

Chapter 14

Textperts: Utilizing Students' Skills in the Teaching of Writing

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ABSTRACT

Text messaging has many similarities to poetry or short prose writing. Instructors typically discount text messaging as a distraction in the classroom, but this chapter includes a review of the positive aspects of implementing the genre of text messaging in the composition classroom as a means of teaching writing. Using a community of practice approach, this chapter looks at the technologically savvy generation of college students in today's classrooms and attempts to capitalize, educationally, on the writing skills that students already possess. Next, it explores both the theoretical and practical implementations of this genre into the composition classroom with careful consideration of the positive and negative impacts of this, before examining the transition from student text messaging to the writing of other, longer genres. Although this chapter's focus is on the teaching of writing, the information can be considered to be interdisciplinary.

INTRODUCTION

I do want to argue that teachers of composition need to pay attention to, and come to value, the multiple ways in which students compose and communicate meaning, the exciting hybrid, multimodal texts they create—in both non-digital and digital environments—to meet their own needs in a changing world. We need to better understand

the importance that students attach to composing, exchanging, and interpreting new different kinds of texts that help them make sense of their experiences and lives—songs and lyrics, videos, written essays illustrated with images, personal web pages that includes sound clips. We need to learn from their motivated efforts to communicate with each other, for themselves and for others, often in resistance to the world we have created for them. We need to respect the rhetorical sovereignty of young people from different backgrounds,

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communities, colors, and cultures, to observe and understand the rhetorical choices they are making, and to offer them new ways of making meaning, new choices, new ways accomplishing their goals. – Cynthia Selfe (2009)

As Web 2.0 technologies become more mainstream and part of students' everyday lives, we, as instructors, have to consider the implications of these technologies on student learning and the possibilities that they may hold for instruction. Text messaging, in particular, has become a part of students' everyday lives; something that they will not even put away for the duration of a 50-minute class. Despite the criticism that texting in the classroom usually garners from many faculty members, I believe that understanding and accepting text messaging as an effective means of communication is a great step toward developing the technological relationship between students and teachers. By incorporating text messaging into classrooms, instructors are welcoming a skill set that college-aged students value tremendously. Text messaging makes the students the experts in technology, and in this case, in writing in a format they know very well. For too long, text messaging has been looked upon as a mode of writing unsuited for academic purposes. It may not be the ideal type of writing that composition instructors are looking for, but it is its own unique genre of writing and students, as experts of this genre, should be praised for their writing developments and efforts. Cynthia Selfe (1999) has rallied for an understanding of technological literacy and its role in the composition classroom. According to Selfe, *technological literacy* is defined as “a complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including reading, writing, and communicating” (p. 11). This chapter considers text messaging as a growing social software in and outside of the classroom, and, as with all Web 2.0 technologies, not something that can be ignored

for its communicative opportunities. The most positive effect of utilizing text messaging in the classroom is that bestowing agency on students as “textperts”—technological experts in text messaging writing skills—may result in an increase in student interest in writing, and. Using texting as an instruction tool in the classroom can also provide an opportunity to discuss the rights and responsibilities of digital citizenship. Although this chapter will focus on the role that texting can play in the composition classroom, the suggestions I make may be adapted and applied productively across different disciplines.

BACKGROUND

Cynthia Selfe's (2009) words quoted at the beginning of this chapter serve as a starting point for considering text messaging as a community of practice in which sometimes the students are experts and the instructors are novices. Selfe argues that instructors should take the unique opportunities that various demographics of students offer in regards to teaching and learning composition. In my experience with composition students, these opportunities would include striving to understand their preferred modes of communication and writing, and using that as a starting ground for other types of writing. One of the key elements of Selfe's argument is *respect*: having respect for our students' abilities, capabilities, and rhetorical interests. Banning text messaging based on our own assumptions about that technology does a great disservice to our students.

Utilization of text messaging for composition studies is still relatively new. Mahatanankoon and O'Sullivan (2008) discuss the concerns of computer anxiety as it applies to text messaging: “[a]lthough text messaging use has grown dramatically in recent years, this means of communication . . . are still unfamiliar to the many newer adopters and as such is potentially anxiety provoking” (p. 980). Since Mahatanankoon and O'Sullivan wrote their

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