Zero-Thumb Game: How to Tame Texting

English teachers take text messaging to task -- as a teaching tool.

by Sara Bernard

Cindi Rigsbee, a sixth- and seventh-grade reading-resource teacher who was named the 2008-09 North Carolina Teacher of the Year, has seen electronic-messaging shorthand show up in her students' writing since the advent of email. "I'd say something about it to the kids, and they'd respond, 'This is faster,'" she laments. "Now, when I say something, they don't even realize they're doing it. That's what worries me."

Stories like Rigsbee's -- alongside an onslaught of ominous headlines such as "Informal Style of Electronic Messages Is Showing Up in Schoolwork, Study Finds" -- seem to sound the death knell for students' writing skills, thanks in no small degree to the ubiquitous cell phone. According to the recent Pew Internet & American Life Project report "Writing, Technology, and Teens," 64 percent of the teens surveyed admitted that some form of electronic-communication lingo has crept into their academic writing.

But key participants in the report and some optimistic educators maintain that there are good tidings, too. Teenagers are writing more than ever, they recognize the importance of formal writing skills, and they want exactly what they need -- more writing instruction in school.

"Students are choosing to write in several kinds of media for many purposes and for many different audiences," says Kathleen Yancey, president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English and an English professor at Florida State University. Although there is a growing concern that the distinctions between formal and informal writing are disappearing, many language teachers refuse to ban cell phones and simply throw up their hands in disgust. A new form of communication is taking hold in the linguistic sphere, which means new challenges for teaching and learning -- but also new opportunities.

Cindi Rigsbee, for example, makes sure her students know when text language is appropriate and, more important, when it's not. She talks frequently in class about types of writing, the intended reader, and the evolution of language. At the beginning of each school year, she introduces a discussion about the way English has transformed over time. "We look at Old English, Middle English, and what was contemporary English in the time of Jane Eyre. Then I show them a MySpace page."
The Web page, of course, is full of the kind of semi-encoded language her students understand very well. Rigsbee uses this lesson to remind them of the different forms of writing. "Throughout the year, I ask them, 'Remember that MySpace page I showed you?'" she says.

**Passive Voices**

Rigsbee notes that, unfortunately, not many teachers she knows are actively addressing the issue. Though text-message-speak may turn up in academic essays, it's not part of the English curriculum.

"Some teachers don't see the purpose of having such a conversation," says Kristen Montgomery, an English teacher at Canajoharie High School, in upstate New York. "They just want to close it off, pretend it's not happening, and admonish the kids not to use it."

Making the topic off-limits, however, won't do anything to address the problem, nor will it shed any light on the upside some educators insist is there. Says Yancey, "If you take an approach that views all of these forms of writing as legitimate forms, and you talk about how they are both similar and different across media, I think you are more likely to have students use the correct form for the correct audience. If you talk about texting as this bane that goes on outside of school, I don't think that's good teaching."

The problems often blamed on text messaging may actually result from a variety of complex factors. Both Rigsbee and Montgomery find texting-related grammatical issues to be more prevalent among younger students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those who are already generally weaker writers. So the perceived decline in students' writing skills might simply be a sign that they need more, and more comprehensive, writing practice.

"In the days when only half the population graduated from high school, many people didn't need to write well. That's not true anymore. We need literacy skills," says Richard Sterling, executive director emeritus of the National Writing Project and adjunct professor at the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Education. "The answer is not, 'We should ban texting.' That's absurd, and also impossible. It's much more about giving students an opportunity to write so extensively and so often that their writing develops. Those errors will disappear if there's a sufficient amount of writing going on."

**R U Getting It?**

In the meantime, some determined English teachers are tapping students' own instant messaging style to get their points across. Some, including Cindi Rigsbee, are guiding exercises in text translation: pulling up a MySpace page or a lingo-drenched school paper and asking students to translate the writing into standard English. Or they ask students to translate passages from classic literature into texting speak to demonstrate their comprehension of the writing and to create a form of multilingual focus, similar to how learning a foreign language tends to enhance a student's understanding of his or her native tongue.
An example from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Focus on Effectiveness Web site brings together texting and Shakespeare: Teacher Inez Brown's students used cell phones to summarize passages from *Richard III*. She divided students into groups and used the constraints of text messaging (160 characters per message) to gauge how succinctly students could comprehend and compress the content of the passages.

Sometimes texting can help reticent students speak up, because their comfort level with the technology can encourage participation, even if the teacher insists on proper spelling. Janelle Quintans Bence, codirector of the North Star of Texas Writing Project, asked her English-language-learner students to create questions about a story they'd read. She then had students volunteer to text those questions, and responses, to her and their classmates. "Not only did I have more replies than I expected, but the questions were open ended, so students used more English to respond," Bence says. "I had students who rarely join in discussions in class share ten or more responses."

The use of texting in the language arts classroom can also be a point of entry into a larger discussion of the phenomenon in general. The incessant buzzing and thumb flying has an effect not only on spelling and grammar but also on clarity and focus. Bud Hunt, a teacher-consultant with the Colorado State University Writing Project, asked his students to use Twitter accounts to "pepper each other with texts and tweets" as they discussed the information overload and constant distraction addressed in M.T. Anderson's book, *Feed*.

"It totally worked," he says. "It was fascinating for me, and I think useful for them, to think about what it means to multitask. The next step is to start to figure out when it's okay to be in text mode and when it's not, based more on internal controls than on teacher controls."

**Social Studies**

Whether educators think texting shorthand is just another teenage slang or whether it heralds linguistic deterioration, the effect of the technology on students -- particularly the ability it gives them to instantaneously communicate and collaborate with peers -- is, for some teachers, as curious a phenomenon as is its effect on grammar and spelling. "It's the social nature of texting that is increasing interest for teens," UC Berkeley's Richard Sterling claims. "And learning is often best done in social and collaborative ways. That's another thing that schools need to do more of."

All of which, says English teacher Kristen Montgomery, is sufficient cause for further exploration. She notes that "only a fuller understanding of this aspect of youth culture" will help educators effectively harness it for learning.

"This is new territory for teachers," says Paul Oh, program coordinator at the National Writing Project. "The notion that there is a solution is not the way I would approach this. Instead, there is a basis for conversation."

*Sara Bernard is a former staff writer and multimedia producer for Edutopia.*