



British Educators Angered by “Texting” I say “don’t get mad, get creative!”

by Erin Jansen, author “NetLingo The Internet Dictionary”
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Texting is a new form of online communication. Texting is English that’s been adapted to the rapid fire conversational style of instant messaging. Commonly transmitted over cell phones or mobile devices, “texters” use the keypad to type written messages to each other.

You’ve seen bits and pieces of it: brb, cul8r, lylas, b4n, cu@8...
It’s one of the most popular sections on NetLingo.com.

For teenagers, texting is like knowing another language. Since it is an online language, it is global in nature and is quickly becoming a universal from of English.

Given that you must type the messages, shortcuts have been created in an effort to type more in less time. Shortcuts such as r, u, and b4 make these text messages look like code, but in fact it is conversational writing.

It is this kind of conversational writing that is infiltrating students’ schoolwork and educators are wondering what to do about it. In a recent interview with the BBC entitled “The Pedant’s Revolt” I came face to face with those who fear the Queen’s English is losing her ground.

While everyone agrees that language evolves, there are groups of highly educated speakers and professors who are dead set against the presence of texting in schoolwork and who are arguing for ways to stamp it out. My presence on the program, however, forced us to look at the cultural implications of online communication and to look for creative ways to deal.

It is not only a subculture of youths who are texting: 60% of the online population under age 17 uses text messages (according to Nielson/Net Ratings). They use it primarily to socialize and communicate, in other words, for recreation.

It is certainly true that at school, kids need to know the difference between formal writing and conversational writing. They need to know where to draw the line between formal English and informal English.

Before we solve the problem with text shorthand found in schoolwork, I want parents and educators to realize and appreciate there is a culture associated with this style of writing, and that culture is important and meaningful to our youths.

After all, when kids use text messaging, they are communicating and isn't that something every parent wants to cultivate? Don't you want your child to express him or herself? To communicate more?

The same is true for educators, after all, because of the Internet, kids are writing more than ever. Isn't that what every teacher wants, to get their kids writing?

Texting poses two major challenges for the educator. One, should not be to overcome this new abbreviated language, but rather find ways to use it creatively.

The second challenge texting poses for educators is solved when teachers impress upon their students that there is a clear distinction between formal and conversational writing and that in class, only formal writing is accepted in the final draft.

The opportunity exists to encourage students to use text shorthand to spark their thinking process. For example, when you're writing a first draft, it's all about freeing up your creativity.

A sixth grade teacher said "When my children are writing first drafts, I don't care how they spell anything, as long as they are writing. Remember creative writing class? If this lingo gets their thoughts and ideas onto paper quicker, the more power to them."

It is during the editing and revising stages of a writing project that the switch needs to happen. The switch from using elements of text shorthand to only standard English needs to happen. If the text shorthand still appears in the final draft, it is the educator's responsibility to work with the student to make sure this writing is translated or converted into proper English.

"I see it as another opportunity to teach and learn," said a junior high teacher. Because texting is infiltrating students' schoolwork to such a large degree, this kind of teaching is needed.

The fact is kids are saying they are so accustomed to IM abbreviations (instant messaging), that they read right pass them when editing their schoolwork. This indicates their ability to separate formal and informal English is declining.

If educators choose to react with alarm or dismay, or try to stifle it, or call this type of writing rude (it is not rude), they are dismissing an important opportunity to work with the student. This type of response is the wrong response, especially from the teens' point of view.

I advocate turning the issue of texting into a positive. For example, establish a dialogue about the evolution of language and use examples such as Shakespeare's delight in creating new words. This helps them see the broader picture and creates an environment of respect.

Teenagers have long pushed the boundaries of spoken language, now they are pushing the boundaries of written language. It remains to be seen if text shorthand is just a fad. To me it is a cousin of the acronym, which has been widely used in the government, business and technology sectors for decades.

Let's also not forget that youths like the feeling of knowing something that not everyone knows and sharing that with their friends. Remember the Internet and online communication is very real for them, they don't see it as a technological revolution...they're actively using it everyday.

I challenge parents and educators to learn and know as much as they do about computers and high-tech gadgets. I'd say the learning curve for feeling comfortable using the Internet and understanding the online lingo is pretty steep for many adults.

Whereas for teenagers, also known as screenagers, they've grown up or they're growing up with this technology that involves looking at a computer screen instead of just a television screen. In a sense they are helping create a new lingo and style of writing and that's empowering for them. So you see texting is an important part of their culture.

The Internet represents a new frontier, a place where you can set aside the rules, especially the rules of grammar and punctuation, and instead create your own descriptive phrases and styles of expression to give feeling in what is essentially a two-dimensional written world. And therein lies the popularity of the emoticon :-)

Another way to look at texting is to think of it as an accent; a written accent. Teenagers have gotten comfortable with this kind of typing and now in school, they're not paying attention. It's just like with a spoken accent: You live somewhere long enough, you pick up the accent, and you don't even pay attention to it.

So don't get mad, get creative and work together! It's that kind of response we'd rather teach our children anyway now isn't it?



Erin Jansen is an expert in online communication. She is the author and publisher of "NetLingo The Internet Dictionary" (ISBN: 0970639678) and "NetLingo.com" a Top 1000 Web site as ranked by Google. Erin frequently speaks and writes about online culture and technology trends.

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