

Write or wrong? Teachers wary of technology's effects on writing skills

By Sonya English - Special to the Journal-World

March 16, 2009

Inside the halls of West Junior High School, hand-written notes delivered during passing periods are a thing of the past. Cell phones, smuggled into the bathroom or concealed in the pocket of a hooded sweatshirt, trade text messages instead.

Kate Welch, 42, teaches English to eighth- and ninth-graders. She says a student without a cell phone is a rarity.

Text test

How well do you know your texting shortcut words? Take this quiz of the most popular text terms, according to www.netlingo.com, to find out.

1. 2moro
2. 2nite
3. BRB
4. BTW
5. B4N
6. BCNU
7. BFF
8. POV
9. DBEYR
10. SWAK
11. FUD
12. FWIW
13. GR8
14. ILY
15. IMHO
16. IRL
17. ISO
18. J/K
19. L8R
20. OIC
21. LOL
22. LYLAS
23. MHOTY
24. NIMBY

Answers: 1. Tomorrow; 2. Tonight; 3. Be right back; 4. By the way; 5. Bye for now; 6. Be seeing you; 7. Best friends forever; 8. Point of view. 9. Don't believe everything you read; 10. Sealed (or sent) with a kiss; 11. Fear, uncertainty and disinformation; 12. For what it's worth; 13. Great; 14. I love you; 15. In my humble opinion; 16. In real life; 17. In search of; 18. Just kidding; 19. Later; 20. Oh, I see; 21. Laughing out loud or lots of love. 22. Love you like a sister. 23; My hat's off to you. 24. Not in my backyard.

"And if they don't have texting, they have abusive parents," Welch says.

Text messages, e-mails, instant messages — they've not replaced pencil and paper, but they are ways students communicate daily. The modern student has mastered the shorthand, condensed language of electronics by the time teachers introduce classic literature and formal writing.

Michel Loomis, 64, has been teaching English at Central Junior High School for 26 years.

"I ignore it all," she says. "I don't text. I don't own a cell phone."

But in the classroom, Google images, YouTube videos and literary works she finds online serve as teaching tools every day.

She says technology can create at least one problem for students. It can promote "nonthinking." When writing lacks a student's voice, it's often because it's been doctored by thesaurus.com or copied and pasted from a Web site.

"There's definitely more plagiarism today. It's so easy because of the Internet," Loomis says. "It's also easy to say this isn't this kid's writing."

Nathan Lindsey, 23, a paraeducator in Loomis' classroom, says instructors talk about plagiarism to students again and again.

"It's so accessible, it doesn't seem wrong," Lindsey says.

At West, Welch has coined her own diagnostic term for how technology affects her students: Rapid-fire writing.

"It's the immediacy of communication," Welch says. "There's not a lot of reflective thinking."

Consider the pervasiveness e-mail and instant messaging and the correlating decline of letter-writing. Rapid-fire writing is hardly a product of youth.

"They're following the pace we set for society," says Aly Beery, 26, who has taught at West for two years.

Beery teaches English, electronic media, yearbook and newspaper, and she uses technology to get students into education. Text-speak is allowed, but only in informal writing.

Learning formal and informal writing can be a struggle for eighth-graders. Now, it's e-mails and five-paragraph essays, but Loomis remembers before the Internet it was talking to friends and talking to adults.

“It’s always been a challenge,” Loomis says.

Doug Ward, assistant professor in journalism at Kansas University, says accepting technology had always been a challenge, too.

“People used to say television would destroy the mind,” Ward says. “Now texting and instant messaging will destroy the young mind.”

He isn’t worried that his two sons in seventh grade need help with formal writing. That’s the role, he says, of teachers — to guide and reinforce.

Beery and Loomis say disparities in student writing were a reflection of more than involvement with technology as well. Beery saw sophisticated writing from her class’ most voracious readers. Loomis credited parents who read to their children.

And, in spite of all its new stimuli, the classroom is still a place to develop writing skills.

Or, as Welch put it: “Yes, we do require you to have a complete thought. And capitalize it. And punctuate it.”