

Chapter 7

Error or Strength? Competencies Developed in Adolescent Digitalk

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ABSTRACT

A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project has indicated that teens are writing more than ever and that much of this writing is done in digital spaces. However, digitalk, the informal language used, often breaks from Standard English, and adults are concerned about the effects of digitalk on literacy skills in general. This chapter reports research that focuses on what language teens use in their digitalk and why they make the choices they do. With analysis of digital writing from 81 adolescents, researchers identified 18 conventions of digitalk. In a second phase of research, teens were surveyed and interviewed about their linguistic choices. Findings indicate that adolescents attend to audience, and they consider personal voice in their digital writing. Teens develop these competencies in a community of writers – outside of school.

INTRODUCTION

we hangin later?

i gotta meet my moms after skooooool today. tom?

yeah, fo sho

fo sho...we can meet behind the yard

k. see u then

HOLLA

Is this text conversation between two adolescents riddled with errors? Does the following exchange evidence “lax punctuation and grammar” (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. 3)?

Heyyy ! how you getting home tomorrow?

Hey um I think my mom will pick me up I guess

Oh alrightttt ... do you think she could give me a ride home? My mom's working, and I don't wanna be the loser senior on the bus. HAHA

haha prob I didn't even ask if she could bring me lol

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Error or Strength?

*ohhhhhh haha okayyy... . . let's go out to lunch
for your birthday!*

Hey I wish I could but I have soo much to do! Lol

Ughh okay well we must do something!

okk ok well I gotta ttyl:)

Byeeee!

A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al., 2008) indicated that teens are writing more than ever and that much of this writing is done in digital spaces. The conversations above represent examples of that writing. Noticeably, the writers of these texts do not adhere to standard conventions and instead adopt language that is popularly known as “textspeak.” The Pew report noted that this nonstandard language troubles “a considerable number of educators and children’s advocates” who “are concerned that the quality of writing by young Americans is being degraded by their electronic communication, with its carefree spelling, lax punctuation and grammar, and its acronym shortcuts” (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. 3). This view, that the language is “carefree” and “lax,” has also been seen in popular media, where titles like “The Gr8 Deb8 of Teen Txtng: Text Messaging Ruining the English Language?” (Howard, 2012) have revealed an inherent prejudice against digital language.

What is interesting about the headline of Howard (2012) is that it captures a commonly held perception that teens regularly substitute numbers for sounds (e.g., Gr8). Surprisingly, this practice is rarely used by adolescents (Turner, 2011). In fact, adults hold many misconceptions about the digital language that teens use on a daily basis. As evidenced by the conversations cited above, adolescents easily communicate with each other via texting, instant messaging, and social networking. The language that they use blends formal and nonstandard English to serve a purpose for

a community of writers. This digitalk (Turner, 2010, 2011) allows adolescents to participate in a digital community even as it helps them to identify themselves among their peers (Turner, in press).

A careful examination of the digital messages that begin this chapter reveals that they were composed by four individuals. Reading down each column uncovers a distinct voice. For instance, the first teen wrote somewhat abruptly in short lines while his friend extended “skooooool” and used ellipses for flow. In the second conversation, the first writer repeated letters, as in “heyyy” and “ohh-hhhh,” but her friend did not adopt this convention. Each person created a noticeable style, a practice reflective of expert writers. Far from being lax, the adolescents used language purposefully, and their manipulations may reflect strengths of digital writers. A growing body of research has suggested that use of digitalk supports the development of literacy skills (Kemp & Bushnell, 2011; Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008; Plester, Wood, & Joshi, 2009; Powell & Dixon, 2011; Wood, Jackson, Hart, Plester, & Wilde, 2001). This chapter will add to that literature by articulating competencies developed by adolescents who participate in a community of digital writers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studies that support a negative relationship between digitalk and grammar skills (e.g., Singel & Sundar, 2012) often isolate language from context. In contrast, the present study evolved from a sociocultural frame (cf. New Literacy theories (Barton, 1994, 2001; Gee, 1996, 2000; Street 1995, 1999)) that has viewed literacy as contextually based.

Gee (2008) recognized that language cannot be divided from “its social context” (p. 2). He distinguished between “big D Discourses,” which “include much more than language” (p. 2), and lowercase discourses, which refer to issues of language alone. Understanding that language use var-

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