thought and feeling into words. They write more than any generation has since the days when telephone calls were rare and the mailman rounded more than once a day” (O’Connor, 2005, p. 4).

O’Connor’s (2005) comment may be true, but it may also be misleading, for calling the exchange of text that happens over IM “writing” is highly contentious. Strewn with acronyms, numbers, symbols and emoticons, IM text does not always look like what we have traditionally considered as writing.⁸ Some of its characteristics (such as phonetically spelled words and the use of slang) have influenced researchers to debate whether IM is more like speech than writing (eg. Baron, 2004; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006), and this is not the only debate IM is causing.

⁷ “Deb8s” is a spin on the word “debates.” It is a typical IM trait to substitute numbers for letters in words to create the same phonetic pronunciation.

⁸ See Appendix A for a list of IM characteristics. See Appendix B for an excerpt of an IM conversation from my study.

A second and related debate guides educational research on IM. This debate has to do with how IM use affects the writing students do at school. In general, there is a split between those who see IM as bad for school writing, and those who see it as good (Craig, 2003; Farmer, 2005; Lee, 2002; O'Connor, 2005). On the "IM is bad" side, people talk about it as a degenerative threat towards written language.⁹ They believe student writing is being stripped of the grammar, formality and standards that characterize our notions of literacy and what it means to be literate. On the "IM is good" side, people see it as a natural part of the evolution of language. They believe IM promotes familiarity with the written word and helps users develop useful skills they will use in their future careers and lives.¹⁰

From news stories and research articles about IM, it is obvious that the debatable issues I have mentioned above are having an impact on schools and classrooms. Some educators that see the good in IM use suggest using it in or after class (Farmer, 2005; O'Connor, 2005). [Robert Farmer](#)¹¹ (2005), for example, says the "collaborative nature [of IM] is what makes [it] ideal for educational and learning environments" (p. 60). A second example comes from a decision recently made by the [New Zealand Qualifications](#)

⁹ I will only be focusing on the English language, but the same argument has been made in countries that speak other languages. For example, York (2005) journalist for the *Globe and Mail*, reports that the Chinese government "is striking back with laws and regulations to protect the ancient language." York describes how "the older generation" cannot comprehend new language trends, such as typing "88" to say goodbye to a friend on IM. York explains, "The Chinese word for eight is 'ba', so 88 can be pronounced as baba," which sounds like the English word "bye-bye" (York, 2005). The URL to York's article is (http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v5/content/subscribe?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2Fservlet%2FArticleNews%2FFTPStory%2FLAC%2F20051111%2FLANGUAGE11%2FTPFront%2FTopStories&ord=919644&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true).

¹⁰ I must stress that this introductory description of the IM debates is general and thus rudimentary at best. My intent here is simply to introduce the main IM arguments as I see them. I will address these arguments in detail in Chapter 2 and provide specific examples to support my claims.

¹¹ The URL to Farmer's (2005) article is <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0562.pdf>

Authority¹² (NZQA). In November of 2006, the NZQA announced that high school students are allowed to use “IM language” on exams, although they do not encourage it (Hann & Chalmers, 2006). A New Zealand principal, Denis Hyatt, sees this as an exciting advancement. “It is another development in that wonderful thing we call the English language,” he told reporters (Hann & Chalmers, 2006).

On the other hand, educators that see the bad in IM are taking action by banning it from schools (Textly, 2005), deducting marks for “IM mistakes” in school work (Lee, 2002) and trying to “unteach” it to their students (Freiss, 2003). As you can see, these debates are causing a polarized controversy—one that interests me for both personal and professional reasons.

Personal Interest in IM

I am an IM user myself and have been “IMing” for nearly a decade. I started using IM with a few friends in high school and then with many friends in university as a quick, convenient way of socializing. I like IM because it is useful for connecting me to people. I have built up a “support system” of friends, family, classmates and co-workers that I can connect with as long as I am in front of a networked computer. I know who is “available” and who is not, just from looking at my contact list. Since so many people in my life use IM, it is easy to contact people and I do not worry about losing touch with distant friends. My social circle has expanded because I can “store” people in my IM network. More social connections in my life mean more possibilities and opportunities to develop personal and professional relationships.

¹² The NZQA is New Zealand’s government agency responsible for quality assurance of national qualifications. This agency runs the national senior secondary school examinations that students need to pass to obtain a National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). The URL to the NZQA website is <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/index.html>

At the same time, I know IM can be a distraction from work. I often leave it running in the background when I am on my computer. And every so often, it will alert me with jingling sound and a flashing box that a “buddy” wants to “chat.” More often than not, I respond.¹³ Then, I might “multitask” between my chat (or chats) and the news I am reading or the paper I am writing. By logging onto my IM network I am welcoming distractions, which are often a bitter-sweet temptation when I am swamped with work.

I know and use a number of the acronyms, shortened words, phonetic spelling and symbols associated with IM use without worrying whether it is good or bad for my writing.¹⁴ I have developed my comprehension of textspeak over the years. Textspeak is useful because it is efficient. For instance, it is much quicker to type “t tyl” than it is to type “I’ll talk to you later,” and when I know my “audience” will understand me, I am making better use of my time. Also, it adds character to my words. Because it is quick and casual, textspeak feels more closely connected to my voice than when I write.

I would not say it has affected my ability to write academically, but then again, I began IMing later in life than many of today’s youth.¹⁵ I am not sure if IM would have influenced my academic writing in different ways if I began using it at a younger age when I was developing basic writing skills. This uncertainty is one reason why I felt the need to research how adolescents perceive the relationship between IM and writing.

¹³ I think it is worth mentioning here that I usually chat with the same group of people—my closest friends and family—but there are many more people I am connected to that I might only chat with maybe once or twice a year. I have about 80 online contacts, but I only regularly chat with a handful of them. It also seems that as I grow older, I chat with fewer people.

¹⁴ See the Glossary for a list of IM terms that were used during this study.

¹⁵ Studies show a high percentage of IM use by students as young as 11 (grade 7) (Kids’ Take on Media, 2003; Lenhart, Ranie & Lewis 2001; Tagliamonte & Denis 2006).

Professional Interest in IM

I am a beginning English teacher for high school students and I believe that good writing skills are incredibly important and useful in many aspects of everyday life. Not only do I want to be effective in teaching students how to become better writers, I want them to enjoy writing. During my experiences as a student teacher, I found it surprising how small a role technology plays in English classes. It seems that English teachers always prefer (and even expect) typed work, but rarely do computers play a role in classroom activities.

The fact that so many students enjoy using IM leads me to wonder if IM might be useful for teaching students to enjoy writing in other contexts such as school. But at the same time, the “IM deb8s” call me to question if IM is something I need to be cautious of with my students. So I am left wondering, how should IM be addressed in schools? What role should IM have in my classroom, if any? These are the professional questions that inspired me to write this thesis.

My Aim and Purpose

My thesis addresses the two “IM deb8s” through a qualitative examination of high school students who use IM on a regular basis. By describing how IM shapes my participants’ school writing and their perceptions of literacy, I will present evidence that helps support and reject some of the current arguments and assumptions about IM. I show that the relationship between IM and school writing is a complex one: IM shapes writing in a variety of ways. Some of the IM influences appear encouraging, but others present cause for concern. The purpose of my thesis is to expose significant IM influences and discusses their educational implications.

My Perspective

The perspective that has helped guide me through my research is known as “New Literacy Studies,” or NLS (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 2003). Proponents of this perspective claim it is useful for making sense of the new ways of reading and writing emerging in our world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Lotherington, 2000; New London Group, 1996), which is what led me to believe it might be useful for researching IM.¹⁶

I chose to approach IM from a NLS stance because I agree with their basic views. I agree that new digital practices are coming to dominate in written culture, meaning “the relationship between readers, writers and texts are being repositioned; paper is becoming increasingly an electronic abstract; language norms and standards are being rewritten; [and] textuality is evolving dimensionally” (Lotherington, 2000, p. 1).¹⁷ I also agree that by acknowledging the kinds of literacy practices students are doing outside school, teachers can “make effective pedagogical connection to them in class” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

From “Literacy” to “New Literacies”¹⁸

New Literacy Studies calls for a new way of thinking about literacy, which stems from a popular movement in the field of literacy studies, usefully described by Peter Roberts. Roberts’ (1995) framework describes the conceptual shift from “literacy” to

¹⁶ Most new literacies are web-based (Lotherington, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), such as “blogging,” “culture jamming” and “e-zining” (see Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, Chapter 2). However, it is important to note that not all new literacies use information technology. For example, Lankshear and Knobel (2003) discuss “scenario planning,” a new technique to strategically think about the future by writing narratives describing possible futures (this is not to be confused with making predictions) (p. 25).

¹⁷ The URL to Lotherington’s (2000) article is <http://www.teslontario.org/new/research/lotherington.pdf>

¹⁸ I would like to make a distinction between “New Literacies” (as a proper noun) and “new literacies” (as a noun). When I state “New Literacies” or “New Literacies Studies,” I am specifically referring to the theoretical framework for literacy instruction developed by Street (1984, 2003) and Lankshear and Knobel (2003). When I state “new literacies” I am making a general reference to new ways that people are communicating (as defined in the Prologue).

“new literacies” over the course of the 20th century. He explains the transition in three stages, moving from “quantitative,” to “qualitative,” to “pluralist” approaches to defining literacy.¹⁹ He begins by identifying typical definitions of literacy in the early 1940s (made by policy makers and international organizations) in terms of “years of schooling” and “reading ages²⁰” (Roberts, 1995, p. 414), and then explains why literacy cannot be measured in these “quantitative” ways. First, he argues “the number of years one has attended school in no way provides a definitive picture of one’s ability in reading, writing or anything else” (p. 414). Second, he states that defining literacy in terms of “reading ages” is problematic because it assumes all people can reach certain predetermined behavioural objectives simply by growing up and attending school (p. 415). “So long as schooling is regarded as a gradual continuum for learning, rather than a series of abrupt steps, the cut-off point between ‘illiteracy’ and ‘literacy’ under such definitions is inevitably arbitrary” (p. 415). Roberts deduces that quantitative definitions were used for instrumental, pragmatic and political reasons—they were not honest attempts at defining literacy (p. 417).

“Qualitative” definitions of literacy gained popularity in the 1960s (Robert, 1995, p. 418). These definitions focused on describing literacy in terms of “features” or “dimensions”; they presume there is a series of “qualities” that make up “the literate

¹⁹ It should be noted that Roberts (1995) uses the terms “quantitative” and “qualitative” in a restricted sense, for lack of better terms. He does not mean to imply a direct relationship to quantitative and qualitative research methods (p. 8).

²⁰ Roberts (1995) offers several examples defining literacy with “reading ages.” For instance, in 1950, England’s Ministry of Education considered people “semi-literate” if they had a reading age between 7 and 9 years (p. 414).

person” (p. 418).²¹ Roberts (1995) commends the qualitative approach for being more sensitive to the complex character of literacy, but critiques it for being too vague and quite confusing. He calls the definitions “stipulative in the weakest sense,” making it seem like literacy “can mean whatever people want it to mean” (p. 419). Roberts argues that authors of qualitative definitions were still in search for a single, all-inclusive definition of literacy, and thus they were bound to fail (p. 420).

In the past three decades, increasing numbers of scholars are approaching literacy from a “pluralist” mindset (Roberts, 1995). Roberts offers examples of “pluralist” definitions from as early as 1979.²² These definitions can be considered to be “particularist” constructs that, unlike quantitative and qualitative views, do not assume literacy to be unitary or neutral (Roberts, 1995, pp. 421-422). Roberts supports the pluralist approach, finding it the most adequate of all the approaches for explaining the nature of literacy. This approach works from the assumption that there is no such thing as one definition of literacy because there are a series of definitions for multiple literacies.

David Barton’s (1994) book, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, is an excellent example of the pluralist approach to defining literacy. In his introduction, Barton explains that the first starting point for discussing literacy is to look

²¹ Roberts (1995) offers a long list of qualitative definitions of literacy. Here are two examples he cites: ‘Literacy’ is ‘...a combination of technical skills that make it possible, with content and purpose, to interact with the specific environments in which people live and function. (Harman, 1987, p. 96, cited in Roberts, 1995, p. 418).

To be ‘literate is ‘...[to be a] person who reads to explore him or herself, to discover other people, to find respite, or to be startled’ (Guthrie, 1979, p. 451, cited in Roberts, 1995, p. 419).

²² In 1979, Cassidy and Shanahan discussed “survival literacy” as “the literacy skills necessary to survive in modern technological society” (Roberts, 1995, p. 420). Roberts offers other examples from the mid 1980s, around the same time that Street’s book came out. These works suggest when the conceptual shift towards NLS began to rise in popularity.

at “people’s everyday reading and writing” (p. 3). To address this point, Barton asks his readers to imagine a scenario:

Imagine a person waking up in the morning: they may well be woken up at seven o’clock in the morning by an alarm which turns on a radio automatically. The first voice they hear might be someone reading the radio news to them, a written text which is being spoken. Going for breakfast, they pick up the newspaper from the door mat along with some mail. Breakfast might consist of newspaper and opening some letters. Other people might be present, adults and children, and they might participate in these activities. Already, at the beginning of the day, there have been several literacy events, each quite different from the other.

(Barton, 1994, p. 3)

He goes on to say that depending on where and when you are from, this scenario may or may not seem familiar to you, for what is acceptable in one situation, might be unacceptable in another (p. 3).

Barton’s little story demonstrates several things. It demonstrates that how people use literacy is connected to specific details about culture and context; it is linked with particular communities in particular points in history (p. 3). It demonstrates that literacy impacts people in their everyday lives—“it is embedded in...activities of ordinary life”—and not just used at work or at school (p. 4). In short, it demonstrates a “plurality” of literacy uses. The NLS stance that guides my research emerged from this pluralist mindset that Roberts (1995) astutely identifies and Barton (1994) descriptively exemplifies.

The New Literacies Studies Stance

Brian Street²³ is one of the first “theoretical architects” responsible for conceiving the New Literacy Studies framework, beginning with his 1984 book titled, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. According to Street (1984, 2003) to truly understand literacy, we must move away from the traditional “autonomous” concept of literacy toward an “ideological,” socio-cultural concept of literacy. Street (2003)²⁴ explains the “autonomous” model of literacy:

Introducing literacy to poor, “illiterate” people, villages, urban youth etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their “illiteracy” in the first place. I refer to this as an “autonomous” model of literacy. (p. 77)

He proceeds to argue the “autonomous” model works under the assumption that literacy alone will improve peoples’ social and cognitive situations and neglects to address socio-cultural factors also at play. Literacy alone, he says, will not have these “benign effects” (2003, p. 77).

An “ideological” model of literacy moves us away from the “autonomous” mindset because it is sensitive to how the meaning of literacy shifts depending on social and cultural contexts (Street, 2003). According to Street, the ideological model of literacy “is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (p. 78). He stresses that literacies are always embedded in social *practices* (i.e. job markets and educational

²³ A biography of Brian Street can be found online at <http://www.literacyonline.org/sltip/presntr/street.htm>

²⁴ The URL to Street’s (2003) article is <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/Archives/5.2/52street.pdf>

contexts) and therefore, learning effects of particular literacies depend on participating in particular contexts.

The notion of *literacy practices* is important to the NLS framework and should be distinguished from the notion of *literacy events*, which includes any event involving written text. Simply put, literacy practices are what people use in literacy events; they are observable exercises understood within their larger social and cultural implications (Barton, 1994; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Street, 2003).

The NLS stance is a framework I can use to examine and understand the relationship between IM and school writing. From this stance, I can consider IM and school writing (or to be more “particular,” the writing high school students do in English class) as literacy events. NLS theory suggests that understanding how these events relate means considering the specific literacy practices that make up the events and considering how these practices are rooted in separate conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. (Barton, 1994; Street, 2003). Therefore, by using the NLS approach, I should be able to tease apart some of the complex notions that separate IM and school literacy by observing, discussing and practicing these two literacies with a group of adolescent students. As a result, I hope to present a more useful understanding of the relationship between IM and school writing that can help teachers and curriculum developers decide how to address IM in the classroom.

An “Insider” Look at IM

Lankshear and Knobel (2003, 2006b) argue that when it comes to new literacies that derive from new technologies, two conflicting “mindsets” dominate educational discourse. They claim that “Mindset 1,” the “outsider” mindset, leads educational

directions (2003, pp. 32-33). They regard people who have not grown up using the technologies of new literacies as “outsiders” or “newcomers.” The outsider mindset reflects paradigms of the Industrial Age and assumes that the present world has not changed its principles. Technology has created new and sophisticated ways to carry out some of these principles, but they are not necessary in the lives of outsiders.

“Mindset 2” people—also known as “insiders”—have grown up in the Information Age (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; 2006b). Insiders have experience practicing new literacies, which results in a deeper understanding of them (p. 32); they understand the protocols, the etiquette, the jargon and so on. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) argue that in general, the “insiders” are mainly the students and the outsiders are mainly the teachers, and see this as a cause for tension. They note that “of course, these distinctions are not the only way of ‘carving up’ the world, but we find them useful when talking about new technologies and education” (p. 32).

In reality, the distinction between outsider and insider is not as “cut and dried” as I have made it seem in my explanation above. Insider experience is not always related to age, and it also related to culture and affluence. But it is true that people born prior to 1975 did not grow up with networked computers in their homes.²⁵ Adolescents today have digital opportunities that did not exist and IM is one opportunity that is receiving a massive response.

When it comes to IM, I consider myself an insider. I was fortunate enough to have access to a computer at home ever since I was a young teenager. The computer plays a large role in my daily routine. So if what Lankshear and Knobel (2003) argue is true (that

²⁵ The Internet gained popularity in households in mid to late 1990s. For more information on the history of the Internet see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet#History>

educational discourses on new technologies are dominated by outsiders), then I can offer a deeper understanding of the workings of IM to the existing body of research. While I believe this perspective offers me credibility as an IM researcher, I cannot ignore that it also gives me some biases. As an IM user writing an academic thesis, it would appear inconsistent of me to argue that IM is harmful to academic writing. I understand why adolescents enjoy using it and it would be hypocritical of me to tell them not to do so. So some of you may think that as an insider, I have a “soft spot” for IM—perhaps even a naïve outlook—but it is my job to convince you otherwise by the time you reach the end of this thesis.

My Study

As I mentioned, my purpose is to expose ways that IM shapes academic writing and discuss the educational implications that follow. To achieve this purpose, I set up a writing group with four adolescents (aged 16 to 19). Over the course of six weeks, we met live and online to write and to talk about writing. The data I collected from these participants combined with my interpretation of the existing research, a NLS framework, and my insider perspective, form the basis of my main argument: there are both positive and negative aspects to IM’s influence on writing. It is important for teachers to be aware of the negative aspects, but that does not mean they cannot take advantage of the positive ones. I develop this argument in the following chapters.

In Chapter 2, I review the existing research on IM and elaborate on the “IM deb8s” I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. In Chapter 3, I describe in detail my research methodology and introduce my participants. In Chapter 4, I present the patterns in my data that represent how IM is shaping my participants’ school writing practices and

their notions of literacy. In Chapter 5, I compare my data to what the research on IM and school writing finds and emphasize the educational implications. Lastly, I ask questions and pose issues of concerns for English teachers and future researchers.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature relevant to the two main “IM deb8s.” First, however, I provide a more specific description of what IM is, an account of how it came to be in popular culture and present research that analyzes why and how adolescents are using it. This overview will provide us with a context to help us better understand the controversial literature under scrutiny.

What exactly is IM?

Instant Messaging is the online transmission of information between two or more people. Given its “instant” nature,²⁶ the messages are often short and more casual than email. The communication is largely text-based, and typically contains shortened words and abbreviations. Most IM software also lets users exchange little images called emoticons, audio, video and other attachments. IM easily runs in the background while users perform other web based activities, so they can multitask while maintaining connection to their social network.

IM users can build their network by adding buddies to their contact list. They find buddies to add by entering email addresses or names into a search box. A request is then sent to the found contact, who must then confirm it before an actual chat can take place. Once a connection has been established, users can open a “chat window” by clicking on

²⁶ IM is nearly synchronous communication. The receiver does not see the message as it is being composed. The message is transferred instantaneously after the sender has finished typing it and presses enter or clicks on send.

their “buddies” names. The receiver of the chat is alerted by sounds and flashing tabs to let them know someone is sending them a message.

IM users identify themselves with their real name or their nickname (for instance, my IM nickname is “Julz”), and a picture of some sort (I usually display a picture of myself). It is also typical for a user to enter a caption along with their nickname, which is a personal message of any kind (perhaps a favourite quote, a joke, a hint about what they are doing that day, or what kind of mood they are in, etc.).

When logged on, IM users can set their status to let their buddies know if they are “online” (which means they are available to “chat”) or “busy” or “away” from their desk. They can even set their status to “appear offline,” which lets users look as if they are offline to their friends but actually remain logged on, letting them secretly keep an eye on their IM network. Nicknames, captions and status options are all features that let IM users build their online social identities, as well as attract and deter attention.

Passing the “Tipping Point”²⁷

The interactive message tool can be traced back to the late 1970s, when academics began to “talk” over [UNIX](#)²⁸ real-time messaging systems. In the late 1990s, early versions of Instant Messaging became available to the public. [ICQ](#)²⁹ (which stands for “I seek you”) was the first to be released in November of 1996, with [AIM](#)³⁰ (AOL

²⁷ Malcom Gladwell (2000) coined the term “tipping point” to describe the moment when a novel idea or technology shifts from being new and fresh to a well-known trend. It is the point when the trend becomes so widespread that we can consider it a part of popular culture.

²⁸ For more information on UNIX systems see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unix>

²⁹ For more information on ICQ see <http://icq.com/>

³⁰ For more information on AIM see <http://dashboard.aim.com/aim>

Instant Messaging) following in its footsteps. The first version of [MSN Messenger](#)³¹ (now known as Windows Live Messenger) was released in July of 1999.

At some point around the turn of the 21st century, IM surpassed its “tipping point,” becoming a ubiquitous activity among young people in developed societies (Baron, 2003; Lenhart et al., 2001). The “tip” appears to be an international phenomenon, connecting people around the globe, making our world seem much smaller than before. Kent and Facer (2004) captured a glimpse of the tipping point in South-West England while they conducted a long term study. They were interested in studying young peoples’ home and school use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). In 2001 and 2003, they surveyed over 1800 children, interviewed over 190 children, and visited 11 families. The children were all between the ages 9 and 17. Their data showed a substantial increase in IM use from 2001 to 2003. By the time they reached the final phases of data collection, “[IM] had become a prevalent computer activity at home” (p. 444).

It did not take long for IM to spread. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 82% of American children are online by the Grade 7 (Lenhart, Ranie & Lewis, 2001). A 2003 Canadian report showed that nearly half (49%) of young people in Grades 7 through 10 use IM daily and an additional 20% use it several times a week ([Kids' Take On Media](#),³² 2003). But these reports are quickly becoming outdated as the IM network continues to expand. The latest research from the University of Toronto estimates 80% of Canadian adolescents are avid IM users (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006).

³¹ For more information on MSN Messenger see <http://get.live.com/messenger/overview>

³² “Kids’ Take on Media” (2003) is a report published by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (<http://www.ctf-fce.ca/e/resources/MERP/kidsenglish.pdf>).

The Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed 8 to 18-year-old Americans and found that young people were exposed to electronic media for an average of 6.5 hours per day (Wallis, 2006). This finding does not specify exactly how much time young people spend actually using IM, but the researchers found that IM programs often ran while young people browsed the Internet, listened to music or watched TV. Their findings revealed that one form of electronic media is rarely used in isolation—through multitasking, young people were packing 8.5 hours of media exposure into a 6.5 hour time span (Wallis). IM was noted as a major contributor to young peoples’ media saturated lives.

IM’s firm stance in popular culture is symbolized by a popular series³³ of teen novels recently published by Lauren Myracle: *ttyl*³⁴ (2005), *tfn*³⁵ (2007) and *l8r g8r*³⁶ (2007). These books read as a compilation of fictional IM conversations between three high school girls. The pages are designed to look like IM chats, which is similar to how dialogue would appear in a play—with the speaker’s name followed by a colon and their lines—but containing typical IM language. But Myracle did not break up the dialogue with any narration or “stage directions” beyond noting the date and time at the beginning of each new chat.

Myracle did not set out to write a trilogy of IM fiction. In [an interview](#),³⁷ she revealed that her editor was not keen on doing the second book until the first one was released (Smith, 2007). It received such a positive response from adolescents that her editors agreed to two more sequels. Although most teens are captivated by Myracle’s

³³ *ttyl* (2005) and *tfn* (2007) were both acclaimed New York Times bestsellers.

³⁴ “ttyl” stands for “talk to you later.”

³⁵ “tfn” stands for “ta ta for now.”

³⁶ “l8r g8r” stand for “later gator.”

³⁷ For Smith’s (2007) interview with Lauren Myracle, see <http://cynthialeitchsmith.blogspot.com/2007/01/author-interview-lauren-myracle-on.html>

books, some adults accuse her of “bastardizing” the English language (personal communication, April 20, 2007). The reaction to Myracle’s novels is indicative of IM’s influence on adolescent life and further reflects the controversy on how IM affects writing.³⁸

How Does IM Fit and Function in Adolescent Life?

Since IM has become a dominant practice for adolescents, some qualitative researchers have concentrated on better understanding IM’s role in adolescents’ lives. This body of research reports that adolescents mainly like to use IM for two reasons: to socialize with friends and discuss schoolwork (Boneva et al., 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Jacobs, 2004; Kent & Facer, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Socializing is clearly the main reason adolescents use IM. Studies show that adolescents believe IM enhances their social status (Boneva et al., 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Knowing the teenage years are marked by a strong need for friendship and peer acceptance, it makes sense that young people see the social value in IM (Boneva et al., 2006). IM fulfills teenage social needs by letting them remain in constant connection with their social circle, extending their opportunities to communicate and build peer relationships (Boneva et al., 2006, p. 653). This is handy for many adolescents who depend on their parents for transportation,

³⁸ Here is an example of a negative review of *Tyl* retrieved from [Amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca/Tyl-Lauren-Myracle/dp/customer-reviews/0810987880) (<http://www.amazon.ca/Tyl-Lauren-Myracle/dp/customer-reviews/0810987880>):

I find it appalling [*sic*] that publishers even considered touching this load of garbage! Literature is meant to stimulate the minds of young people, not to cater to the bastardization of our language. We should be making our teenage daughters learn how to fully type out the word "you", not allowing them to read garbage in which internet speak is glorified.

This is a gigantic step backwards in the fight to save our language from the internet. Teachers have a hard enough job as it is with teaching our children how to wrte [*sic*] in English properly, why offer young people a book in their twisted version of our language?

permission and money—IM is a way they can socialize without depending on their parents or guardians for help (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001).

IM is also an ideal social utility for adolescents because it operates “below the radar” in households (Grinter & Palen, 2002). The participants in Grinter and Palen’s study said they like using IM even more than the telephone because it goes unnoticed by their parents and siblings. “During late hours, when phone calls can disturb others and, for high school teens, sabotage efforts to communicate with friends, IM is a boon” (p. 26).

If adolescents are not using IM to socialize or plan social events, they may be using it to talk about their homework (Boneva et al., 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Jacobs, 2004; Kent & Facer, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Kent and Facer observed students discussing school tasks. They reported that their participants asked and answered schoolwork related questions, shared ideas and answers and exchanged documents. According to Kent and Facer, these participants created their very own “virtual social environment” similar to what they could find in their classrooms (p. 453). IM appears to be a convenient way students can seek out help, answer questions and collaborate on school activities during after-school hours.

When adolescents use IM, they are probably multitasking (Boneva et al., 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Jacobs, 2004; Kent & Facer, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Wallis, 2006). Grinter and Palen observed 16 adolescents in their study and all of them said they multitask between IM and other activities when on the computer, homework often being one of them (p. 25). Jacobs (2004) paid close attention to multitasking in her case study of a 15-year-old girl’s IM use. She argued that IM chats are never practiced in isolation—

they are typically interrupted, not only by online matter, but offline as well. Therefore, researchers need to pay attention to both online and offline worlds when researching IM (p. 397). Jacobs observed Lisa, her participant, engaging in multiple chats while listening to music, watching television and talking on the telephone. She would not have known about this diversity of activity – it would have remained “under the radar” –had she not been looking for it.

Lewis and Fabos’ (2000, 2005) research is very helpful for understanding how IM functions in adolescent lives. They studied seven teenage IM users. Their aim was to discuss how their participants’ social identities shaped and were shaped by IM. Their analysis led them to identify three patterns related to the functions of IM: language use, social networks and surveillance (Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

First, Lewis and Fabos (2005) noted their participants’ use of language, or as they called it, “language play.” They found their participants manipulated their writing style (by shifting tone, voice, word choice and subject matter) depending on whom they were chatting with. They compared their participants’ language use to a “juggling act” of language styles and message flow (p. 486). In the chats that participants identified as “satisfying,” imaginative use of language was noticeable. For instance, one participant, Sam, said IM “enhances [her] depth of thought” (p. 483). Because she cannot use her hands to explain, she uses descriptive language and metaphor. Lewis and Fabos note that the level of creativity in the IM conversations “should be encouraging for educators” (p. 482).

The designing of social networks was the second pattern Lewis and Fabos (2005) discussed. Their participants said their social status was enhanced by IM use—they

believed they were more popular because of it (p. 486). These teens said it was a medium through which they felt comfortable talking to their peers (p. 488). The most satisfying conversations seemed to happen between best friends; “knowing to whom they were talking meant that they had that much more detail to draw upon, and thus could create more interesting dialogue” (p. 488). IM was also considered a good medium for engaging in romantic conversations. For Lewis and Fabos’ participants, the obscurity of the screen relieves the nervous pressure they feel if they are on the phone or face-to-face with their “crush.” Lewis and Fabos believe “IM encouraged a kind of openness” where their participants were not worried about being “put on the spot” (p. 489).

The third pattern is called “surveillance” because IM networks function as a space where users can watch others and be watched (Lewis & Fabos, 2005). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, IM users offer information about themselves through their nicknames, pictures, captions and status. Some IM services like MSN Messenger even allow users to create their own web space and build a profile that includes photo albums, a list of favourite music and books, a weblog and more.

Lewis and Fabos (2005) found their participants quite comfortable with sharing information about themselves. Some of the participants’ parents tried to regulate their child’s profile information, but that did not always stop the participants (p. 492). Karrie, for instance, with the help of her best friend Sam, was able to “hack in” and make changes without her parents knowing (p. 492). These girls said they understand their parents’ concerns; they know there are risks associated with publicly sharing information, but do not think the risks are serious enough to withhold personal facts and refrain from interacting with the virtual world.

Lewis and Fabos (2005) regard the information sharing features of IM services as “surveillance features” that are “built into the IM platform” (p. 489). They are features that allow adolescents to build their social identities and keep an eye on the identities of others. For example, Lewis and Fabos described how their participants kept a constant eye on their buddy list whenever they were online:

The buddy list, always in view, carried the important information concerning who was active—at home and on or near a computer and receptive (being online but blocking their availability). (p. 490)

When their participants set themselves to “away,” they left messages about where they were going or what they were doing (e.g., “I am watching TV”) in order to keep their buddies “in the know” about their activities (p. 490). One participant, Jake, remarked that adolescents without IM access cannot find their friends as easily (p. 490). Some of their participants enjoyed being monitored more than others—the ones wanting more attention, revealed more about themselves more often.

A Brief Summary Thus Far

The research I presented above helps support the NLS stance by revealing particularities of IM literacy practices in terms of purpose and function of IM use. In brief, the main reason adolescents use IM is to socialize. This socializing happens in the midst of other tasks and contributes to the development of their identities.

Because IM use hinges on adolescent representation of self and social well-being, it makes sense that IM practices stimulate adolescents to be creative with language, take risks and experiment with their identities (Lewis & Fabos, 2005). It would be wonderful

if teachers could motivate students to have the same kind of enthusiasm towards school writing. But a bridge between IM and school writing is not easy to build because IM's relationship with writing is complex and controversial.

Review of the "IM Deb8s"

In this section, I review the controversies surrounding IM and school writing that inform my research. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, two debates dominate in the literature; the "speech-writing debate" disputes whether IM is more like speech or writing and the "good-bad debate" disputes whether IM has a positive or negative effect on student writing. As I review the literature that addresses these debates, I identify the strengths and shortfalls of both sides of the debates. I believe the general opinions of how IM shapes school writing are over-generalized by an "either-or" mentality, which is not useful for teachers who face the challenge of teaching literacy to the "Net Generation."³⁹ By stepping away from the tendency to think of IM as a polarized debate, I hope to offer teachers real solutions for dealing with the opportunities and challenges IM has to offer writing education.

The Speech-Writing Deb8

A number of linguistic studies on Computer-Mediated Communication⁴⁰ (CMC) have debated whether textspeak is more like speech or writing (Baron, 2003; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006). The latest study comes from the University of Toronto. In their paper, "LOL for real! Instant messaging, teen language and linguistic change,"

³⁹ Don Tapscott (1998) coined the term "Net Generation" to describe children of the "Information Age" who grow up using digital technology in their day-to-day lives.

⁴⁰ CMC includes IM as well as other types of synchronous and asynchronous online communication services (like chatrooms, email, message boards, newsgroups, blogs, etc.)

Tagliamonte and Denis reviewed a number of studies on linguistic features of CMC in order to establish a context for their study on whether IM is more like speech or writing.⁴¹

Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) divided the studies they reviewed into two camps. Ferrara, Brunner and Whittemore (1991) and Yates (1996) found the forms of CMC they studied were “neither simply speech-like nor simply written-like” (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006, p. 11). However, Werry’s (1996), Hentschel’s (1998), Paolillo’s (1999, 2001) Palfreyman and al Khalil’s (2003) and Baron’s (2004) findings led them to argue that the speed and informality of CMC makes it more like spoken discourse.⁴² For these researchers, CMC is a way of reproducing and simulating spoken language.

Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) are particularly critical of [Baron’s \(2004\)](#)⁴³ study examining the IM language of college students. Tagliamonte and Denis report on Baron’s findings:

A mere 0.3% of the words had typical IM abbreviations (eg. hrs, cuz), less than 0.8% were acronyms (eg. lol, brb) and 0.4% represented emoticons (smiley faces and the like). Furthermore, where lexical pairs could be contracted, as in “I’m” for “I am,” Baron found that only 65% were shortened. (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006, p. 12)

In Tagliamonte and Denis’ (2006) opinion, Baron’s findings suggest IM language is more formal than Baron gives it credit for. They do not agree with Baron’s suggestion that college students have simply grown out of using trendy IM forms (p. 12).

⁴¹ Refer to Appendix C for the table Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) use to summarize this body of research.

⁴² For example, all of these researchers noted that their users’ spelling reflected their spoken dialect (Tagliamonte & Denis 2006, p. 11).

⁴³ The URL to Baron’s (2004) article is <http://www.american.edu/lfs/tesol/Baron-SeeYouOnlineCorrected64.pdf>

Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) found that as a whole, the literature does not offer definitive answers on IM's relationship to speech and writing. They stated, "The question of precisely where to place IM on a spectrum between written and spoken language remains open" (p. 12). With the goal of contributing to the "speech-writing debate," they conducted a study on 71 IM users, all native, English-speaking Canadians between the ages of 15 and 20 (p. 14). They took measures to try and gather "authentic" samples of IM by collecting the majority of their data from conversational histories saved on participants' computers prior to the study.⁴⁴ They compared this IM data with spoken data from actual interviews with the participants. In total, they studied a corpus of 1,470,376 words (p. 16). They studied their data for typical IM forms (eg. lol, brb, ttyl, etc.) and grammatical features (eg. distribution of pronouns, intensifiers, temporal references, quotative verbs) that have been tied to either speech or writing.⁴⁵

Through their sociolinguistic analysis of the spoken and written data, Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) found IM language to be more formal than speech, but not as formal as writing, describing it as a combination "formal, informal and colloquial variants" (p. 33). They found their "authentic" IM data were not scattered with numerous abbreviations and acronyms—only 3% of the IM data had these forms—which contradicts Baron's assumption that textspeak is something the young outgrow. The medley of language

⁴⁴ Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) note that MSN Messenger software gives its users the option to automatically save a record of their conversations. Many of their participants simply opted to donate their conversation histories. (p. 15)

⁴⁵ For example, they compared the use of intensifiers, finding the main ones to be "really," "very" and "so." They found that in speech, their participants predominantly used "really," but in IM, "so" was more often used. Consistent with earlier research "very" (which is considered more formal and is more often associated with older speakers) was rarely used by their participants, but it was used twice as much on IM as it was in speech (Tagliamonte & Denis 2006, pp. 23-24). This they argue, "is the first indication that IM is not simply an informal speech-like register, but instead mixes both formal linguistic features as well as innovative trends" (p. 24).

variants they collected, compared to findings from existing research, led them to describe IM as a “language variety that never existed before” (p. 33). They did not define it as more like speech or more like writing, but as a “hybrid” of speech and writing (p. 33).

It seems to be a consensus that “IM language” looks different than what we have always regarded as writing. It is therefore important that we do not refer to IM language as writing. I have seen it called “IM lingo,” “Netspeak,” “IMspeak,” among other names. However, I prefer to call it “textspeak,” for the name reflects the notion of IM language as a blend of text and speech.

Summary of the Speech-Writing Deb8

Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) suggest that the “more like speech or writing” view is not sufficient for describing textspeak. Textspeak is a hybrid—a complex combination of the two. But can we be more specific? What part of IM is speech and what part is writing? I hope to take the notion of hybridity a step further through my investigation of four teenagers’ perceptions of IM and literacy.

The Good-Bad Deb8

Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) argued their findings suggest IM is not having a negative effect on writing in general; rather, it may actually strengthen teens’ command of language (p. 33). They partly based this claim on the fact that their data did not include a great deal of IM shortcuts, and partly on the creative and articulate IM chats they collected as data. But Tagliamonte and Denis were only looking at their participants’ writing in one context—on IM. They did not look at the writing these students were

doing in and for school or other contexts for that matter. Therefore, the question of how IM affects school writing is still open for debate.

A number of news (Lee, 2002; McCarroll, 2005; “[Reading and Writing](#)”, 2003) and scholarly articles (Craig, 2003; Farmer, 2005; O’Connor, 2005; Seggern & Novak, 2003; Textly & DeGennaro, 2005) discuss the relationship between IM and academic writing as an “either/or” relationship—either IM is good or it is bad for the writing students do in school. The debate is based on the assumption that IM is having an effect on school writing. The prevailing tone of this debate appears to be polarized, which is obvious by looking at the titles of some of these articles. For example, in April 2005, the journal, *Learning and Leading with Technology*, published a two part article titled, “Should we Ban Instant Messaging in School?” The first part, written by Sharon Texley is labeled “Yes, Ban Messaging” which opposes the second part of the article by Donna Gennaro, “No, Don’t Ban Messaging.” Robert Farmer published an article in the proceedings of the 2003 [NAWeb](#)⁴⁶ Conference titled, “[Instant Messaging – Collaborative Tool or Educator’s nightmare?!](#)”⁴⁷ In the online journal, [New Horizons for Learning](#),⁴⁸ Amanda O’Connor published an article titled, “Instant Messaging: Friend or Foe of Student Writing?” When some reporters caught word of Tagliamonte and Denis’ findings, they published headlines like “[Texting helps teens’ grammar](#)”⁴⁹ (Alphonso,

⁴⁶ NAWeb stands for North American Web (<http://naweb.unb.ca/>)

⁴⁷ The URL to Farmer’s (2003) article is <http://www.unb.ca/naweb/proceedings/2003/PaperFarmer.html>

⁴⁸ The URL to O’Connor’s (2005) article is <http://www.newhorizons.org/>

⁴⁹ The URL to Alphonso’s (2006) article is

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v5/content/subscribe?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2Fservlet%2Fstory%2FLAC.20060801.TEXT01%2FTPStory%2FTPNational%2FOntario%2F&ord=1141394&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true.

2006) and “[Study shows IM is OK](#)⁵⁰” (Hearn, 2006). Titles like these do not seem to leave much hope for us to find a middle ground.

I believe thinking about IM in terms of an either/or influence on school writing overlooks the complex relationship between IM and school writing. Too often those focused on the potential for using IM as a teaching tool tend to not account for the disposable nature of IM conversations and the distractions they create. Too often those most concerned about the malignant influence of IM on school writing ignore the very nature of the English language—the fact that it evolves—and they have few suggestions about how to approach IM in the classroom besides teaching against it or punishing students for their “IM mistakes.” My analysis of the following literature illustrates this two-sided debate. I propose we take a different approach to thinking about IM and school writing—one that adheres to NLS principals and takes into account both sides of the debate.

IM Negative: IM is “bastardizing” English.

From the negative viewpoint, IM is ruining the formality of the written word (Craig, 2003; Lee, 2002; O’Connor, 2005; Seggern & Novak, 2003). This perspective is, for the most part, coming from teachers and parents who are seeing the effects in their students’ or children’s school work.

In September of 2002, the *New York Times* published, “[I Think, Therefore IM](#),”⁵¹ voicing the concerns of teachers who dislike IM (Lee, 2002). Ms. Harding, for example,

⁵⁰ The URL to Hearn’s (2006) article is <http://www.theage.com.au/news/technology/study-shows-im-is-ok/2006/08/01/1154198131278.html>

⁵¹ The URL to Lee’s (2002) article is <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=technology&res=9F06E5D71230F93AA2575AC0A9649C8B63>

said IM had been a problem in her classroom for the past two years—ever since she began noticing IM shortcuts creep into students’ papers (such as u, r, ur, b4, wuz, cuz, 2 and so on). She stated her students should know the difference between IM and school writing but, "To them it's not wrong... It's acceptable because it's in their culture." She seems to perceive IM as a teaching obstacle. “It's hard enough to teach them the art of formal writing,” said Ms. Harding, “now we've got to overcome this new instant-messaging language” (Lee, 2002).

Lee talked to several students to get their side of the story. These students admitted that they were so used to abbreviating words on IM that they do it unconsciously in schoolwork. They said that they do not realize they are reading and writing in textspeak because they use it all the time (Lee, 2002).

One year later, *CNN*⁵² reported on a teacher in London, England, who was completely bewildered by a student’s essay that began: “My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc”⁵³ (“Text Message Essay,” 2003). In the same article, Judith Gillespie, of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, responded to this issue, stating that a decline in proper grammar and standard written English was partly linked to the IM “craze” (“Text Message Essay,” 2003).

In *USA Today*, Steve Friess described some parental reactions to their children’s written work after they began using IM. Carl Sharp, for instance, could not believe his eyes when his fifteen-year-old son’s summer job resume read, “i want 2 b a counselor

⁵² URL for the (2003) *CNN* article, “Text Messaging Essay”:

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/03/03/offbeat.text.essay.reut/>

⁵³ In translation: "My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place" (“Text Message Essay,” 2003).

because i love 2 work with kids” across the top of the page (Friess, 2003)⁵⁴. He was convinced that his son’s “unacceptable” literacy behaviour came from chatting over IM. “I never thought I’d be encouraging my kids to talk on the telephone,” said Sharp, “but I realized that the constant chatting on the Internet was destroying their ability to write properly” (Friess, 2003). Another parent, Bill Doak, barred his 12-year-old daughter from using IM. His daughter accepted her father’s ruling (although reluctantly), because she understood his point; “It might hurt me because I might be thinking the same way in school as I would online,” she said (Freiss, 2003).

Seggern and Novak (2003) published an article in the proceedings of the 2003 ASCUE⁵⁵ Conference called “How YOU Say and Write it; How I Say and Write It.”⁵⁶ In it, they expressed serious concern with “the sanctity of language” (, p. 249). They said they felt as if they were watching “the deterioration of language,” which is “warping communication” (p. 248). They called students “victims of a changing world” and blamed IM, along with other forms of CMC, for initiating this downward trend (p. 248).

From the above examples, it seems that unless all parents make the same decisions as Bill Doak to ban their child from using IM then teachers will continue to see our language deteriorate. From this perspective, the assumption is that adolescents cannot differentiate between IM and proper English. I am led to wonder, are students unconsciously ruining the standards that have taken civilization centuries to build? Is IM “dumbing down” society?

⁵⁴ The URL for Friess’ (2003) article in USA Today is http://www.usatoday.com/life/2003-03-31-chat_x.htm

⁵⁵ ASCUE stands for Association of Small Computers Users in Education (<http://www.ascue.org>).

⁵⁶ The URL for Seggern and Novak’s (2003) article is <http://fits.depauw.edu/ascue/proceedings/2003/p248.pdf>

IM Positive: It motivates writing & challenges the mind.

On the other side of the debate, people argue IM motivates adolescents to practice writing (eg. Lee, 2002; McCarroll, 2005; O'Connor, 2005). For instance, sixth-grade teacher, Ms. Fogarty said “If this lingo gets their thoughts and ideas onto paper quicker, the more power to them” (Lee, 2002, p. 4). David Warlick, author of three books on technology in the classroom, argued that “Teachers should credit their students with inventing a new language ideal for communicating in a high-tech world” (“Text Message Essay,” 2007).

In her case study of Lisa’s IM use, Jacobs (2004) was impressed by the manner at which Lisa could negotiate tasks. Jacobs said that Lisa’s highly developed multitasking tactics brought to mind a suggestion made by Lewis and Fabos (2000), “that students’ boredom with the linearity of the writing process associated with the classroom may be related to the sophisticated strategies they employ in activities such as instant messaging” (p. 405).

David Craig (2003) explored how IM challenges students to think in his paper, “Instant messaging: The language of youth literacy.” He said that when young people IM, they engage in “language play”—a comment also made by Lewis and Fabos (2005). For instance, Craig talked about how IM users typically make phonetic replacements while they write in textspeak (eg. typing “every1” instead of “everyone”). This type of “language play,” Craig argued, suggests the development of advanced literacy skills (p. 123). Using the research of Dr. David Crystal, professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, in support of his case, Craig reasoned that people must know how language works in order to engage in language play. Thus to use IM, teens must have an understanding of

how the English language functions. “As instant messagers develop proficiency with a variety of phonetic replacements and other types of slang, they can’t help but increase their subconscious knowledge of metalinguistics⁵⁷” (p. 125). Craig believes that teens are displaying metalinguistic abilities when they IM, because they are forcing themselves to “step back” and think about new ways to use words to serve their own purposes (p. 125).

Craig’s (2003) argument is based on the assumption that adolescents instinctively know the difference between IM and school writing. He explained that historically, “human beings can develop a large set of literacies, ranging from the formal to the relaxed and from the mainstream to the subculture” (p. 126). Craig supported this theory using Mark Twain’s work as an example. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain was able to switch between dialect and standard English; “Twain’s possession of an alternate literacy not only did not harm but indeed helped his effectiveness as a storyteller,” said Craig (p. 126). I do not doubt that people can maintain and differentiate between multiple literacies, but it seems like a far stretch to compare the writing abilities of Twain with those of adolescents who are still developing their literacy skills. Whether students find it difficult to separate textspeak and formal language is still questionable. Also questionable is whether IM motivates writing, as it is not simply writing, but a blend of speech and writing. It is important for educators to know if students need to be taught the differences between textspeak and school writing—informal and formal language—or if they understand them instinctively.

⁵⁷ Craig (2003) explained that “metalinguistics” refers to the ability to “step back” and think of ways of using words, and therefore, analyzing how language works.

IM Negative: Multitasking and “multi-distractions.”

A counter-argument to the view IM is challenging students’ minds to advance their thinking about language, is the argument that adolescents cannot be thinking too deeply when they use IM. I have already mentioned that study after study has shown teenage IM users multitask (Boneva et al., 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Jacobs, 2004; Kent & Facer, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Wallis, 2006), and research on multitasking suggests “the quality of one’s output and depth of thought deteriorates as one attends to ever more tasks” (Wallis, 2006, p. 4). David E. Meyer, director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan, found multitasking causes more errors (often twice as many) and can make a single task take significantly more time than it would have otherwise (Wallis, 2006, p. 6). Meyer gave a simple explanation:

The bottom line is that you can’t simultaneously be thinking about your tax return and reading an essay, just as you can’t talk to yourself about two things at once.... If a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing algebra, she’ll suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if she just thought about algebra until she was done. (Meyer, cited in Wallis, 2003, p. 6)

Helene Hembrooke and Geri Gay (2003) studied the effects of multitasking in a college Communications class. A classroom of 44 students was equipped with networked laptops for an entire semester⁵⁸. The students were encouraged to use their laptops as a supplement to the lectures, discussions and lab activities (p. 7). At the beginning of one

⁵⁸ The group of students were asked to log onto a proxy server during the lectures so that Hembrooke and Gay (2003) could create a record of all the “tools” they used (such as e-mail, discussion board participation, URL visits, etc.) (pp. 6-7).

lecture, the class was randomly split in two and one group was sent to the lab while the other stayed and listened to the lecture. Then the two groups switched spots. Both groups heard the same lecture, but the first group was allowed to use their laptops and the second group was asked to keep them closed. At the end of the class, all the students were given a pop quiz to test their memory of the lecture (p. 7). The study was repeated a second time two months later, but the group that had laptops open the first time were asked to close them and vice versa (p. 8). It was obvious from comparing their memory test results, that open, networked laptops were a distraction, as the test scores were significantly lower than when students were in a closed laptop environment (Hembrooke & Gay, p. 15). Students used the internet as supplement to class activities, but were surely distracted by things like e-mail, IM, and browsing the Net (p. 15). They concluded that “tech-etiquette” for using wireless technology in the classroom needs to be established to deter students from “high-tech doodling⁵⁹” and defeating the purpose of using the technology in the first place (p. 16).

Research also shows that students are easily distracted by IM (Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Kinzie, Whitaker & Hofer, 2005; Textley & DeGennaro, 2005). Textley (2005) was writing from experience when she suggested that IM be banned in all high schools (Textley & DeGennaro, 2005). In Textley’s school, each student was given their own laptop and the school created a school-wide IM network. Using iChat, students could communicate with each other from anywhere in the school. The administration and teachers intended for students to be able to share ideas, work on group projects and help each other with assignments. But students did not use iChat the way the “idealists”

⁵⁹ “High tech doodling” refers, in part, to IM. E-mails and off-task browsing are also regarded as ways of “doodling.”

envisioned (p. 6). Textley said the reality was “constant ‘iChatter,’ [which] included who’s going out with whom, who went to the party last weekend, who’s bored in class, and so on” (p. 6). Even though students knew their chats were monitored, they figured they could get away with off-topic socializing because no one could monitor over 300 computers at once. IChat was therefore removed from every laptop and banned from the school. Textley concluded the students are “better without it” (p. 6).

A study in a post-secondary classroom specifically focused on how IM worked as a supplement to lectures. Kinzie, Whitaker and Hofer⁶⁰ (2005) studied a university class of pre-service teachers to answer the question, “Can the connectivity and real-time discussion facilitated by Chat or IM sessions and the multi-tasking capabilities of students contribute to new learning opportunities in the classroom?” (p. 150) The researchers provided each participant with a hand-held computer and found students were able to engage in effective IM and spoken discussions in each class, but only one-third of the IM discussions were on task. Through interviews with students and instructors, it was found that students felt there were too many claims on their attention and instructors felt they did not always have the class’ full attention. The instructors said the multitasking they observed involved *sequential attention* rather than *simultaneous attention* (p. 159). The researchers felt that it was unclear in this circumstance whether IM led to greater learning and suggested research “use brief alternating time periods for lecture and online discussion” to correspond with the sequential nature of multitasking.

Together, this research suggests that IM poses a threat in learning environments by being a distraction from the course at hand if it is used during other tasks. IM—which encourages multitasking—appears to be having a negative effect on school writing if

⁶⁰ The URL to Kinzie, Whitaker and Hoffer’s (2005) article is http://www.ifets.info/journals/8_2/14.pdf

students are trying to do both simultaneously. It is possible for teachers to divide the class into sequences of lessons and online discussion and control the distractions that multitasking can impose on the classroom, but teachers cannot control their students' online actions at home. How often, I wonder, are students distracted while they are completing written school assignments on the computer?

IM Positive: A collaborative tool.

It would seem from the research I reviewed that we should rule out IM use in school, if there were not any positive examples of IM use in learning environments. However, Kent and Facer (2004) discussed what happened at John Cabot City Technology Centre's "E-Learning Day," for students between the ages of 11 and 18. The adolescents were given computer-based tasks to focus on during the day. Teachers could be contacted for help, but students also had access to an instant messaging service that connected them with their peers. Many of them logged on and discussed the school tasks, exchanged ideas and answered questions together. In this example, IM was useful for collaboration. A collaborative tool is exactly what Robert Farmer (2005) said IM is good for. He suggested teachers communicate with students over IM to create a "more engaging" learning environment (p. 60). He argued that the collaborative nature of IM is what makes it "ideal for educational and learning environments" (p. 60).

Rosalind Helderma⁶¹ (2003) reports on a high school English teacher, Robyn Jackson, who created a chat room for her students where they meet once a week outside of class to discuss literature and writing. Jackson makes it clear for her students that

⁶¹ The URL for Helderma (2003) is <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/338430431.html?dids=338430431:338430431&FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&date=May+20%2C+2003&author=Rosalind+S.+Helderma&pub=The+Washingt on+Post&edition=&startpage=B.01&desc=Click+by+Click%2C+Teens+Polish+Writing>

textspeak is allowed inside the chat room, but not on formal school writing. She asks them to "switch off their informal habits when they leave the chat room" and finds this tactic very successful (Helderman, 2003)

There is a long list of benefits tied to collaboration and writing. In her book, *Co-authoring in the classroom: Creating an environment for effective collaboration*, Helen Dale (1997) described how collaborative writing tasks can be effective for teaching students how to write. She said that collaborative writing socializes the writing process and encourages students to learn from each other. It makes the writing process explicit, so writers are forced to think about and articulate the process. Multiple perspectives bring to the table a greater awareness of method and finer attention to detail. As co-authors interact, they are actively modeling and observing each other, passing on and improving on their techniques and skills. In effect, they are developing a metalanguage for talking about writing. This type of interaction requires trust and the sharing of responsibility. In this sense, co-authors become a community of writers. This type of relationship is present in the workforce and valuable to many sectors of employment, including government and business (Dale, 1997).

Dale (1997) gives us many reasons to believe collaborative writing tasks can help students learn how to write. But researchers have not studied the effectiveness of collaborative writing activities in the context of IM. I am left wondering if textspeak is as Robyn Jackson suggests; that it can be switched on and off? And do teachers need to teach students how to "flick the switch?"

IM Positive: Making connections.

One argument repeated by the positive perspective is that IM is not going to go away (Craig, 2003; Farmer, 2005; O'Connor, 2005). As Craig (2003) states, "You cannot stop the tide" (p. 129). Adolescents have embraced IM and made it a part of their lives and identities (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), which leads people to believe it can be used to connect with students. Farmer (2005) and O'Connor (2005) both suggest teachers could use IM to converse with their students after school hours. O'Connor (2005) also suggests IM be used to make a more figurative connection with students. IM, she argues, can be used as an example to teach students about important concepts related to understanding language and writing, such as audience and the evolution of language (p. 4).

Lewis and Fabos' (2005) suggest a series of important literacy lessons that could be instigated by asking students to think about their own IM practices.⁶² Discussions about IM can guide students to "analyze the features of the semiotic systems with which they interact across contexts...as well as the semiotic processes they use to carry out these interactions" (p. 40). Lewis and Fabos argue that the ability to articulate what students know about their own literacy practices is an important part of literacy education.

⁶² "For example, discussions about conceptions of audience in IM might focus on the need to deftly shift topic, writing style, and voice from audience to audience. This may lead to a discussion of the issues of circulation and hybrid textuality that we discussed earlier as students talk about how they share messages, sometimes surreptitiously, and make up for the paralinguistic features of face-to-face conversations (eg. LOL). This discussion can lead to a discussion about the nature of audience as it is usually conceived in school writing (often ambiguous or the teacher as audience) with points made about the intersections and disjunctures students can identify related to these different conceptions of audiences. Further discussions could point to the affordances of each kind of writing, including aptitudes fostered by each. Finally, it would be possible to apply some of the aptitudes fostered in computer mediated communication to shape a different sort of writing at school, perhaps writing for a clearly defined and fully imagine audience, singular but highly contextualized as is each buddy in IM exchanges with close friends." (Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 496)

Summary of the Good-Bad Deb8

The debate on how IM affects school writing is polarized. IM is often discussed as either an “ally” or a “rival” of school writing. It is either ruining literacy by confusing young minds that have trouble noticing the difference between formal and informal language, or it is encouraging young minds to realize and practice multiple literacies to meet personal purposes. It is either creating poor, distracted writers or creating people that are comfortable collaborating and playing with language.

Generally speaking, those who see IM as bad think adolescents would be better off without it. Some schools have reacted by banning IM, treating textspeak as taboo (eg. Friess; Lee; Textley, 2005). But rejecting IM does not make it go away. Rather, ignoring IM means ignoring a part of teenage culture. Those who see IM as good tend to see IM as a revolutionary teaching tool (eg. Farmer, 2005; O’Connor, 2005) but do not seriously stop to consider the types of distractions that accompany IM use. Here we have a polarized debate, and at the moment neither side stands on higher ground. Accordingly, Amanda O’Connor (2005) is not able to answer the question, “Is IM a “friend or foe of students’ writing?” She concludes that more research is needed. But I would like to suggest that perhaps she is asking the wrong question in the first place. Perhaps it is not an “either/or” problem at all.

Steven Johnson (2005) based his book, *Everything Bad is Good For You*, on the premise that people have a tendency to regard popular culture as bad—as a force that “dumbs down” society—but this view fails to notice that many trends in popular culture reflect that teenagers are demanding more complex and challenging technologies, IM being one of them. He argued that popular Internet activities are challenging minds by

being “participatory” in nature (p. 118). In order to participate, people must learn how to cope in new environments (learning new software, applications, codes, etc.) (p. 121). He cautioned that “every technology can be exploited or misused to nefarious ends,” but the trends in popular culture suggest society is actually getting smarter (p. 120).⁶³ If we accept Johnson’s argument then IM, on its own, can not be causing language to degenerate. Rather, adolescents are building innovative strategies to cope in a new environment convenient to their lifestyles. But the question of whether adolescents are misusing IM language remains.

A “Plural” Perspective

It is my contention that understanding these debates in terms of an “either/or” relationship is not helpful for teachers since it overlooks the complex relationship between IM and school writing. With ties to both speech and writing—a “hybrid” of text and speech (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006)—textspeak is a complex literacy. If the relationship between textspeak and writing is not “black and white,” why do we think IM has “black or white” effects on school writing?

I propose that the relationship between IM and school writing be understood in terms of a series of “effects” rather than an ultimate “effect” of either bad or good. There is no rule that IM must shape school writing in one definitive way; there is no law that says we cannot look at the relationship between IM and school writing from a “plural” perspective.

⁶³ The increase in popularity of digital technologies like IM is simply one trend that Johnson (2005) discusses. He also goes into great detail about the increase in popularity of television programs that have multiple characters and complicated storylines, which challenge viewers to make assumptions and connections on their own.

New Literacies Studies (NLS) help us to understand that literacies may be understood in terms of particular contexts and specific practices. Understanding the relationship between IM and school writing means understanding how their practices are attached to and detached from one another. Through my study, I have attempted to bridge IM and school writing practices to better understand this relationship. I have talked to and written with a group of adolescent IM users, who are at the centre of this debate. Their perceptions and experiences are what have led me to identify ways IM shapes school writing that are important for educators to understand and will help them make decisions about how to address IM in the classroom.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Principles of New Literacy Studies have guided my research methodology. Indeed, I have regarded IM as a new literacy which I can compare and contrast to a more conventional literacy, school writing. I have studied the relationship between these new and old literacies through the perspective of the people who use them, high school students. My central question looks at how IM shapes my participants' formal writing and their perception of literacy. In this chapter, I offer a rationale for selecting a qualitative approach, introduce my participants, describe my methods of study and discuss how I analyse my data.

Rationale

The polarized debate on how IM affects student writing leaves us uncertain of how to respond to textspeak in schools. Therefore, I see a need for further research to gain a better understanding of the relationship between IM and school literacy. NLS gives me tools I can use to examine this relationship.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, NLS theory emphasizes the importance of understanding literacies within their particular social and cultural contexts (e.g., Barton, 1995; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Roberts, 1994; Street, 2003). Since I wish to explore the relationship between IM and school writing through a NLS lens, I must examine the particular experiences of individual students. A qualitative methodology is the one best suited to examine these students' IM and school literacy practices because it provides a window on individual experience that simply cannot be captured by quantitative

measures. A qualitative approach allows me to interpret not just the relationship between these two literacies, but also the manner in which students perceive this relationship.

Because IM is a prime new literacy in the lives of today's youth, I see my research as having an important place in new literacies discourse. I hope my research will help educators understand how adolescents perceive the relationship between the literacy practices they do at home and those they do at school, so that they may devise a pedagogy for new literacies that is attentive to the role IM plays in the lives of so many students.

Methods

To study the relationship between IM and school writing, I decided to form a writing group with adolescent IM users that met in various writing contexts, both live and online. That way, I was not only able to talk to adolescents about their perceptions on IM and school literacy, but I could also observe their writing practices in their particular contexts. We met live on three occasions in a classroom at Queen's University (where I set up a networked computer for each participant). I captured these sessions through audio-recordings (that I later transcribed) and detailed field notes. The IM sessions were easy to capture, as each of us participated from the comfort of our own homes, and I effortlessly saved all of the IM transcripts. After each IM session, I typed up a journal entry logging my interpretation of what just took place.

The blog was also useful for collecting data as my participants had access to it at any time. They logged on outside our meeting times and added posts. I also collected a sample of their "school writing." They each gave me a recent assignment they did in

school. Even though I did not specify English class, they all gave me English assignments. These assignments helped me understand the quality of their school writing and their perception of literacy. I followed up the writing group with one-on-one interviews over IM, and again, the transcripts were saved and used as data.

To find my participants, I sent out a recruitment email over my faculty's listserv and recruitment packages to various schools in the area targeting high school students who use IM and are interested in writing.⁶⁴ My efforts led me to four individuals who I refer to by the MSN nicknames they made up especially for my study: Angel, Al, Jean and the Jeffinator. All four of them are between the ages of 16 and 19, and are regular users of MSN Messenger.

We corresponded by email to set up our first meeting. Before coming together for the first time on MSN Messenger, I thought it would be a good idea to meet in person and get to know each other face to face. We met for the first time one chilly winter afternoon in a classroom on campus. Once we introduced ourselves and settled into our chairs, I took some time to go over my study and explained their role in it. First of all, I told them I hoped they would enjoy themselves. I hoped they would feel free to be creative with their writing, and share writing with each other. I said their role was primarily to be honest, as I was there to listen to their perspectives on IM and the writing they do at school. I explained that in newspapers and online, I was hearing teachers and other "experts" in education talk about how IM is either good or bad for literacy, and I hoped they could help me develop a better understanding of the relationship between IM and school writing. I told my participants that we would use MSN and a weblog to talk about opinions on IM, writing and literacy, and engage in writing activities. I also mentioned

⁶⁴ Refer to Appendix D for the Letter of Information I sent out to prospective participants.

that a lot of the writing that we would do would have a collaborative element and I encouraged them to work together.

I acted as the leader of this writing group by organizing writing practices and guiding discussions. Although I acted as a “teacher figure” I also wanted to participate so I could get a sense of how it felt to be engaged in the same literacy practices as my participants. I believe my participation helped me gain insight into their perspectives by making them feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and writing. For them, I was not just a teacher figure, but someone who could relate with their experiences.

The Participants

Angel

At 16-years-old, Angel was my youngest participant. She was also the quietest of the group. During online meetings, she often agreed with other people’s opinions and rarely put forward her own. She seemed to be a very observant person who enjoyed listening more than talking when she was in a group (or at least in a group she is not very familiar with).

Angel was not always confident in her writing abilities. During some of our writing activities, she contributed very little because she did not know what to write. Sometimes she seemed surprised that she was able to think of something to write. For instance, she added a postscript to the end of a poem that she posted on our blog saying “it worked!” I believe Angel articulated her thoughts well, but she did make the most spelling and grammatical mistakes of the four participants.

Angel is a prime example of a teenager that likes to multitask. On more than one occasion, I noticed her sending a text message from her cell phone during our live

meetings. In the interview, I asked her if she multitasked while she participated in the study and she said “always.” She admitted to me that she was downloading music during the interview. I had already guessed she was multitasking during our interview because MSN has a feature that tells you when your buddy is in the process of typing, and there were long pauses in between the moment when I entered text and she typed her response. After I had finished doing all of the interviews, I noticed the interview I did with Angel is pages shorter than my other interviews, despite the fact each interview lasted for the same amount of time. Therefore, it was obvious to me I did not have Angel’s full attention.

Angel said she enjoys English class but “literacy” has never been her strongest subject. She sees herself as a hard-working student, but usually receives average grades in English class. She said she spends most of her after-school hours (2-7 by her estimate) on the computer. Whenever she is on the computer she is on MSN, chatting with up to six friends at once. Angel believes the amount of time she spends on MSN, may have a negative effect on her writing, but she continues to use it because it fulfills her social needs.

Al

Al was the oldest in the group. She turned 19-years-old during the study. Al stood out from the rest of the group because of her attitude towards school. Because Al has had a tough time finishing high school, she does not have a high opinion of the education she has received.

One of the first things Al told me was that she is confused by the idea of literacy and she has always struggled in English class. She is very critical of the English teachers she has had throughout high school. She believes her teachers have merely “taught to the

test” (referring to the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test⁶⁵) and did not pay attention to her specific literacy needs.

She had an interesting outlook of what schools should be teaching instead of the standard test questions; she said that schools should be teaching “fluid literacy.” She told us about her idea of fluid literacy in an MSN discussion. “it’s like fluid intelligence,” she IMed, “it’s a measure of literacy in everyday life.” She went on to explain, “You look at how people read in their everyday life, what they read in their everyday life, can they debate a novel with other people? Can they write letters to the newspaper and can they write a business letter if they needed to?”⁶⁶ As I understood it, Al’s notion of “fluid literacy” means reading, writing and interpreting texts that fit her present needs as they shift, moment to moment.

Al, like Angel, did not seem to have much confidence in her writing abilities and she was somewhat reluctant to share her writing. On more than one occasion, when I gave the group time to write at the end of a session, she asked me if she could take more time and post her writing later, but she never posted them in the end. She did not always like to contribute to the MSN writing activities and would say she did not know what to write. As time went on and she became comfortable with us, she began to open up and share more. For the most part, she was active in the IM conversations but less so in the writing activities.

In my one-on-one interview with Al, I asked her why she chose not to complete all of the writing activities and she told me that she was afraid of being ill-judged. She said she always feels like people think poorly of her and she “expects the worst from

⁶⁵ The OSSLT is a mandatory standardized test that Ontario students write in the 10th grade. It was implemented in 2001.

⁶⁶ As I discussed in the Prologue, I am reproducing the IM text as it was written.

herself.” But there were some writing activities, especially the character development activity,⁶⁷ where she felt like she could be creative, “it didn’t matter what we put because we were making it up...it wasn’t like anyone was judging what you were writing,” she told me. The “lack of judgment” is one of the things AI loves about IM. When she chats with her friends, they do not criticize her spelling, grammar, word choice and so on, which makes it easy and enjoyable for her to IM.

Jean

Jean is the Jeffinator’s twin sister, so it is not surprising they have many similar traits. It is also easy to speak of them together because they shared the same computer during all of our MSN meetings, so I did not always know who was saying what. When I asked for clarification, they often told me that they shared the same opinion. They were 17-years-old, bright, friendly, and never seemed too shy to speak their minds or share their writing. They both hold after-school jobs on top of maintaining an excellent grade point average. They were always the most active participants in the activities and discussions.

Jean was always very pleasant and eager to participate. She seemed comfortable sharing her thoughts and opinions and liked to take initiative. I learned from the Jeffinator in our one-on-one interviews that Jean is President of their school council and he is Vice-President. If Angel or AI had trouble with a writing activity, Jean would encourage them. “Just write the first thing that comes to mind,” she once told Angel.

I noticed Jean was quite concerned with the speed of technology she uses. One of the reasons she liked IM is because of its speed. She does not have much patience for

⁶⁷ I will be describing the character development activity later on in this chapter.

computers. She said she gets annoyed at school because the computers are too slow, so she refrains from using them.

Jean rarely turns on the computer just to use IM, but she often lets MSN run in the background for around 7 hours a week. She is often logged on when, for example, she is doing research or reading celebrity gossip. But she said that most of the time she spends on MSN does not involve “chatting.” Sometimes she changes her settings to appear offline, but still keeps track of which of her buddies log on, in case the one she wants to talk to appears online. She admitted to me that she probably stays online longer because of MSN and tends to read books less than she should, although she does enjoy a good novel.

The Jeffinator

The Jeffinator had a playful sense of humour and likes to make people laugh, which is evident by the nickname he selected for my study. His comic personality was reflected in much of his writing during the study (including our MSN conversations). But he also had a serious side to him, especially when it came to discussing schoolwork. He portrayed himself as a hard working student and said he achieves high marks in all of his classes. He mentioned several times that it bothers him to see other students slack off in school and still pass with decent grades. So while he often jokes around, he is diligent with his school work.

The Jeffinator seemed to be a confident individual and did not shy away from offering an opinion. But interestingly, I kept getting the sense that he was giving me “what I wanted to hear.” There was one occasion where he actually asked me what kind of answer I was looking for. He said, “are you looking for an answer like, it was more

fun?’ I responded that I was not looking for any answers in particular; I just wanted to know his personal opinions.

I got the sense that he was concerned with my perception of him—that perhaps he was trying to impress me. He told me that he does not often use textspeak when he IMs because he does not like to appear lazy, but he makes some exceptions when chatting with close friends. Even then, he said he only uses a few of the most popular acronyms (like “ttyl” or “lol”), and he always tries to spell his words correctly. Of all of the participants, the Jeffinator claimed he spends the least amount of time on IM—about 5 hours a week—as he lives a very busy life.

As a Group

My four participants made up an interesting collective. I believe they enjoyed participating in the writing group, but did not see it as something really important in their lives. I got the sense that they felt like they were “helping me out” and not terribly interested in spending a great deal of time writing on our blog, since it did not affect their grades at school.

The highest levels of interest and interaction happened during our IM sessions. They all said that at least some of the activities we did and discussions we had challenged them to think about IM and writing in new ways. The writing activities we did led my participants to think of my study as “school-like,” so I suspect I did not collect “authentic IM chats” as Tagliamonte and Denis (2006) did in their study. Because I was similar to a teacher figure, I think that sometimes they answered my questions with what they thought I wanted to hear—the “right” answer—instead of the honest answer. For this reason, I kept asking similar questions in different ways, trying to probe their answers and get at

the heart of their perceptions. I believe the school-related writing we did over MSN Messenger helped my participants think critically about how IM shapes their personal writing practices.

The Settings

My participants and I met in several different contexts over the course of six weeks. We met face-to-face at Queen's University, and we met virtually, using Wordpress, a Weblog service on the Internet, and MSN Messenger (MSN in short), Microsoft's Instant Messaging service. The face-to-face meetings were held in a classroom in the Faculty of Education. We sat around a table in the middle of a classroom for two hours to write and discuss IM. I set up laptops for each participant, and one for myself which I connected to the overhead projector so that we could all see my monitor on the large white canvas at one end of the room.

Our virtual communication happened both synchronously (over IM) and asynchronously (on our blog). For the most part, my participants contributed to the blog on their own time, but we set specific meeting times for our MSN conversations. We met five times on MSN for at least an hour each time. I set up a private MSN Messenger network for these meetings. I gave each participant an email address and password that they used to log into our network. Since I had access to the passwords, I could monitor their accounts and make sure they remained secure.

Typically IM conversations happen between two people, but MSN Messenger has a feature that allows its users to have group conversations. As each participant logged in at a scheduled time, I invited them into the conversation so that we were all

communicating on the same chat window, which looks something like the box in the middle of the screen (see figure 1).

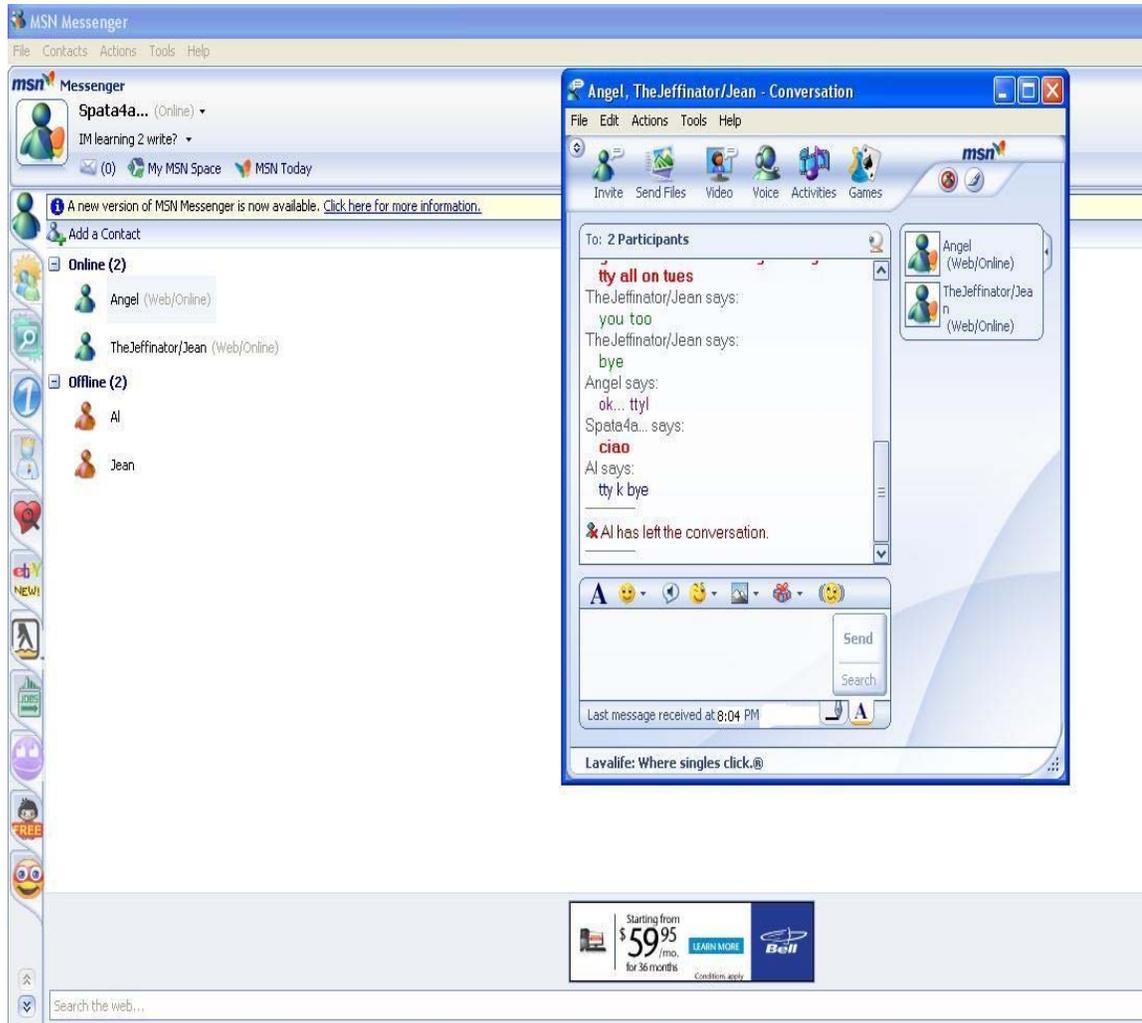


Figure 1. MSN Messenger contact list and “chat box.”

Since my participants are all avid users of MSN Messenger, there was no need for me to explain any of the technicalities of how it works. They were comfortable communicating over this medium and they could all log in from their homes.

Through Wordpress.com, I set up a free weblog for my writing group. I was able to create my own site with my own personal address (<http://spata4a.wordpress.com>). My participants logged onto our blog through names and passwords that I gave them. By

using a secure blog I could rest assured the identities of my participants would not be compromised and the data would not be affected by anyone other than my participants. At the same time, the security meant that we did not have an “authentic” blog, visible to a global audience.

I led our blog discussions by posting questions and activities on our homepage so that my participants could click on those questions and answer in the comments field.

Here is a glance of our homepage (see figure 2).

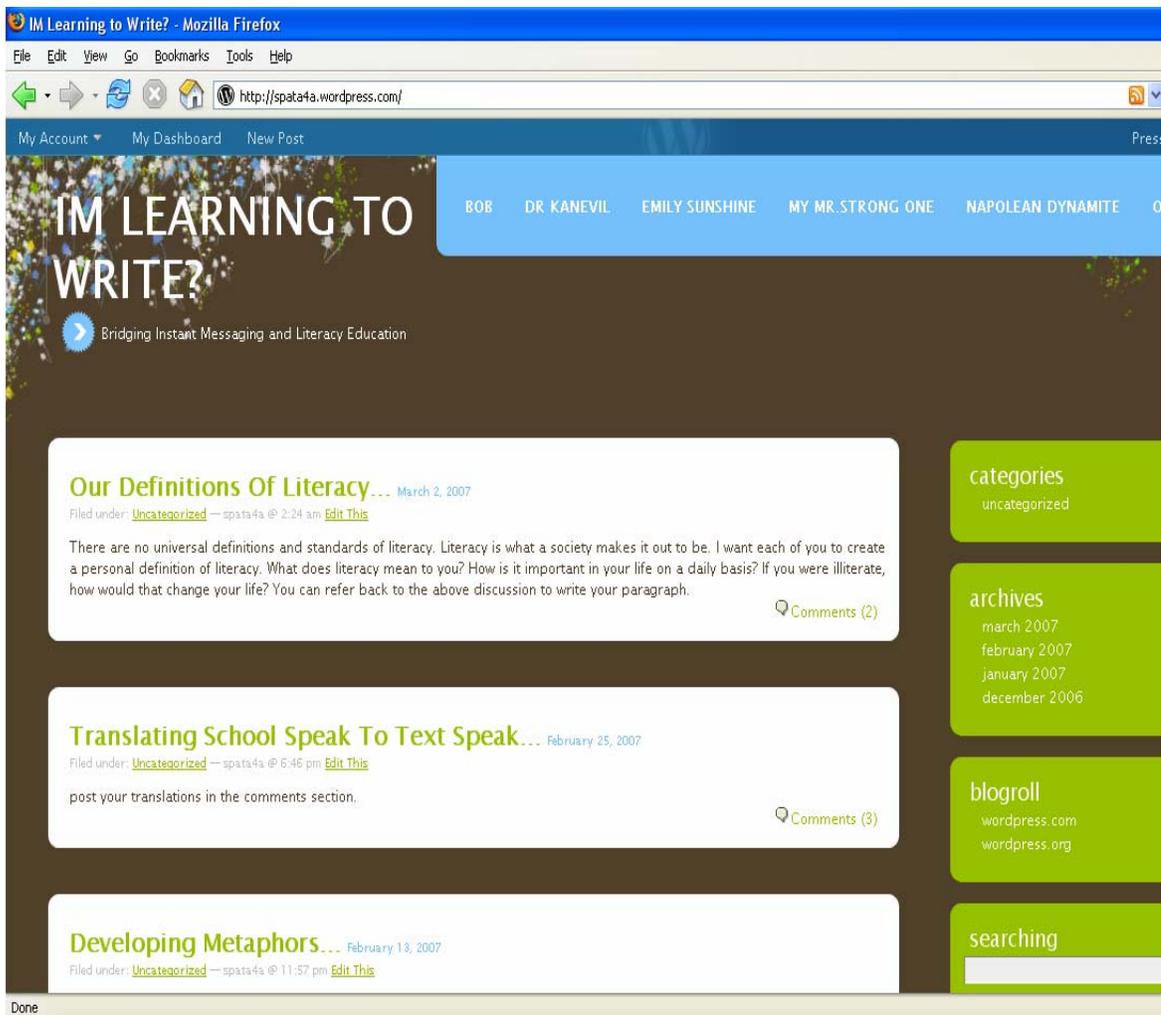


Figure 2. A screenshot of our Wordpress blog.

Wordpress has a number of features to set up and organize blogs. First, you can choose from a variety of designs. Each design presents your blog in a slightly different way, but like all blogs, the information builds from the bottom up so that the most recent post is always visible at the top. The design I chose allowed me to create new pages that line up along the top of the screen. These pages link to characters we developed in a writing activity and our meeting schedule.

Wordpress has simple tools for composing writing and creating hypertext. You simply click on new post and begin typing in the textbox. Tools for manipulating the font, displaying images and creating hypertext line the top of the textbox. “Blogging” on Wordpress was new to my participants, but they did not need very much instruction to be able to use it. I went over the basics in our first meeting and they caught on quickly.

Discussions

I had very interesting discussions with my participants on IM and in the live setting. I stimulated the discussions with questions about IM and writing. Sometimes questions were directly related to news articles, but most often focused on their personal experiences. I asked about the similarities and differences of IM and school writing. I asked whether IM had a place in their schools or if it is only useful at home. I asked if they had any experience with IM in learning environments. I asked if and how IM affects their school writing. I asked about how much thought goes into IM and about the quality of writing that emerges from its use. I asked about the feeling and the process of IM writing in comparison to school writing. I asked about audience, misunderstandings, habits and grammar. Discussions also followed many of our writing activities. I took the

time to repeat my questions in different ways and on different occasions to try and get at the heart of their perspectives.

Writing Practices

From the NLS stance, an important part of researching new literacies is looking at them in their particular contexts and observing them in practice (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Lotherington, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Street, 2003). But my focus is not simply on one new literacy, it is on the relationship between a new literacy and an old one. To research the relationship I decided to bridge IM and school writing—to bring them side by side so that my participants could compare them. I created educational IM writing activities and by doing so, I was able to give my participants a context in which to practice IM and school writing together. In the remainder of this chapter, I summarize the activities I planned and how they transpired in my study.

Poetry Activity

I began this activity with a single phrase. It did not matter what the phrase was about, any topic would have sufficed. The rest of the group had to reply to my phrase with one that rhymes. So they were constrained by the sound of the last word, but nothing more. I believed that by leaving the topic up to my participants, it would be quick and simple to think up original sentences. I participated as well, making up rhyming phrases, but they had to stay aware of the text I was entering, because if I changed the rhyming scheme, they had to as well. In the end, once we built up a repertoire of poetic verses, we each took time to review the poetic lines and used them to write a short poem. The poem contained at least one line from our conversation and had to be at least four lines long.

The remaining choices were up to each author, but they were asked to take rhythm, meter and sound into consideration.

My participants were only meeting for the second time (and the first time on MSN Messenger) when we tried this activity. I found that it was good for inviting participation from all members of the group. All four participants contributed to our repertoire of rhymes. I gave them some time at the end of the session to work on some four line poems. Jean and the Jeffinator were the first to post two amusing little poems onto our blog. Angel posted last and was impressed with her accomplishment. At the end of her post she wrote, "P.S. It works lol" as if she did not believe it would. Al asked for more time to write her poem but in the end, she chose not to post one. Here are the poems the other three posted:

I am an international spy.

My momma, she says I tell too many lies.

Do you really want to make me cry?

Because if you do, I won't get these guys.

~The Jeffinator

It gave me butterflies

almost like my very first date

I felt like my heart grew in size

I think I found my one true mate

~Jean

When I eat all my veggies I get a treat

and that's because I don't eat meat

Let us sit down for a cup of tea

cuz we all know, its all about me!

~Angel

P.S. It works lol

I sensed that Al and Angel were slightly intimidated by writing and sharing poetry—Al especially. I found out later that Al did not post a poem because she did not see herself as a talented poet and feared the other group members would think poorly of her efforts. In hindsight, I think I would have had a better response if I did this activity later on in my study, after my participants got to know each other better and were more comfortable sharing their writing.

Character Development Activity

Since the idea of poetry seemed to make some participants nervous, I thought that perhaps they would respond better to a prose based activity. I devised a character building activity that I hoped would “feel” more like a conversation. It seems I succeeded in this goal. The consensus was unanimous—the character development activity was their favourite because it let them be the most creative.

The first step was for each of us to find an interesting picture of a character (in the broadest sense) using Google Images. In the activity, they pretended they were the character in their picture and answered a series of questions while keeping their identities secret. I asked questions like, “What did you have for breakfast this morning?” and, “What makes you cry?” My participants wrote in first person, paying attention to other

people's answers to try and discover who or what they are. After a bit of a guessing game, we revealed our identities. Then I asked my participants to trade characters and write a descriptive paragraph based on the answers to the questions. I participated as well. The paragraphs were then shared and discussed.

We spent more time developing our characters in a face-to-face meeting where we all came together at Queen's University in a classroom equipped with laptops. I asked more questions like, "What was your most embarrassing moment?" and we each spent five to ten minutes quietly composing mini narratives on our blog. For every question, we switched characters, so each character page on our blog is a collaborative effort. On a later date, we attempted to write a story about one of our characters, Emily Sunshine, on MSN Messenger. We took turns building the story, each one of us contributing one sentence at a time. Sentence by sentence, the story emerged, although none of us really sure where it was headed. We ended up with a somewhat sporadic story of Emily, a vibrant yellow garden flower, facing her fear of the night, and befriending a creepy little spider.

Similes and Metaphors Activity

This activity helped me gain an understanding about their perceptions of IM and writing. First, I selected the topic of the sentence and then asked them to finish the sentence by making up a comparison by creating a simile or metaphor. For instance, I wrote, "Writing an essay is like..." and they gave me responses like, "torture to the brain," "murdering myself slowly," and "finding a rock in a hard place." I purposely decided to ask them to make up metaphors about writing and about IM, hoping that it

would tell me something about their perceptions. The most interesting similes arose from the topic, “My MSN Messenger buddy list is like...”:

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

...a grocery list for a family of 10 haha

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

...a magnifying glass to my life

Al says:

mine looks like a guest list for someone famous lol

I was amused and intrigued by the similes they created. I thought it was interesting that the comparisons to their MSN Messenger buddy list reflected the importance of IM in their social lives. Angel was not present at this meeting so she did not partake in this activity, but I would have liked to have seen her comparison as well.

Once we created a series of similes then I asked them to review what we had done, choose one simile (not necessarily their own) and expand on it. I asked them to use the simile they chose as the topic sentence of a paragraph and further develop the comparison in a few sentences. All three of them took 10 minutes or so to write their paragraphs, which they posted on the blog:

When I am asked to write an essay all that I can think about is how writing an essay is like finding a rock in a hard place. I feel when I have to write an essay it hurts my head. I can never avoid that block. It is so hard to develop my thoughts when there is something in my way. Looking at the blank screen and trying to find an idea is like searching through a pile of stones looking for that perfect one to skip; never ending but fulfilling.

Although tough at times you do make it through that gray area and are able to push yourself through. You eventually find yourself covered in stone, unable to stop the pile of rocks from flowing around you. The rock pile eventually stops however, and you are able to see the light, the open area in which you can write freely.

~Jean

Having multiple MSN conversations is like having a million thoughts at once. Multiple MSN conversations are VERY hard to keep track of. When you're having lots of thoughts at once its very hard to concentrate on just one same as MSN conversations its very hard to keep track of one conversation.

~Al

Having Multiple MSN conversations is like playing a game of whackamole. You are constantly trying to keep up with everyone, but are unable to at times. You get frustrated by the never ending pop-ups but continue on. You try and make each conversation happy by covering it, but they keep coming faster and more frequent. Everyone wants your attention at the time, but while trying to satisfying that one, more become dissatisfied and angry. As the game slows and the conversations come to an end you are able to breathe again knowing that you can satisfy those around you once again.

~The Jeffinator

Following this activity, I asked my participants if it was helpful to look back on our conversation to get ideas of what to write. Jean and the Jeffinator thought so. “Yeah, you can get more ideas that way,” they said.

Alliteration Activity

Textspeak is a written language and not meant to be read out loud. So I thought it would be interesting to introduce my participants to poetic devices that drew their attention to the “sound” of the writing they are producing. We discussed alliteration and I asked them to list as many words as they could think of that begin with certain sounds. In no time, we had a long list of words that began with “a” or “th.” The next step was to use as many words as we could from our lists to create alliterative phrases. For instance, Jean and the Jeffinator thought up, “The thick thunderous sounds made Thelma think provocative thoughts.” If we had more time, I would have liked to ask my participants to expand some of their alliterative phrases into poems or short stories.

Translation Activity

We did this activity face-to-face, but it could easily have been done over MSN. Three of them were there that day; Al was missing. The others had brought in a sample of writing from school. As their constraint, I asked them each to pick a section of their school writing, no more than a paragraph, and “translate” it into textspeak on our blog.

“You mean like write it like we would on MSN?” asked Jean.

“Exactly!” I said.

They took five minutes or so to do this and I sat quietly and waited. The Jeffinator looked up at me and said he would just “dumb it down” a bit, but he would not use a lot of short forms because he does not normally write with short forms on MSN.

I glanced at the blog page when they were all done and was immediately surprised at how few shortcuts they had taken. By “shortcuts,” I mean acronyms, shortened words, and numbers or symbols instead of words. I asked them why little changed in their translations. They insisted that they do not use many short forms in their own IM writing. The Jeffinator said he prefers to sound intelligent and the others nodded in agreement.

As a Whole

I felt the writing activities added an interesting dimension to my data. The activities acted as a bridge between a new and a conventional literacy, which I believe helped my participants to consider the relationship between the writing they do on IM and the writing they do at school.

Working through these activities with my participants also provided me with insight into how collaborative writing might work on IM. I quickly realized my activities needed to stimulate short pieces of writing, which was partially to do with the length of my study and partially with the nature of IM. IM pressured them to think and respond quickly and thus suited writing activities that worked with sentences rather than paragraphs. But because my participants fed off of each other’s ideas and were interested in what each other had to say, the activities were engaging. For the most part, the blog writing they produced as a result of our MSN activities showed potential, but was in need of editing.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the conversations and writing that happened in the various contexts of my study (on MSN, Weblog and in person). I focus on the data illustrating the perceptions held by my participants and how their perceptions of IM shape their school writing and perceptions of literacy.

Four themes emerged from my data analysis, all of which show my participants' particular attitudes to this new literacy. First, unlike earlier generations of teenagers, my participants now have a designated space where they communicate in slang in writing. They see slang as the norm in IM. Second, my participants are aware of switching language registers, from informal to formal. They demonstrate sensitivity to different language usage in different contexts. Third, my participants have a certain attitude towards writing in informal contexts that is best described by a term Naomi Baron (2002) introduced: “[linguistic whateverism](#).”⁶⁸ And finally, my participants hold a broad view of literacy—unlike school—where they recognized multiple communication forms as being a part of their life. At times these themes overlap and merge, but overall, they represent the main perceptions of my participants of how IM shapes school writing and literacy.

A New Space for Slang

Near the beginning of my study, I introduced my participants to the news article, “Txt speak approved for exams,” discussed in Chapter 1. This article reported the New Zealand Qualifications Authority’s (NZQA) decision to permit (but not endorse) the use

⁶⁸ The URL to Baron’s (2002) paper is <http://www.american.edu/lfs/tesol/2002%20Conference--Whatever.pdf>

of textspeak in national examinations (Hann & Chalmers, 2006). All of my participants were shocked by this decision. “on exams? That’s strange...” messaged Jean and the Jeffinator. “do they not know how to spell or something??” asked Angel (MSN Meeting).⁶⁹

Before I told them about the NZQA’s new policy, they explained to me that textspeak does not belong in school writing because, said Angel, “not everyone understands the short forms of everything.” Al agreed, “people who aren’t familiar with it wont be able to understand it,” and Jean and the Jeffinator added “it would be strange to write a paper [for school] using short forms and stuff because that’s like using short hand when writing...sure, YOU may understand it [...but] not everyone else can” (MSN Meeting).

Who understands textspeak? “It seemed like everyone who knows the short forms of everything are people who live on msn,” messaged Angel. “i think the more writing you do [on MSN], the more short forms you know” (MSN Interview). My participants said they spent a considerable amount of time using IM. Angel and Al were the biggest users; they admitted to logging on for several hours everyday. Angel estimated she logs on for 2 to 7 hours everyday, Al said about 5 hours, Jean for up to 7 hours each week and the Jeffinator guessed he logged on for at least 5 hours per week.

My participants saw themselves as living in two worlds, two spaces: online and offline. They perceived textspeak as the language of their online life. They realized the novelty of their online lives as textspeak was young and “cool”—it belonged to their

⁶⁹ As I mentioned in the Prologue, I have included all of the participants’ spelling and grammatical errors to offer an authentic representation of IM language. Also, in this chapter, I have identified the context in which I gathered particular pieces of datum—whether it was from a “live meeting,” “MSN meeting,” “MSN interview” or on the Weblog.

generation. The sense of ownership they felt towards textspeak was clear from many of our discussions. Jean and the Jeffinator messaged, “we think that our generation [...] is just used to that language, like my parents for example do not understand some of the notes we write them because we are using IM language for short forms...” (MSN Meeting). Al wrote, “Adults aren’t accustomed to reading text speak and IM language, they are used to speaking normally with no grammatical errors” (Weblog). All four of them agreed that if any of their teachers understood textspeak, it would be the young ones. Jean and the Jeffinator mentioned that their mother uses MSN, but only to speak to their sister who attends university out of town (Live Meeting). In their minds, “old people” do not understand textspeak; it is a product of youth culture.

Their perception of IM as a product of youth culture is sustained by their schools’ reactions to IM. Angel, Jean and the Jeffinator said their schools have banned IM use (Live Meeting). Jean and the Jeffinator even told me how their school has a security system that blocks students from installing MSN Messenger on the school computers. But IM has not been banned from Al’s school computers—students are simply aware that they are not supposed to use it. Later on, Al admitted that she does not always follow the rules. She messaged, “yeah i go on it all the time when im in class haha and my teacher gets mad” (MSN Meeting). IM is regarded as taboo in my participants’ schools. Using it during class is a new way of “passing notes.”⁷⁰

The metaphor of textspeak as “slang” came up over and over again in my study. In their minds, the use of slang separates IM from school writing. “one is slang the other

⁷⁰ Although most of my participants do not have access to a computer with MSN Messenger software in their classrooms, they can send and receive “text messages” from their cell phones. On several occasions, I noticed Angel discreetly sending and receiving text messages during our classroom meetings.

is proper...” explained Jean and the Jeffinator (MSN Meeting). It is not hard for them to distinguish between the two.

The comparison of textspeak to written slang was made 12 times over the course of the writing group. For instance, Al messaged, “i feel that’s what we do on msn we use slang when we type” (MSN Interview). And Jean and the Jeffinator messaged, “slang is the norm” for their generation and equated understanding textspeak to understanding slang (MSN Meeting). They also said that as their generation grows older, textspeak will be accepted as slang among the general population (implying that they think textspeak has not yet been widely accepted as slang). “We think that in maybe 10 years from now IM language will be as well known as simple slang,” they messaged (MSN Meeting).

Slang is nothing new, but until the Internet and IM, slang was particular to speech, not writing. Written slang did not appear in print outside of writing that emulated spoken discourse, like you might find in Mark Twain’s, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or George Bernard Shaw’s, *Pygmalion*. Similarly my participants think of IM as a space where they emulate their own voices in writing—where they “talk” in printed form. Using IM, the Jeffinator explained the IM experience as this:

you type what you are thinking befcuase you wnat to spit it
out so fast [...] its just what your thoughts are, but visual
[...] technically you are writing [...] but it really isn’t
because it’s a social tool [enter] its talking, but visually
(MSN Interview).

IM technology appeals to my participants because of its social utility, and socializing is naturally a priority.

Although my participants had never met each other before (save the siblings of course), they had textspeak in common. They, along with a great many of their friends, are connected through IM and through a common language. My participants relate to IM as a community relates to its neighbourhood. IM may be considered a space that creates, promotes and extends the practice of “talking visually.” While textspeak is easy to save and retrieve, it is not normally meant to be reread. From this perspective, textspeak may be thought of as “disposable” writing.

Switching Registers

My participants discussed textspeak as if it existed on a different level from school writing on the language “hierarchy.” They made the distinction between IM and “real writing,” or “writing that counts” (MSN Meeting, Weblog). For instance, Jean blogged, “School is where our writing is supposed to count, so if they allow students to use text speak in exams or on tests, it makes it seem like it is ok in other important situations when it really is not acceptable” (Weblog). They believe they can easily switch back and forth between textspeak and school writing, as if it were a matter of drawing from different language registers. “we don’t use [textspeak] when writing assignments,” messaged Jean and the Jeffinator. They all said they often used IM while doing their homework, thus switching language registers as they switched between the two applications (MSN Messenger and Microsoft Word that is).

This perception brings to mind Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of the heteroglossia. To understand the heteroglossia, you must think of writing as a part of a larger system, where each word carries its own history and is shaded by personal interpretation. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2004) described the heteroglossia as “a wonderful amalgam of threads from

which speakers and writers draw. These different threads of language, including formal usage, slang, jargon and dialects among others, are colored by the specific ways in which they have been conceptualized, understood and evaluated.” (p. 61). My participants regard IM and school writing as different threads of language spun with different values and for different purposes. This view was especially apparent during the translation activity⁷¹ when my participants described the translation as “dumbing down” their writing, making it “simpler” and “more casual” (Live Meeting).

Although my participants view textspeak and school writing as separate threads, they see the potential for entanglement. Al said textspeak was definitely having a negative effect on her school work “because whenever im typing an essay or something like that that i would have to hand in i dont use commas or anything like that or capitals i type like i would on msn[...] i do edit them but most of the time im so used to reading msn that i normally miss my mistakes[...] i was never good with grammar to begin with and i think it [IM] made it worse” (MSN Interview). The school assignment that Al gave me did contain a few mistakes that may be linked to her MSN habits—in two cases she used “i” instead of “I.” Refraining from using capitals is typical of textspeak.

The other participants believe IM may be harmful to student writing, but they distanced themselves from this IM effect by discussing it in the future tense, as if it was something that “would” or “can” happen rather than something that “is” happening to them. Angel, for instance, messaged, “you would end up writing everything wrong without even noticing it” (MSN Meeting). The Jeffinator blogged, “using text language will make one become dependent on using improper grammar and spelling” and messaged, “it can be hard to decide when it’s appropriate,” but he seemed to be speaking

⁷¹ The translation activity was explained in Chapter 3, Methodology.

on behalf of other teens because when I questioned if he ever inappropriately used textspeak, he said he did not use enough textspeak to get confused, just the odd acronym like “lol” and “ttyl.” He added that he likes to spell words out so he does not come across as lazy or unintelligent (MSN Interview).

Switching registers is a regular occurrence when my participants are on the computer. They often discussed how they switch between homework and IM. The digital tools are what seem to make switching registers possible and easy.

They often told me about their aversion to handwriting. “i can’t think of anything to write on paper lol” messaged Al, “it comes easier when i’m typing or when i’m talking about it.” “oh yeah,” replied Jean and the Jeffinator, “because you can fix your mistakes on the computer much faster and see them much quicker.” Al elaborated, “when you’re typing it corrects your grammar and punctuation and everything else and spelling on paper its harder to correct and when you’re talking its easier to understand and you dont have to worry about grammar punctuation or spelling” (MSN Meeting).

Al was referring to features on Microsoft Word such as *spell check* and *grammar check*, which underlines all your “mistakes”⁷² and *autocorrect*, which automatically corrects common mistakes—changing “clær” to “clear” for example—even if you did not realize you spelled it incorrectly in the first place. My participants admitted they are dependent on spell-check to fix their typos and mistakes. They think of their computers as editors and spell check was a part of their school writing process (Live Meeting). They

⁷² The parentheses are there to recognize spelling and grammar checks are not always reliable. Spell-checkers, for example, may not recognize Canadian words like “colour” (and suggest it be changed to “color”). They will also miss mistakes if homonyms are used (such as “your write!” instead of “you’re right!”).

said they *always* prefer to type (rather than handwrite) because it is what they are accustomed to and they produce better writing.

But when they type, they are also accustomed to multitasking. Angel and Al said they often engage in multiple MSN chats at once (as many as 6 and 10 respectively). The others seem to have different thresholds of how many chats they can pay attention to at once. Jean and the Jeffinator were surprised at the high volume of multitasking Al and Angel did—they only feel comfortable chatting with 2 or 3 people at once (Live Meeting). However, all four agreed that they log onto IM whenever they do homework on the computer (such as online research and essay writing). They admitted that during our online meetings, they downloaded music or “surfed” the Web (MSN Interviews). Al even said that she would sometimes talk on the phone (MSN Interview).

I noticed that if we took five minute breaks during our live meetings, my participants would log out of our group’s private MSN network and log into their personal MSN accounts and chat with friends. Angel sometimes received text messages on her cell phone (I could tell because her phone vibrated) and she would hide the cell phone on her lap and text her response quickly then tuned back into what the group was doing.

The group recognized that higher quality writing—school-appropriate writing—requires more time and greater concentration than that required for IM. IM writing was viewed as “unconscious” writing; it happens fast and seemingly “without thinking” (MSN Meetings, Weblog, MSN Interviews). But while the effortlessness of IM made textspeak seem less valuable to my participants than school writing, it also made it the preferred register.

Compared to school writing, they see IM as more fun because it feels more natural. They feel hampered by the need to pay attention to form and style in school. Al messaged, “sometimes u thin[k] about the grammar to much and forget what to say eg. in school when ur writing an essay you think to much about the grammar rather than the idea,” to which Jean and the Jeffinator replied, “yeah, we agree with that... you concentrate too much on how to make what youre saying sound proper and you forget the meaning” (MSN Meeting). So, it is easier for them to get words on the screen when they do not have to pay attention to form and their audience is not expecting “perfection.” Jean and the Jeffinator said that it is helpful to use IM to write “short phrases,” referring to some IM writing activities we did, because “it just helps spur you to think” (MSN Meeting). IM is a place for expressing important ideas, but in low-quality form. This perception explains the creativity, liberty and security they connected with IM use. Al assured me, “i feel safer [on IM...] i can say more of what i want to say” (MSN Interview).

Linguistic “Whateverism”

Naomi Baron (2002) labeled today’s generation of adolescents as the “whatever generation” because of the prevailing attitude she called “linguistic whateverism,” marked by an “indifference for consistency in linguistic usages” (p. 5). From this perspective, clarity and efficiency are of greater importance than correct spelling and grammar. My participants demonstrated this attitude throughout my study through the many spelling mistakes and inconsistent use of punctuation. Jean messaged “i dont feel as much pressure to correct myself because usally i just type whatever, i dont look at the keys much” (MSN Meeting). Similarly, Angel messaged, “I usually chose not to bother

correcting myself because i dont really care and plus you save time not going back over things” (MSN Interview).

My participants care more about getting their point across quickly than getting it across with proper usage. The Jeffinator blogged, “when all you want to do is get your ideas across, then speed is just as important as getting your ideas out, as long as it makes sense.” According to the Jeffinator, speed entails not only shortcuts, but also “human error; spelling and grammar mistakes,” so when he must write under a time constraint (like in an exam), he would like to be able to use textspeak (Weblog). But the others think that exams are formal enough settings that written form should count.

Angel held the “whatever” attitude toward school-assigned “rough work.” She messaged, “i hate doing rough work, i think its so stupid, but for some things that require planning i just do work quickly and dont look over my work” (MSN Interview).

Linguistic whateverism was apparent in most of the writing they did in my study, because the two digital mediums that we used to communicate, blog and IM, were considered informal. In the Venn diagram⁷³ they created, they described IM writing as “not formal,” blogging as “less formal” and school writing as “formal” and “professional” (Live Meeting). Consistently, I found their blog writing to be more formal than the IM writing we did (displaying yet another thread in the heteroglossia), but not as formal as the examples of school writing they provided me with.⁷⁴

Their attitude of whateverism has a lot to do with an emphasis on the value of speed. My participants consider IM to have a positive effect on typing speed, which in turn helps them accomplish their school writing more efficiently. The Jeffinator said, “I

⁷³ See Appendix E to see the Venn diagram.

⁷⁴ As I mentioned in Chapter 3, each participant gave me a sample of their school writing.

would say [IM is] a positive [influence] because I am a much faster typer now, and I just type what I think and it comes out the way I want to write at times, like it will sound ok” (MSN Interview). Similarly, Angel regards her quick typing speed as a “skill” she acquired from IM use (MSN Interview). In my interview with Al, she said she went from typing 25 words per minute to 75 words per minute thanks to spending hours on MSN everyday.

Because their fingers can move so quickly and effortlessly across the keyboard, my participants feel like IM is “writing without thinking,” as Jean and the Jeffinator put it (MSN Meeting). More specifically, IM is without rereading, revising or editing; it is like writing without worry. To type their messages faster, they take “shortcuts”; they rarely use capital letters unless they wish to emphasize an entire word and they often leave out apostrophes, commas and periods.⁷⁵ For the most part, they do not bother to correct many spelling mistakes.⁷⁶ They justify their “whateverism” attitudes on the basis of efficiency. Too much attention to detail would be a waste of time (for both people involved in the chat).

But interestingly, I noticed my participants’ could have communicated even faster in our writing group—they could have taken more shortcuts with their text. Only 2% of the IM data I collected contained acronyms and shortened words.⁷⁷ Furthermore, I was a major contributor of this 2%. “Lol” (laughing out loud) was the most commonly used acronym out of the 18 that appeared in my study.⁷⁸ I have already mentioned several

⁷⁵ These are some of the common IM characteristics that my participants used. For more characteristics refer to Appendix A.

⁷⁶ When they did correct their spelling mistakes, they used an asterisk to flag the correction. (Refer to Appendix A for an example.)

⁷⁷ Refer to Appendix F for a list of acronyms and shortened words that were used in my study.

⁷⁸ “Haha,” which essentially means the same thing as “lol” was also used a great deal.

reasons my participants did not like to use many acronyms; they did not want to seem unintelligent or be misunderstood and recognized that not everyone understands every acronym. So while they typed “whatever,” they still made an effort to use entire words.

Literacy is Ubiquitous

My participants believe their basic literacy skills were *not* acquired in school. Jean and the Jeffinator messaged, “we learn the basics outside of school, we learn how to use these basic measures that we've learned from our families and friends in a much more proper and more educated way in school” (MSN Meeting). Angel made the same insinuations, connecting literacy with “maturity” and “sophistication” (Weblog, MSN Interview). In their minds, school is helpful for refining literacy, as if literacy is something people naturally learn in daily life, and not something they are taught in school.

When I asked how literacy was taught in their schools, Al replied that schools “teach to the test” (MSN Meeting). The test she was referring to was the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), which they had all completed. All four of them were critical of the test. The twins messaged, “we find it funny that in our classes we have literacy prep so that we all pass [...] it is odd to prepare us for something that we are supposed to already know on our own,” again suggesting that literacy is something learned autonomously, not taught in schools.

Al is especially critical of the OSSLT. “true literacy isn’t measured in schools,” she stated, to which Angel quickly agreed (MSN Meeting). Al described her own vision of how literacy should be taught in school. She even gave it a name, “fluid literacy.” We asked her what she meant. “it’s a measure of literacy in everyday life” said Al, “you look

at how people read in their everyday life, what they read in their everyday life, can they debate a novel with other people[...]can they write letters to the newspaper and can they write a business letter if they needed to” (MSN Meeting). Al was implying that the literacy test is irrelevant to her life and disconnected from her day-to-day needs.

Listening to their perceptions, I formed a real sense of detachment between what they thought of as “basic literacy” and “school literacy.” It was evident they saw themselves as learning and developing two separate literacies as they lived in their two worlds, online and offline. Literacy in school means doing well on literacy tests and achieving high grades in English class, but literacy in general meant using technology to function in their everyday lives. This perspective is best illustrated by the Jeffinator’s own personal definition of literacy. He blogged, “I think that literacy is just any format to convey a message to one another, through symbols, words, images, actions etc.[...] In order to do something someone says, to get from place to place, to obtain material, to have relationships, you need to be literate” (Weblog). The Jeffinator’s view of basic literacy seems influenced by IM. His mention of symbols, images, actions and relationships make IM a part of his general notion of literacy: that which allows him to function in day-to-day life.

Summary

The four themes that emerged from my data reveal the collective perceptions that four students hold about IM’s relationship with school writing and literacy. They show us a tension that exists between the two central writing practices in their lives, and in many other students’ lives as well.

The values, attitudes and procedures that make my participants successful IM writers do not necessarily make them successful school writers. They think the speed and ease that come with using IM to “speak their minds” can help them accomplish school tasks quickly. But associated with speed and ease of communication is slang-full, unedited writing. Therefore, although this type of writing allows them to express their point of view with ease, they take the chance of appearing lazy and immature. More importantly, there was not always a consensus on where to draw the line between formal and informal.

My participants can switch registers, from informal to formal, depending on the context. But unless they are motivated by a certain audience or grades, my participants feel more comfortable writing “whatever” and not thinking about it twice. Given the amount of time they spend on IM, the whatever attitude is appropriate, as none of them have the time to perfect every thought that flows out of their fingertips; their audience would probably not wait around if they tried to. They realize that linguistic whateverism is not helping them succeed in school, but it is a part of their perception of basic, untaught literacy, essential to their lives outside of school.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Four themes reflecting my participants' views arose from my analysis: 1) a space for slang, 2) switching registers, 3) linguistic “whateverism”, and 4) literacy is ubiquitous. In this chapter, I look at how these themes map on to what the research is saying about IM and school writing. In particular, I discuss how the first theme, “a space for slang,” relates to the popular debate about whether IM is more like speech or writing and how this helps teachers understand the particularities of the IM process in relation to school writing. I connect the idea of “switching registers” to the popular debate about whether IM is good or bad for school writing and discuss how teachers might think of using the good to their advantage while remaining cautious about the bad. Then I discuss how “linguistic whateverism” and the perception that “literacy is ubiquitous” relate to what the literature is saying about the changing culture of writing and the growing divide between the student perception of literacy inside and outside of school. In this section, I present how IM could be a tool that teachers use to bridge the divide. Finally, I end the chapter with some of the larger questions and implications for education that my research points to, and discuss directions for future research.

On the Speech-Writing Deb8

In Chapter 2, I introduced the debate about whether IM is more like speech or writing. By comparing IM to slang, my participants perceive IM to be closer to speech. At the same time, they talked about IM as a “form” of writing. This perception was best reflected by the Jeffinator when he messaged:

its just what your thoughts are, but visual [...] technically
you are writing [...] but it really isn't because it's a social
tool [enter] its talking, but visually (MSN Interview).

The notion of “talking visually” supports Tagliamonte and Denis’ (2006) finding that textspeak is a “hybrid” of speech and writing. A theory proposed by Lankshear and Knobel (2006b) can help us develop this notion of hybridity.

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006b), new literacies are made up of “new technical stuff” and “new ethos stuff.” Technical stuff includes the skills and “know how” that enable competent participation in a specific literacy practice (p. 4). The ethos stuff refers to general attitudes and attributes that emerge from a specific literacy practice: the “values, sensibilities, norms and procedures and so on” of IM users (p. 5).

It is clear from the Jeffinator’s description above that the technical stuff of IM is knowing how to write (and type). But the social aspect of IM—the ethos stuff—connect IM to speech. One way to consider these perspectives is to think of IM as a hybrid; that is, as made up of the “technicalities” of writing and the “spirit” of speech. Understanding the hybridity of textspeak is useful when we consider IM from the New Literacy Studies stance, as it gives us a way of describing the “particularities” of “literacy practices” that make up IM.⁷⁹

This understanding of textspeak as a hybrid is important for teachers who wish to address IM in their classrooms, and especially for teachers who have never used IM. With this understanding, teachers will not automatically assume that students equate textspeak with writing and feel they have to “unteach” it. Furthermore, if there are

⁷⁹ Refer to Chapter 1 for an explanation of the parenthesized terms.

students who have trouble distinguishing between formal and informal text, this understanding can help teachers explain the difference and point out when and where informal writing is appropriate.

On the Good-Bad Deb8

In Chapter 2, I explained that literature is divided on how IM is thought to affect school writing. The polarized debate centres on whether IM helps or hinders school writing. My participants believe it *can* do both. I emphasize “can” because my participants spoke as if their writing were not yet affected by IM, particularly when they discussed it as a “bad” influence. Only Al believes that IM is actually having a negative impact on her writing right now. In accordance, I found two occasions in Al’s sample of school writing⁸⁰ where she did not capitalize “I,” which is something she does on IM.

I did not find any indication that IM was affecting the writing of the other participants. They spoke of IM as if it were a pending threat or one which affects only their peers. They said that IM *could* be a negative influence on spelling and grammar if one gets accustomed to textspeak, as if textspeak is a “bad habit.”

Lee and Perry⁸¹ (2004) find a relationship between IM and bad habits, although not particularly linked to writing. The bad habits they find are unhealthy behaviour patterns and what they refer to as “media addiction.” Lee and Perry studied 409 college students and found that many of them have great difficulty regulating their IM use. Some of these students admitted to missing classes and sleep because they were preoccupied with IM (Lee & Perry, 2004). Similarly, Al talked about IM as being “addictive,” and

⁸⁰ As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I collected a sample of school writing from each participant.

⁸¹ The URL to Lee and Perry’s (2004) article is http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2047/is_200409/ai_n9442858

Jean talked about going to bed later and reading fewer books. Moreover, they all pled guilty of signing on to their IM networks while they did homework. Such behaviour can have an indirect affect on their school writing. If, for instance, they are writing an essay while using IM, then they are not putting their full attention into their essay. It seems that even if students are not forming bad writing habits because of IM, they are forming bad habits while writing.

On the other hand, my participants discussed some positive results from IM use. They said that IM helps them to get their ideas on to the page quickly. IM makes the flow of ideas from their brain to the screen an easy process because they do not have to “worry” about language formalities like spelling and punctuation. The sense of freedom my participants associated with IM reminds me of Peter Elbow’s (1998) notion of “freewriting” and Rebecca Luce-Kapler’s (2004) notion of “flow writing.”

Freewriting and flow writing are exercises where you choose a topic and write without pausing or crossing out words for a predetermined amount of time. The result of this type of exercise is a written representation of a writer’s stream of consciousness. From Elbow’s experience as a writer and a teacher, freewriting is the most effective exercise you can do to improve your writing (Elbow, 1998, p. 3). He finds that the biggest problem people have with writing is that they edit at the same time as they produce (p. 5). He blames schools for supporting this problem, as “schooling makes us obsessed with the ‘mistakes’ we make in writing” (p. 5). He explains, “The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn’t just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead” (Elbow, 1998, p. 6). Not only is it hard to write, it is hard to read. It is dreary and

dull. It lacks personality. Freewriting forces us out of this habit because “it is *nonediting*” (p. 6). The author can edit once he or she has a piece of writing to edit.

My participants have the same problem that Elbow (1998) identifies. They believe school writing is a problem because they concentrate “too much” on “proper” writing and sometimes “forget the meaning” (MSN Meeting). They think of the school writing process as editing while writing, resulting in difficulty and frustration. Al and Angel let out their frustrations during some of our IM writing activities. They said they did not know what to write. But when we were simply “chatting,” they were not as shy.

Luce-Kapler (2004) developed her sense of “flow writing” from writers like Natalie Goldberg and W. O. Mitchell. She explains that practicing flow writing is an “invitation to just let language flow onto the page in whatever form” (p. 152). It is one of many activities that Luce-Kapler likes to teach to her students as a way of beginning the writing process. She described the product of flow writing as “raw data” that writers can edit into eloquence (p 153). Similarly, when asked to write a blog posting based on the transcripts from our chats, my participants said it was “like having the research in front of [them].”

IM is similar to free and flow writing as it may also be considered writing without editing and without worry. I believe IM can also be thought of as a writing exercise teachers can use with their students to *begin* the writing process. It can inspire students quickly to create some ideas with which they can then work and learn from. But of course, unlike IM, free- and flow writing are independent activities. IM demands interaction. It demands collaboration.

One reason Dale (1997) finds collaborative writing activities as effective for teaching students to improve their writing⁸² is because students often have difficulty generating ideas and sustaining a topic when they write alone. She suspects that their difficulties “may be because writing does not provide them with a turn-taking partner, as does conversation” (p. x). IM incorporates turn-taking with written communication. Students can receive “instant” feedback on their text and share the responsibility of generating ideas and sustaining topics. IM seems to be an ideal vehicle for creating an environment for effective collaboration.

On the Student Perception of Literacy

My participants think of literacy as something learned in English class, where their teachers “teach to the test;” referring to the OSSLT in particular. Luce-Kapler and Klinger (2005) made a similar discovery. They found that students perceive the OSSLT as an evaluation of their skills in English class even though the official purpose of the test is to evaluate cross-curricular literacy skills (p. 17). This view of the OSSLT was linked to these students’ narrow perception of school writing. The “students had a singular view of writing; i.e. one wrote in particular genres that served specific purposes that were related to specific jobs after graduation” (p. 20). Luce-Kapler and Klinger infer that the OSSLT itself may be driving their narrow perception of what writing is, “and by extension, literacy” (p. 20).

Although my participants’ ideas of literacy in school are linked to their performance in English class and on the OSSLT, they had broader perceptions of what literacy is outside of the school context. In Chapter 4, I discussed how they described

⁸² See Chapter 2 for a description of Dale’s (1997) rationale in support of collaborative writing.

“basic literacy” as the skills that help them function in their day-to-day lives which they learn from their family and friends. This view, that “basic” and “school literacy” are separate, supports the central argument of Lankshear and Knobel’s (2003) book, *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning*, that increasingly, students perceive schooling as irrelevant because schools are not teaching them the literacy skills they need. My participants believe they need writing in their lives, but not necessarily the writing taught in school.

Although IM can be a fertile ground with which to connect with students’ interests and enable writing, there is a “whatever” culture that seems inherent to IM users. Naomi Baron (2002) came up with the term “whateverism” to describe the attitude young people are developing that “linguistic consistency may be foolish” (p. 9). Baron identifies four major ways of thinking that are coming out of linguistic whateverism:

- Writing as a record of informal speech rather than a distinct form of linguistic representation
- Growing irrelevance of writing “mechanics” (spelling, punctuation)
- Reduced role of language as a marker of social status.
- Diminished role of writing in clarifying thought.

(Baron, 2002, p. 15)

The writing my participants did in my study—on IM and our private blog—reflected these changes that Baron identifies. But my participants maintain they change the way they write in the school context—they switch registers. They believe their intelligence is reflected by proper spelling and grammar and feel it is important in formal circumstances.

They do not think linguistic consistency is foolish, they simply find it easier to “downgrade” to textspeak whenever they get the chance. The more social networking they do on the computer,⁸³ the more opportunities they create to downgrade their writing. I think teachers can help students by asking them to look at the writing process from a new perspective, where they “upgrade” the writing they do in their day-to-day lives. In this way, teachers can connect with the “basic” literacy practices of their students. Perhaps then we can reverse the trend of believing school literacy is irrelevant.

Educational Implications and Directions

My research suggests that students understand IM and writing as separate modes of communication. They distinguish between textspeak and formal writing. But this distinction is not always precise or ubiquitous because textspeak is partly writing and partly speech. Because textspeak incorporates writing, it influences and is influenced by it. IM can offer a sense of freedom with language but not without sacrificing deep thought and proper form. The question is, how can teachers take advantage of the “ethos” aspects of IM (that “stuff” that makes IM engaging) while teaching students how to improve the “technical” aspects of their school writing?

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) can help us answer this question. In 2004 they published, “[NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing](#).”⁸⁴ The document is clear and concise, neatly organized into 11 principles designed to guide writing pedagogy. The principles promote a pedagogy of new literacies; they recognize

⁸³ Not only do my participants spend hours every week on MSN, they mentioned they belong to other social networks, like Facebook. These networks take up hours of their time on daily basis for AI and Angel and weekly basis for Jean and the Jeffinator.

⁸⁴ I do not present the principles in the same order as NCTE does. See Appendix F for the entire NCTE document. It can also be found online, at <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/118876.htm>

that technological developments have “expanded the types of texts that writers produce” and “expanded immediate access to a wider variety of readers” (p.1). Together, these principles reveal writing as a “multifaceted activity” that can be taught, learned and enjoyed (p. 1). I believe that by following these principles, teachers can address and support IM use and still help students improve their writing. While all eleven principles are important, I only review the six I find relevant to my research and discuss how these principles can guide teachers to effectively address IM in the classroom⁸⁵.

1) Writing is a process.

“Writing is a process” means that every finished text is made up of various strategies an author used to produce it. Writing is not “the” process; not every author follows the same recipe to cook up a piece of writing. “This procedural understanding helps writers most when they encounter difficulty, or when they are in the middle of creating a piece of writing” (p. 2). The NCTE believes that teachers who work through the processes their students follow to produce texts are more effective (p. 2). Since so many students are comfortable with IM, it seems wise for teachers to see if integrating it into more formal writing processes helps their students. Plus, the process of working with and revising IM writing helps reinforce the important lesson that good writing will not come out perfectly the first time you try to string it together—it does not happen in an instant.

2) People learn to write by writing.

The NCTE states, “The more people write, the easier it gets and the more they are motivated to do it” (p. 1). The same might be said about IM, but IM is not only writing, it

is also speaking. Its purpose is to be remembered, not necessarily reread. Learning how to write requires us to reread our writing numerous times, revise it and think carefully about word choice, grammar, tense and tone. People learn to write by moving through the entire writing process. IM may be used as a tool to enable writing, but not to finish it, as “IMers” rarely find a need to go back and review their communication with others. Students need other strategies to revise and edit writing.

3) Writing is a tool for thinking.

The NCTE states, “the act of writing generates ideas” (p. 3). Although my participants view IM as “writing without thinking,” they are thinking about what they are communicating, but they are not thinking about the best way to communicate it. From the writing activities we did as a group, it seems IM is useful for generating written ideas—ones that can be rethought and restructured into poetry and paragraphs. Furthermore, the collaborative aspect of IM helps users inspire ideas in each other.

4) Writing has a complex relationship to talk.

The NCTE states, “writing exists in a nest of talk” (p. 8). Talking about writing helps one through the writing process. IM is a way to talk about writing, but then have something written in front of you. My participants pointed out how using IM to “chat” about writing not only inspired them but also recorded their inspirations for future use. Teachers (and researchers) can take advantage of the fact that Instant Messaging produces instant transcripts.

5) Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.

A writer’s skills depend on the culture he or she is from (p. 9). The NCTE explains, “How much a writer has access to wide, diverse experiences and means of

communication creates predispositions and skill for composing for an audience” (p. 9). Teachers can assume that students will begin with the language they are most comfortable with and strive to “move [students] toward greater flexibility, so that they can write not just for their own intimates but for wider audiences” (p. 9). My research suggests students who use IM are comfortable beginning with IM language and moving forward from there.

6) Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.

Because of rapidly changing technology, writing involves more than just pen on paper. Composing now involves “a combination of modalities, such as print, still images, video, and sound” (p. 9). Teachers can connect with students’ interests by understanding and including different modalities and technologies they use and relate to—like IM—but it is equally important to introduce students to modes they are not familiar with.

IM’s Role in New Literacy Studies

When English teachers send students home with homework to do on the computer they ought to understand the environment they are asking their students to write in. By and large, students’ computers are connected to their social networks on top of innumerable distractions the Internet offers. Distractions are many and students only have so much time and attention to devote to each distraction. Michael Goldhaber (1997) believes that the Internet has given rise to an “[attention economy](#)”⁸⁶, where the overabundance of information has led to the scarcity of attention. Lankshear and Knobel

⁸⁶ The URL to Goldhaber’s (1997) article on the attention economy is http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue2_4/goldhaber/

(2003) argue the rise of this new economy means that “schools ought to be paying more attention to attention,” to help students prepare for successful careers (p. 129).

From an “economic” standpoint, IM is not helping writing. But I am not suggesting IM play a role in day-to-day school writing. However I believe it is important that students’ day-to-day literacy practices play a role in school. This is not the case for my participants. They described IM as a taboo in their schools. But neither teachers nor students benefit from ignoring and banning IM for the simple reason that students will continue to use it whether it is banned or not. By connecting what I have learned about IM with the NCTE’s beliefs, I have laid out specific opportunities that IM has to offer to New Literacies Studies.

In general, I do not believe we are in jeopardy of losing sight of the importance of having formality and consistency in writing to communicate to wider audiences. The young writers I have come across through my research are very sensitive to context and audience. But I believe it is important for teachers to discuss the relationship between textspeak and writing because they are so closely connected to one another. It is important to refrain from equating textspeak with writing and recognize it as a combination of oral and written communication.

Future Research

My findings point to a number of possibilities for further research on IM and school. I believe a closer look at “authentic” IM and school writing⁸⁷—that is, writing that is not influenced by the researcher—could add depth to my findings. Researchers

⁸⁷ Tagliamonte and Denis’ (2006) research was unique because they were able to collect “authentic” IM data. Their participants simply handed over their IM histories, which are files of their IM chats which the software automatically saves if programmed to do so. The IM data I collected was not authentic in this manner.

might consider a long term study that gathers a number of authentic samples of both IM and school writing⁸⁸ and use discourse analysis techniques to draw comparisons. This research might compare the style, voice and form of the IM and school writing to examine where IM and school writing diverge and overlap.

I feel research could extend the notion of IM as a hybrid of speech and writing. Philosophers like Plato, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jacques Derrida and Walter Ong have advanced theories on the relationship between speech and writing. As a hybrid, textspeak melds together distinctions that these philosophers have set out. Questions that one might ask are: How exactly does textspeak affect our philosophical understanding of language? And, does it affect the relationship between speech and writing?

In addition, I feel IM may be valuable for exploring how dialects of language evolve. This opinion is based on a finding I made that does not quite constitute a theme in itself, but is interesting in the light of future research. Contrary to how some of the critics have described IM—as completely “littered” or “riddled” with acronyms (e.g. Lee, 2002 “Text Message Essay,” 2003)—I found that my participants used surprisingly few acronyms and shortened words in our IM sessions. Merely 2% of my IM data were acronyms.⁸⁹ I am reminded of Tagliamonte and Dennis’ (2006) finding that the textspeak they studied was surprisingly more formal than they had anticipated, with only 3% of their data being acronyms.⁹⁰

Although these teenagers did not use many acronyms, I cannot ignore the records of countless acronyms in the literature I discussed in Chapter 2 and websites like

⁸⁸ I only collected one sample of school writing from each of my participants.

⁸⁹ Refer to “Appendix F: List of Acronyms and Shortcuts”

⁹⁰ Discussed in Chapter 2.

urbandictionary.com,⁹¹ bigbluball.com⁹² and netlingo.com.⁹³ These particular sites have “dictionaries” that are actually created by a wide audience of IM users. But interestingly, the people that visit these sites are the ones who add the acronyms to the lists. This finding leads me to believe that most of these IM acronyms are not ubiquitous. They probably exist between clusters of friends—particular acronyms belong to particular groups, as dialects belong to regions. If this is true, then perhaps there is a great deal we can learn about the development of language and dialects by studying different groups of IM users and the acronyms they use.

Finally, I feel it is extremely important for research to explore the larger issue of the attention economy and its relationship with NLS. Attracting and sustaining attention in the online world are increasingly valuable skills (Goldhaber, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Research should investigate if learning about the attention economy in English class can make literacy more relevant in students’ lives.

Questions and Concerns

As we continue to shift away from writing being primarily a world on paper to one that is primarily on the screen, educators have some fundamental issues to consider about literacy. Teachers must concern themselves with ways to apply the literacy practices students find engaging to school settings if they wish to make school relevant to their students’ lives.

Instant Messaging is an underused tool in my participants’ schools because of its bad reputation. My participants accept that IM “is” or “could be” bad for writing because

⁹¹ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=im>

⁹² The slogan for bigblueball.com is “everything about Instant Messaging.” See <http://www.bigblueball.com/im/acronyms.php>

⁹³ See <http://www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm>

IM is taboo in their schools. I suspect that unless students begin to use IM for educational purposes, they will not regard it as a space where important learning can happen. IM is only used for one purpose in these students' lives: to socialize. But if IM were to be used for educational purposes—for collaboration, initiating the writing process, and connecting teachers to students—then perhaps students would not simply see IM as a social tool, but a literacy tool as well.

If we consider the history of writing tools—from sharpened stones to styli, quills, pens, pencils, typewriters and computers—we can begin to grasp how these tools have progressively allowed us to communicate faster. In her article, “[A Brief History of Writing Instruments](#),”⁹⁴ Mary Bellis suggests that the evolution of handwriting is connected to the invention of pens and paper. She explains that “articles written by hand had resembled printed letters until scholars began to change the form of writing, using capitals and small letters, writing with more of a slant and connecting letters. Gradually writing became more suitable to the speed the new writing instruments permitted” (Bellis, 2007). Now that we have instruments that create spaces where writing can be communicated in an instant, we are seeing a change in written form. Textspeak's faster form is achieved through fewer keystrokes—it is suited to the speed of its environment. Perhaps textspeak is a phase within a larger movement towards a faster written form. Will writing keep getting faster, or have we reached the threshold?

I find my participants' strong aversion towards handwriting concerning. What does this mean for the future of writing? And more specifically, are we heading towards a time when we no longer need handwriting? Perhaps there are aspects of literacy we gain through handwriting and not through digital means. Perhaps future research could focus

⁹⁴ The URL to Bellis' (2007) article is <http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa100197.htm>

on studying learning outcomes of various tools and comparing traditional to modern ones. If handwriting is “becoming extinct,” I think it is important we consider what we might be losing and not simply focus on what we are gaining.

I question whether my participants are fully aware of the attention that editing demands. They may have said school writing takes time and editing, but I got the sense that when they said “editing” they often meant “proofreading” and simply touching up what the spelling- and grammar-checks underline. Therefore, I believe enabling writing activities followed by editing activities that emphasize the importance of *rereading* and *rewriting* are essential steps for teachers to take to help students improve their writing.

The aphorism “practice makes perfect” is a bit misleading when it comes to IM. My participants have increased their speed of text-based communication without perfecting their writing. The speed of my participants’ writing could increase even more if they increase their use of acronyms, which indicates that they are not striving for ultimate speed, but efficient speed. It seems they have found a “comfort zone” for communicating somewhere in between efficiency and accuracy and in between speech and writing.

While today’s students expect that computers can help make things faster and easier, *learning how to write* requires slowing down and patiently (and sometimes even painfully) working with language. Successful authors have long been advising us that the process of writing happens slowly and with a great deal of revision.⁹⁵ Michael Crichton’s advice illustrates this point well. He said, “Books aren't written - they're rewritten.... It is one of the hardest things to accept, especially after the seventh rewrite hasn't quite done

⁹⁵ I found an interesting blog posting that compiles a number of quotes from various famous writers that illustrates this point. See <http://charisconnection.blogspot.com/2006/08/ad-writing-wellwriting-slowly.html>

it.”⁹⁶ I suggest that for this generation of impatient adolescent writers, this advice is more pertinent and urgent than ever.

⁹⁶ This quote appears on numerous websites (eg. <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/books-aren-t-written-they-re-rewritten-including/386291.html>), but I have not managed to locate the exact source.

EPILOGUE

The process I underwent to write this thesis reflects what I learned from my study. By using a blog to begin my writing process, I was able to start forming my ideas into words. Just like the IM writing activities I did with my participants, I found my blog to be useful in the beginning stages. I continued blogging as I wrote a first draft of this thesis. It let me “practice” what to write in these pages. With each blog post I wrote, I felt like I was accomplishing something, which is important when engaging a task as big as a thesis. The blog acted as an outlet in times when I felt the pressures of “writer’s block” or when I was simply overwhelmed by the sheer amount of writing in front of me. Then there came a point in my process where I stopped blogging and began concentrating on rewriting and revising. It is the latter stage of this process that took the most of my time and concentration.

While I value what the blog added to my process, I cannot help but question its influence on my writing after writing a thesis that addresses new literacies. My supervisor pointed out several sentences as she read through my drafts that stood out for her because they were too casual. Has my perception of “formal vs. informal” shifted because of the casual medium I used to begin the writing process? Perhaps years of IM use also contribute to my informal tendencies. More importantly than answers to these questions, is that I ask them—that I am aware of them. By realizing my tendencies—my weaknesses in specific contexts—I gain a new critical lens through which to edit and improve my own writing process.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Characteristics of textspeak

There are no hard and fast rules about how to textspeak, but some common techniques have emerged that are considered to be characteristic of textspeak. The following is a list of techniques. All of these techniques were employed in my study except for no. 11.

- 1) Acronyms replace commonly used colloquialisms. For instance lol (laugh out loud), ttyl (talk to you later), brb (be right back), omg (oh my God), jk (just kidding).
- 2) Shortened/modified words such as r (are), u (you), ur (your or you're), b (be), k (ok), bcuz (because).
- 3) Numbers to replace entire words or part of a word. For instance, 2 (to or too or two), 4ever (forever), l8r (later), 2nite (tonight).
- 4) Symbols to create words or express emotion. For instance :) is a happy face, :(is a sad face, ;) is a winking face, <3 is a heart.
- 5) Emoticons (a.k.a. "smileys") to represent the attitude or emotion of a particular statement (ie. ☺, ☹). For instance, "i can't w8 2 c u! ☺"
- 6) Use of lower case letters at all times, saving capital letters for EMPHASIS ONLY.
- 7) Multiple punctuation marks for emphasis. For instance, "OMG that's gr8!!!" and "where r u???"
- 8) Incorrect grammar. Pressing "enter" at the end of a sentence (which sends the message to the recipient) instead of using punctuation to end the sentence. Also, use of ellipses instead of commas and periods to represent pauses in the text...or to indicate that the person typing has not finished his/her idea and will continue... on the next line.
- 9) Use of an asterisk to indicate spelling corrections. For example, "don't make a misake"
"*mistake"
- 10) Writing oral sounds like ahhhh, ummm, hmmm, heh, haha and hehe.
- 11) Adding asides to the text indicated by <> or ** to portray body language and help the reader interpret the dialogue. For instance, "i'm bored <yawn>", or "i'm so mad right now *clenching fists*"

Appendix B: IM excerpt from my study

From our MSN Meeting, March 6, 2007:

Spata4a... says:

do any of you have any stories of when MSN became an issue in your classroom?

Al.H. says:

yeah i go on it all the time when im in class haha and my teacher gets mad

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

other then teachers being bothered by it...and the fact that it was taken off our
our school computers not really

Spata4a... says:

what do your teachers say?

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

liek i knwo a friend of mine said that one of her computer teachers, who wasnt
really sure what he was teaching just todl them to use msn (when we had it) and
even he would go on

Spata4a... says:

hm...why would they use it in class?

Al.H. says:

they dont let us but we do and we get in troble for it

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

well...this teacher is pretty pathetic as a teacher, because he does not know how
to teach the course he is supposed to be teaching...so he just kind of did
whatever as well

Spata4a... says:

have teachers ever been mad at the class for handing in papers with "textspeak" on it

Spata4a... says:

that you've seen?

Al.H. says:

i have never had that issue in any of my classes

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

not that i know of...i can see some teachers laughing and just correcting it like
they would any grammar mistakes...but i would think that students would only
use textspeak by accident when handing in a paper

Spata4a... says:

**i'm asking because i've read stories in newspapers where teachers say they get all sorts of
essays riddled with symbols and acronyms and blame msn for it**

Spata4a... says:

...do you think this is a big problem?

Al.H. says:

if people really wanted to do their work right they would its just i think they're lazy and dont
want to do it right

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

haha that's funny

Jean / The Jeffinator says:

exactly, people know not to use msn type writing in their work...they just decided
to slack off and not edit maybe or really just didnt care..or really, maybe they
just figured the teacher would understand anyways, so why not do it?

Appendix C: Summary of Linguistic CMC Research

<i>Year</i>	<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Form of CMC</i>	<i>Corpus Size</i>	<i>Feature</i>
1991	Ferrara <i>et al.</i>	e-messages (an early form of IM)	18,769 words	-subject drop -article deletion -copula deletion -tersed sentences -shortened words
1996	Yates	computer conferencing (similar to listserv)	Written: Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen; Spoken: London-Lund; CMC: 2,222,049 words	-type/token ratio analysis -pronoun use -modal auxiliaries
1996	Werry	IRC	no corpus	-conversation organization -addressivity -abbreviation -prosody
1998	Hentschel	IRC	no corpus	-prosody -lexicon -orthography -turn taking
1999/ 2001	Paolillo	IRC	6,317 lines	-use of “r”, “u”, “z” -use of code-switching, Hindi-English -use of obscenity
2003	Palfreyman & al Khalil	IM (MSN)	2,400 Arabic words and 2,000 English words	-use of Roman keyboard character set to write in Arabic -use of local dialect
2004	Baron	IM (AIM)	11,718 words	turn taking -conversation length -openings and closings -abbreviations -contractions -emoticons

(Tagliamonte & Denis, 2006, p. 10)

Appendix D: Letter of Information

Dear Participant,

This letter is an invitation for you to participate in a research project, entitled *IM learning to write? Bridging Instant Messaging and literacy education*, led by Julia Spatafora of the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. In this study, I will be leading a writing group at Duncan McArthur Hall (on the University's west campus), where we will engage in a variety of collaborative writing activities, some involving Instant Messaging (IM). In order to participate, you must be a frequent user of MSN Messenger, Microsoft's IM service, and obtain parental permission. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board.

The purpose of this study is to understand how IM use shapes your general perception of literacy and the development of your writing skills. I hope that through this project, you will acquire new skills as well as a greater sense of awareness about how IM impacts your life.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in a writing group that will meet nine times over the course of six weeks. Three of these sessions will occur at Queen's University, in Duncan McArthur Hall. These face-to-face sessions will take place every second week and last up to two hours each. The remaining six sessions will occur online, via MSN Messenger, for one hour each. All of the meetings will be scheduled after school or on the weekend, at times convenient to me and the participants. The study will have activities such as the following:

- 1) Individual and collaborative writing activities.
- 2) Contributing thoughts about the writing activities on a blog (Web log).
- 3) Partaking in group discussions about your writing processes (these will be audiotaped).
- 4) Partaking in a short interview following the sessions on MSN (which will take 20-30 minutes of your time).

It is important to protect the privacy of the people who participate in the project. Your name will not appear in any of the research data or the published work and all of the data will be kept in a secure location. You are not obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and you may request removal of all or part of your data.

If you consent to participate in this research study, I ask that you sign the accompanying consent form along with your parent or guardian and return it in the self-addressed envelope included in this package to Julia Spatafora. Your signature on this form means that you understand the procedures involved and that you consent to participate. Please keep this letter for your information.

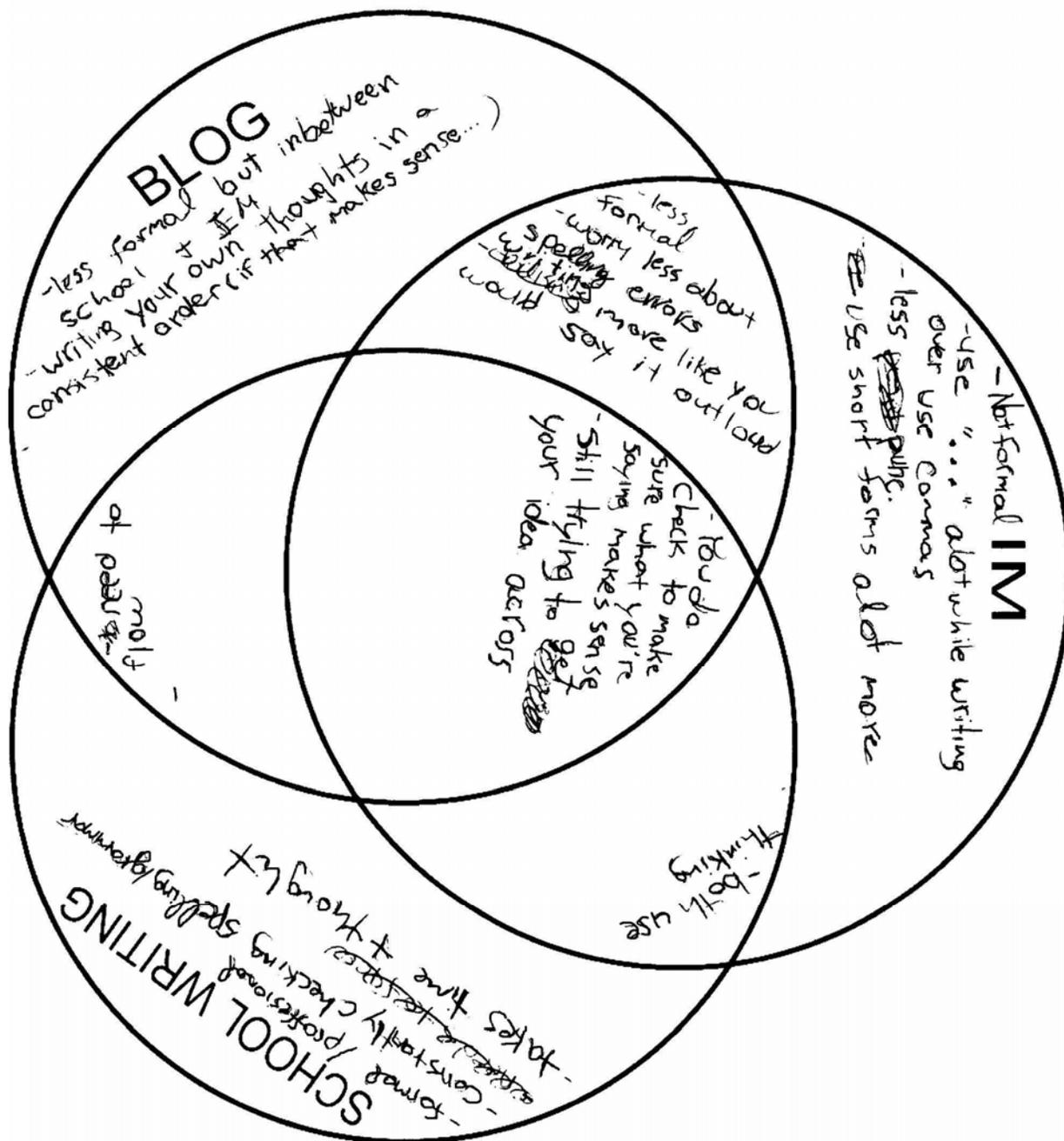
If you have any questions about this project, please contact Julia Spatafora at (613) 547-2984 or 9js59@qmlink.queensu.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at (613) 533-6000 ext. 77267 or rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofré at (613) 533-6210 or brunojor@educ.queensu.ca, or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at (613) 533-6081 or joan.stevenson@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Julia Spatafora, B.A., B.Ed.

Appendix E: Venn-Diagram

This Venn-diagram was created by my participants during one of our live meetings.



Appendix F: List of Acronyms and Shortcuts

Here is a list of the IM terms that came up in my study. Many more terms exist. More extensive glossary may be found at <http://www.bigblueball.com/im/acronyms.php> and http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp

Acronyms & shortened words	Meaning	No. of times it was used
2	to or too	50
b4	before	2
b/c	because	6
byes	bye-bye	3
c	see	5
cuz	because	2
every1	everyone	1
haha	represents laughter	52
k	okay	38
lol	laugh out loud	60
l8r	later	2
r	are	3
sry	sorry	1
ttyp	talk to you later	3
ttys	talk to you soon	2
u	you	33
ur	your or you're	12
yw	you're welcome	1
TOTAL		274
<p><i>The total number of words exchanged over MSN in my study is 12,509 (including words exchanged by my participants and me). Only 274 of the 12,509 words were acronyms/shortcuts, which equals approximately 2% of the IM datum.</i></p>		

Appendix G: NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing

by the Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee
November 2004

Just as the nature of and expectation for literacy has changed in the past century and a half, so has the nature of writing. Much of that change has been due to technological developments, from pen and paper, to typewriter, to word processor, to networked computer, to design software capable of composing words, images, and sounds. These developments not only expanded the types of texts that writers produce, they also expanded immediate access to a wider variety of readers. With full recognition that writing is an increasingly multifaceted activity, we offer several principles that should guide effective teaching practice.

1. Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.

Though poets and novelists may enjoy debating whether or not writing can be taught, teachers of writing have more pragmatic aims. Setting aside the question of whether one can learn to be an artistic genius, there is ample empirical evidence that anyone can get better at writing, and that what teachers do makes a difference in how much students are capable of achieving as writers.

Developing writers require support. This support can best come through carefully designed writing instruction oriented toward acquiring new strategies and skills. Certainly, writers can benefit from teachers who simply support and give them time to write. However, instruction matters. Teachers of writing should be well-versed in composition theory and research, and they should know methods for turning that theory into practice. When writing teachers first walk into classrooms, they should already know and practice good composition. However, much as in doctoring, learning to teach well is a lifetime process, and lifetime professional development is the key to successful practice. Students deserve no less.

2. People learn to write by writing.

As is the case with many other things people do, getting better at writing requires doing it -- a lot. This means actual writing, not merely listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing readings. The more people write, the easier it gets and the more they are motivated to do it. Writers who write a lot learn more about the process because they have had more experience inside it. Writers learn from each session with their hands on a keyboard or around a pencil as they draft, rethink, revise, and draft again. Thinking about how to make your writing better is what revision is. In other words, improvement is built into the experience of writing.

What does this mean for teaching?

Writing instruction must include ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities for writing and should include writing for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Writing, though, should not be viewed as an activity that happens only within a classroom's walls. Teachers need to support students in the development of writing lives, habits, and preferences for life outside school. We already know that many students do extensive amounts of self-sponsored writing: emailing, keeping journals or doing creative projects, instant messaging, making Web sites, blogging and so on. As much as possible, instruction should be geared toward making sense in a life outside of school, so that writing has ample room to grow in individuals' lives. It is useful for teachers to consider what elements of their curriculum they could imagine students self-sponsoring outside of school. Ultimately, those are the activities that will produce more writing.

In order to provide quality opportunities for student writing, teachers must minimally understand:

- How to interpret curriculum documents, including things that can be taught while students are actually writing, rather than one thing at a time to all students at once.
- The elements of "writing lives" as people construct them in the world outside of school.
- Social structures that support independent work.
- How to confer with individual writers.
- How to assess while students are writing.
- How to plan what students need to know in response to ongoing research.
- How to create a sense of personal safety in the classroom, so that students are willing to write freely and at length.
- How to create community while students are writing in the same room together.

3. Writing is a process.

Often, when people think of writing, they think of texts -- finished pieces of writing. Understanding what writers do, however, involves thinking not just about what texts look like when they are finished but also about what strategies writers might employ to produce those texts. Knowledge about writing is only complete with understanding the complex of actions in which writers engage as they produce texts. Such understanding has two aspects. First is the development, through extended practice over years, of a repertory of routines, skills, strategies, and practices, for generating, revising, and editing different kinds of texts. Second is the development of reflective abilities and meta-awareness about writing. This procedural understanding helps writers most when they encounter difficulty, or when they are in the middle of creating a piece of writing. How does someone get started? What do they do when they get stuck? How do they plan the overall process, each section of their work, and even the rest of the sentence they are writing right now? Research, theory, and practice over the past 40 years has produced a richer understanding of what writers do -- those who are proficient and professional as well as those who struggle.

Two further points are vital. To say that writing is a process is decidedly not to say that it should -- or can -- be turned into a formulaic set of steps. Experienced writers shift between different operations according to tasks and circumstances. Second, writers do not accumulate process skills and strategies once and for all. They develop and refine writing skills throughout their writing lives.

What does this mean for teaching?

Whenever possible, teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce texts -- and not only specify criteria for evaluating finished products, in form or content. Students should become comfortable with pre-writing techniques, multiple strategies for developing and organizing a message, a variety of strategies for revising and editing, and strategies for preparing products for public audiences and for deadlines. In explaining assignments, teachers should provide guidance and options for ways of going about it. Sometimes, evaluating the processes students follow -- the decisions they make, the attempts along the way -- can be as important as evaluating the final product. At least some of the time, the teacher should guide the students through the process, assisting them as they go. Writing instruction must provide opportunities for students to identify the processes that work best for themselves as they move from one writing situation to another.

Writing instruction must also take into account that a good deal of workplace writing and other writing takes place in collaborative situations. Writers must learn to work effectively with one another.

Teachers need to understand at least the following in order to be excellent at teaching writing as a process:

- The relationship between features of finished writing and the actions writers perform.
- What writers of different genres say about their craft.
- The process of writing from the inside, that is, what they themselves as writers experience in a host of different writing situations.
- Multiple strategies for approaching a wide range of typical problems writers face during composing, including strategies for audience and task analysis, invention, revision, and editing.
- Multiple models of the writing process, the varied ways individuals approach similar tasks, and the ways that writing situations and genres inform processes.
- Published texts, immediately available, that demonstrate a wide range of writing strategies and elements of craft.
- The relationships among the writing process, curriculum, learning, and pedagogy.
- How to design time for students to do their best work on an assignment.
- How writers use tools, including word-processing and design software and computer-based resources.

4. Writing is a tool for thinking.

When writers actually write, they think of things that they did not have in mind before they began writing. The act of writing generates ideas. This is different from the way we often think of writers -- as getting ideas fixed in their heads before they write them down. The notion that writing is a medium for thought is important in several ways. It suggests a number of important uses for writing: to solve problems, to identify issues, to construct questions, to reconsider something one had already figured out, to try out a half-baked idea. This insight that writing is a tool for thinking helps us to understand the process of drafting and revision as one of exploration and discovery, and is nothing like transcribing from pre-recorded tape. The writing process is not one of simply fixing up the mistakes in an early draft, but of finding more and more wrinkles and implications in what one is talking about.

What does this mean for teaching?

In any writing classroom, some of the writing is for others and some of the writing is for the writer. Regardless of the age, ability, or experience of the writer, the use of writing to generate thought is still valuable; therefore, forms of writing such as personal narrative, journals, written reflections, observations, and writing-to-learn strategies are important.

In any writing assignment, it must be assumed that part of the work of writers will involve generating and regenerating ideas prior to writing them.

Excellence in teaching writing as thinking requires that the teacher understand:

- Varied tools for thinking through writing, such as journals, writers' notebooks, blogs, sketchbooks, digital portfolios, listservs or online discussion groups, dialogue journals, double-entry or dialectical journals, and others.
- The kinds of new thinking that occur when writers revise.
- The variety of types of thinking people do when they compose, and what those types of thinking look like when they appear in writing.
- Strategies for getting started with an idea, or finding an idea when one does not occur immediately.

5. Writing grows out of many different purposes.

Purposes for writing include developing social networks; engaging in civic discourse; supporting personal and spiritual growth; reflecting on experience; communicating professionally and academically; building relationships with others, including friends, family, and like-minded individuals; and engaging in aesthetic experiences.

Writing is not just one thing. It varies in form, structure, and production process according to its audience and purpose. A note to a cousin is not like a business report, which is different again from a poem. The processes and ways of thinking that lead up to these varied kinds of texts can also vary widely, from the quick single draft email to a

friend to the careful drafting and redrafting of a legal contract. The different purposes and forms both grow out of and create various relationships between the writer and the potential reader, and relationships reflected in degrees of formality in language, as well as assumptions about what knowledge and experience is already shared, and what needs to be explained. Writing with certain purposes in mind, the writer focuses her attention on what the audience is thinking or believing; other times, the writer focuses more on the information she is organizing, or on her own thoughts and feelings. Therefore, the thinking, the procedures, and the physical format in writing all differ when writers' purposes vary.

What does this mean for teaching?

Often, in school, students write only to prove that they did something they were asked to do, in order to get credit for it. Or, students are taught a single type of writing and are led to believe this type will suffice in all situations. Writers outside of school have many different purposes beyond demonstrating accountability, and they practice myriad types and genres. In order to make sure students are learning how writing differs when the purpose and the audience differ, it is important that teachers create opportunities for students to be in different kinds of writing situations, where the relationships and agendas are varied. Even within academic settings, the characteristics of good writing vary among disciplines; what counts as a successful lab report, for example, differs from a successful history paper, essay exam, or literary interpretation.

In order to teach for excellence about purposes in writing, teachers need to understand:

- The wide range of purposes for which people write, and the forms of writing that arise from those purposes.
- Strategies and forms for writing for public participation in a democratic society.
- Ways people use writing for personal growth, expression, and reflection and how to encourage and develop this kind of writing.
- Aesthetic or artistic forms of writing and how they are made. That is, the production of creative and literary texts, for the purposes of entertainment, pleasure, or exploration.
- Appropriate forms for varied academic disciplines and the purposes and relationships that create those forms.
- Ways of organizing and transforming school curricula in order to provide students with adequate education in varied purposes for writing.
- How to set up a course to write for varied purposes and audiences.

6. Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.

Readers expect writing to conform to their expectations, to match the conventions generally established for public texts. Contemporary readers expect words to be spelled in a standardized way, for punctuation to be used in predictable ways, for usage and syntax to match that used in texts they already acknowledge as successful. They expect

the style in a piece of writing to be appropriate to its genre and social situation. In other words, it is important that writing that goes public be “correct.”

What does this mean for teaching?

Every teacher has to resolve a tension between writing as generating and shaping ideas and writing as demonstrating expected surface conventions. On the one hand, it is important for writing to be as correct as possible and for students to be able to produce correct texts. On the other hand, achieving correctness is only one set of things writers must be able to do; a correct text empty of ideas or unsuited to its audience or purpose is not a good piece of writing. There is no formula for resolving this tension. Writing is both/and: both fluency and fitting conventions. Research shows that facility in these two operations often develops unevenly. For example, as students learn increasingly sophisticated ways of thinking (for example, conditional or subordinate reasoning) or dealing with unfamiliar content, they may produce more surface errors, or perhaps even seem to regress. This is because their mental energies are focused on the new intellectual challenges. Such uneven development is to be tolerated, in fact, encouraged. It is rather like strength gains from lifting weight, which actually tears down muscle fibers only to stimulate them to grow back stronger. Too much emphasis on correctness can actually inhibit development. By the same token, without mastering conventions for written discourse, writers' efforts may come to naught. Drawing readers' attention to the gap between the text at hand and the qualities of texts they expect causes readers to not attend to the content. Each teacher must be knowledgeable enough about the entire landscape of writing instruction to guide particular students toward a goal, developing both increasing fluency in new contexts and mastery of conventions. NCTE's stated policy over many years has been that conventions of writing are best taught in the context of writing. Simply completing workbook or online exercises is inadequate if students are not regularly producing meaningful texts themselves.

Most writing teachers teach students how to edit their writing that will go out to audiences. This is often considered a late stage in the process of composing, because editing is only essential for the words that are left after all the cutting, replacing, rewriting, and adding that go on during revision. Writers need an image in their minds of conventional grammar, spelling, and punctuation in order to compare what is already on the page to an ideal of correctness. They also need to be aware of stylistic options that will produce the most desirable impression on their readers. All of the dimensions of editing are motivated by a concern for an audience.

Teachers should be familiar with techniques for teaching editing and encouraging reflective knowledge about editing conventions. For example, some find it useful to have students review a collection of their writing over time -- a journal, notebook, folder, or portfolio -- to study empirically the way their writing has changed or needs to change, with respect to conventions. A teacher might say, “let's look at all the times you used commas,” or “investigate the ways you might have combined sentences.” Such reflective appointments permit students to set goals for their own improvement.

Teachers need to understand at least the following in order to be excellent at teaching conventions to writers:

- Research on developmental factors in writing ability, including the tension between fluency with new operations or contents and the practice of accepted spelling, punctuation, syntactic, and usage conventions.
- The diverse influences and constraints on writers' decision making as they determine the kinds of conventions that apply to this situation and this piece of writing.
- A variety of applications and options for most conventions.
- The appropriate conventions for academic classroom English.
- How to teach usage without excessive linguistic terminology.
- The linguistic terminology that is necessary for teaching particular kinds of usage.
- The linguistic terminology necessary for communicating professionally with other educators.
- The relationship among rhetorical considerations and decisions about conventions, for example, the conditions under which a dash, a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop might be more effective.
- Conventions beyond the sentence, such as effective uses of bulleted lists, mixed genres and voices, diagrams and charts, design of pages, and composition of video shots.
- An understanding of the relationship among conventions in primary and secondary discourses.
- The conditions under which people learn to do new things with language.
- The relationship among fluency, clarity, and correctness in writing development and the ability to assess which is the leading edge of the student's learning now.

7. Writing and reading are related.

Writing and reading are related. People who read a lot have a much easier time getting better at writing. In order to write a particular kind of text, it helps if the writer has read that kind of text. In order to take on a particular style of language, the writer needs to have read that language, to have heard it in her mind, so that she can hear it again in order to compose it.

Writing can also help people become better readers. In their earliest writing experiences, children listen for the relationships of sounds to letters, which contributes greatly to their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge. Writers also must learn how texts are structured, because they have to create them. The experience of plotting a short story, organizing a research report, or making line breaks in a poem permits the writer, as a reader, to approach new reading experiences with more informed eyes.

Additionally, reading is a vital source of information and ideas. For writers fully to contribute to a given topic or to be effective in a given situation, they must be familiar with what previous writers have said. Reading also creates a sense of what one's audience knows or expects on a topic.

What does this mean for teaching?

One way to help students become better writers is to make sure they have lots of extended time to read, in school and out. Most research indicates that the easiest way to tap motivation to read is to teach students to choose books and other texts they understand and enjoy, and then to give them time in school to read them. In addition to making students stronger readers, this practice makes them stronger writers.

Students should also have access to and experience in reading material that presents both published and student writing in various genres. Through immersion in a genre, students develop an internalized sense of why an author would select a particular genre for a particular purpose, the power of a particular genre to convey a message, and the rhetorical constraints and possibilities inherent in a genre. Students should be taught the features of different genres, experientially not only explicitly, so that they develop facilities in producing them and become familiar with variant features. If one is going to write in a genre, it is very helpful to have read in that genre first.

Overall, frequent conversations about the connections between what we read and what we write are helpful. These connections will sometimes be about the structure and craft of the writing itself, and sometimes about thematic and content connections.

In order to do an excellent job of teaching into the connections of writing and reading, teachers need to understand at least these things:

- How writers read in a special way, with an eye toward not just what the text says but how it is put together.
- The psychological and social processes reading and writing have in common.
- The ways writers form and use constructs of their intended readers, anticipating their responses and needs.
- An understanding of text structure that is fluid enough to accommodate frequent disruptions.

8. Writing has a complex relationship to talk.

From its beginnings in early childhood through the most complex setting imaginable, writing exists in a nest of talk. Conversely, speakers usually write notes and, regularly, scripts, and they often prepare visual materials that include texts and images. Writers often talk in order to rehearse the language and content that will go into what they write, and conversation often provides an impetus or occasion for writing. They sometimes confer with teachers and other writers about what to do next, how to improve their drafts, or in order to clarify their ideas and purposes. Their usual ways of speaking sometimes do and sometimes do not feed into the sentences they write, depending on an intricate set of decisions writers make continually. One of the features of writing that is most evident and yet most difficult to discuss is the degree to which it has “voice.” The fact that we use this term, even in the absence of actual sound waves, reveals some of the special relationship between speech and writing.

What does this mean for teaching?

In early writing, we can expect lots of talk to surround writing, since what children are doing is figuring out how to get speech onto paper. Early teaching in composition should also attend to helping children get used to producing language orally, through telling stories, explaining how things work, predicting what will happen, and guessing about why things and people are the way they are. Early writing experiences will include students explaining orally what is in a text, whether it is printed or drawn.

As they grow, writers still need opportunities to talk about what they are writing about, to rehearse the language of their upcoming texts and run ideas by trusted colleagues before taking the risk of committing words to paper. After making a draft, it is often helpful for writers to discuss with peers what they have done, partly in order to get ideas from their peers, partly to see what they, the writers, say when they try to explain their thinking. Writing conferences, wherein student writers talk about their work with a teacher, who can make suggestions or re-orient what the writer is doing, are also very helpful uses of talk in the writing process.

To take advantage of the strong relationships between talk and writing, teachers must minimally understand:

- Ways of setting up and managing student talk in partnerships and groups.
- Ways of establishing a balance between talk and writing in classroom management.
- Ways of organizing the classroom and/or schedule to permit individual teacher-student conferences.
- Strategies for deliberate insertions of opportunities for talk into the writing process: knowing when and how students should talk about their writing.
- Ways of anticipating and solving interpersonal conflicts that arise when students discuss writing.
- Group dynamics in classrooms.
- Relationships -- both similarities and differences -- between oral and literate language.
- The uses of writing in public presentations and the values of students making oral presentations that grow out of and use their writing.

9. Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.

Writing happens in the midst of a web of relationships. There is, most obviously, the relationship between the writer and the reader. That relationship is often very specific: writers have a definite idea of who will read their words, not just a generalized notion that their text will be available to the world. Furthermore, particular people surround the writer -- other writers, partners in purposes, friends, members of a given community -- during the process of composing. They may know what the writer is doing and be indirectly involved in it, though they are not the audience for the work. In workplace and academic settings, writers write because someone in authority tells them to. Therefore,

power relationships are built into the writing situation. In every writing situation, the writer, the reader, and all relevant others live in a structured social order, where some people's words count more than others, where being heard is more difficult for some people than others, where some people's words come true and others' do not.

Writers start in different places. It makes a difference what kind of language a writer spoke while growing up, and what kinds of language they are being asked to take on later in their experience. It makes a difference, too, the culture a writer comes from, the ways people use language in that culture and the degree to which that culture is privileged in the larger society. Important cultural differences are not only ethnic but also racial, economic, geographical and ideological. For example, rural students from small communities will have different language experiences than suburban students from comprehensive high schools, and students who come from very conservative backgrounds where certain texts are privileged or excluded will have different language experiences than those from progressive backgrounds where the same is true. How much a writer has access to wide, diverse experiences and means of communication creates predispositions and skill for composing for an audience.

What does this mean for teaching?

The teaching of writing should assume students will begin with the sort of language with which they are most at home and most fluent in their speech. That language may be a dialect of English, or even a different language altogether. The goal is not to leave students where they are, however, but to move them toward greater flexibility, so that they can write not just for their own intimates but for wider audiences. Even as they move toward more widely-used English, it is not necessary or desirable to wipe out the ways their family and neighborhood of origin use words. The teaching of excellence in writing means adding language to what already exists, not subtracting. The goal is to make more relationships available, not fewer.

In order to teach for excellence, a writing teacher needs understandings like these about contexts of language:

- How to find out about a students' language use in the home and neighborhoods, the changes in language context they may have encountered in their lives, and the kinds of language they most value.
- That wider social situations in which students write, speak, read, and relate to other people affect what seems "natural" or "easy" to them -- or not.
- How to discuss with students the need for flexibility in the employment of different kinds of language for different social contexts.
- How to help students negotiate maintenance of their most familiar language while mastering academic classroom English and the varieties of English used globally.
- Control and awareness of their own varied languages and linguistic contexts.
- An understanding of the relationships among group affiliation, identity, and language.

- Knowledge of the usual patterns of common dialects in English, such as African American English, Spanish and varieties of English related to Spanish, common patterns in American rural and urban populations, predictable patterns in the English varieties of groups common in their teaching contexts.
- How and why to study a community's ways of using language.

10. Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.

Increasingly rapid changes in technologies mean that composing is involving a combination of modalities, such as print, still images, video, and sound. Computers make it possible for these modalities to combine in the same work environment. Connections to the Internet not only make a range of materials available to writers, they also collapse distances between writers and readers and between generating words and creating designs. Print always has a visual component, even if it is only the arrangement of text on a page and the type font. Furthermore, throughout history, print has often been partnered with pictures in order to convey more meaning, to add attractiveness, and to appeal to a wider audience. Television, video, and film all involve such combinations, as do websites and presentation software. As basic tools for communicating expand to include modes beyond print alone, “writing” comes to mean more than scratching words with pen and paper. Writers need to be able to think about the physical design of text, about the appropriateness and thematic content of visual images, about the integration of sound with a reading experience, and about the medium that is most appropriate for a particular message, purpose, and audience.

What does this mean for teaching?

Writing instruction must accommodate the explosion in technology from the world around us.

From the use of basic word processing to support drafting, revision, and editing to the use of hypertext and the infusion of visual components in writing, the definition of what writing instruction includes must evolve to embrace new requirements.

Many teachers and students do not, however, have adequate access to computing, recording, and video equipment to take advantage of the most up-to-date technologies. In many cases, teaching about the multi-modal nature of writing is best accomplished through varying the forms of writing with more ordinary implements. Writing picture books allows students to think between text and images, considering the ways they work together and distribute the reader's attention. Similar kinds of visual/verbal thinking can be supported through other illustrated text forms, including some kinds of journals/sketchbooks and posters. In addition, writing for performance requires the writer to imagine what the audience will see and hear and thus draws upon multiple modes of thinking, even in the production of a print text. Such uses of technology without the latest equipment reveal the extent to which “new” literacies are rooted also in older ones.

Teachers need to understand at least the following in order to be excellent at teaching composition as involving multiple media:

- A range of new genres that have emerged with the increase in electronic communication. Because these genres are continually evolving, this knowledge must be continually updated.
- Operation of some of the hardware and software their students will use, including resources for solving software and hardware problems.
- Internet resources for remaining up to date on technologies.
- Design principles for Web pages.
- E-mail and chat conventions.
- How to navigate both the World Wide Web and web-based databases.
- The use of software for making Web sites, including basic html, such as how to make a link.
- Theory about the relationship between print and other modalities.

11. Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment.

Assessment of writing occurs for different purposes. Sometimes, a teacher assesses in order to decide what the student has achieved and what he or she still needs to learn. Sometimes, an entity beyond the classroom assesses a student's level of achievement in order to say whether they can go on to some new educational level that requires the writer to be able to do certain things. At other times, school authorities require a writing test in order to pressure teachers to teach writing. Still other times, as in a history exam, the assessment of writing itself is not the point, but the quality of the writing is evaluated almost in passing. In any of these assessments of writing, complex judgments are formed. Such judgments should be made by human beings, not machines. Furthermore, they should be made by professionals who are informed about writing, development, and the field of literacy education.

What does this mean for teaching?

Instructors of composition should know about various methods of assessment of student writing. Instructors must recognize the difference between formative and summative evaluation and be prepared to evaluate students' writing from both perspectives. By formative evaluation here, we mean provisional, ongoing, in-process judgments about what students know and what to teach next. By summative evaluation, we mean final judgments about the quality of student work. Teachers of writing must also be able to recognize the developmental aspects of writing ability and devise appropriate lessons for students at all levels of expertise.

Teachers need to understand at least the following in order to be excellent at writing assessment:

- How to find out what student writers can do, informally, on an ongoing basis.
- How to use that assessment in order to decide what and how to teach next.

- How to assess occasionally, less frequently than above, in order to form judgments about the quality of student writing and learning.
- How to assess ability and knowledge across multiple different writing engagements.
- What the features of good writing are, appropriate to the context and purposes of the teaching and learning.
- What the elements of a constructive process of writing are, appropriate to the context and purposes of the teaching and learning.
- What growth in writing looks like, the developmental aspects of writing ability.
- Ways of assessing student metacognitive process of the reading/writing connection.
- How to recognize in student writing (both in their texts and in their actions) the nascent potential for excellence at the features and processes desired.
- How to deliver useful feedback, appropriate for the writer and the situation.
- How to analyze writing situations for their most essential elements, so that assessment is not of everything about writing all at once, but rather is targeted to objectives.
- How to analyze and interpret both qualitative and quantitative writing assessments.
- How to evaluate electronic texts.
- How to use portfolios to assist writers in their development.
- How self-assessment and reflection contribute to a writer's development and ability to move among genres, media, and rhetorical situations.