

Speak Out

Does text messaging hurt student writing skills?

We're writing quite well, thank you very much

BY JESSICA GOLD HARALSON

Like, IDK, my BFF Jill?" This instantly recognizable television commercial punch line, delivered by a winsome little girl too attached to her cell phone's text messaging service, has become a predictably scary bellwether for educators fearing the digital age's effect on their charges. And like every other generation where some newfangled contraption threatened the schoolhouse, knucklebiting and pearl-clutching rule the day—blocking a dialogue about whether texting is stunting students' smarts.

Some schools are pre-emptively banning the practice, rendering cell phones the Tamagotchi pets (remember those?) of the current decade. Parents are putting aside their "CrackBerries" to punish Junior for each stray "LOL." A recent *Chicago Sun-Times* subsidiary published the predictable, square quotes from local teachers antsy about the practice. One middle school teacher lamented: "[Students] want to take every shortcut possible."

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There may be a ton of hysteria surrounding the text-messaging craze, but there's little to no evidence to support the idea that Jill and her BFF are headed for a life of flunking and monosyllables. Consider this: A City University of London study recently dispelled the notion that text messaging somehow affects students' grammar. According to the study's leader, the differences between the punctuation and spelling abilities of 11- and 12-year-olds are not dependent on their affinity for texting. See? No need to pray to Strunk and White just yet.

Those still in a snit over texting can find a salve in studies arguing that guilty pleasures don't have to be so guilty after all. Cultural gadfly James Paul Gee, in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, masterfully advances a powerful thesis: Technological literacy can actually help the K-12 set keep up with today's

information overload. A recent Northwestern University literacy survey concurs, introducing the concept of so-called cultural omnivores. While many worry that Internet and cell phone use cut into reading time, the study found that the Internet-savvy adults spend more time reading, not less. Children weren't considered in the study, but it isn't a stretch to conclude that reading—even on a cell phone screen—will just encourage youngsters to read even more.

Still not convinced? Consider that educational services can use texting to their benefit. In fact, tech-savvy book publishers are using the technology to reach out to tweens. According to *USA Today*, HarperCollins, which publishes popular tween author Meg Cabot, is launching a program where students can sign up for weekly text messages from Cabot herself.

No, I'm not trying to oversell here. I'm just making the point that it could be worse, right? The kids might not produce *War and Peace* on their BlackBerries, but they're reading. Who can knock that? IMHO, it is rly hard 2. But I gtg. TTYL!

Jessica Gold Haralson is a writer and English major at the University of Pennsylvania. She lives in Philadelphia.

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Teachers say text messages r ruining kids' riting skills

BY KATE ROSS

Text and instant messaging are negatively affecting students' writing quality on a daily basis, as they bring their abbreviated language into the classroom. As a result of their electronic chatting, kids are making countless syntax, subject-verb agreement and spelling mistakes in writing assignments.

The text message writing style aims at getting as much said with as few words as possible. This rushed form of writing neglects to consider the audience or appropriate voice. The shorthand style is not suitable in formal or classroom writing, and the fact that it is becoming students' primary form of writing is a serious problem.

As an instructional coach for language arts teachers in my district, I constantly see the shortened words, terms and contractions typically found in text messaging dialogue used in students' formal writing assignments. I also find that students' overall quality of work has suffered because their attitude toward writing has changed. Much like texting, students want to get everything written as fast as possible. They don't want to be bothered with the writing process—drafting, revising and editing.

My experience is a perfect example. Last year, I taught English to 200 seventh- and eighth-graders at Mountain Ridge Junior High, part of Alpine School District, in Highland, Utah. There, the problem was most glaring among our older students.

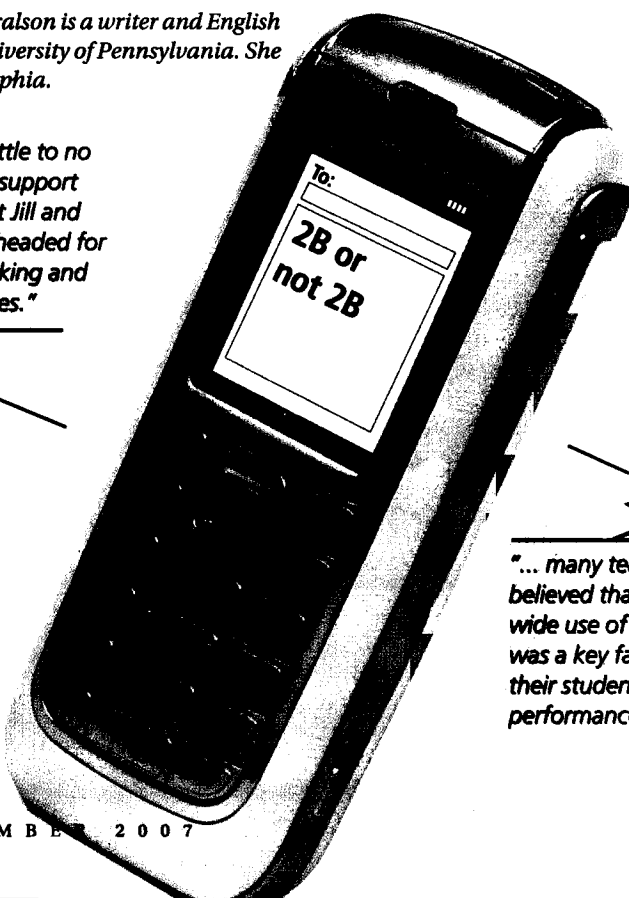
In 2005, only 86 percent of ninth-graders passed the state-mandated Direct Writing Assessment Test. Tenth-graders scored similarly on the Utah Basic Skills Competency Test (UBSCT).

These results clearly defined the situation: Student writing was not up to par. Poor grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes appeared in everything students wrote, from classroom assignments and e-mails for teachers, and then for the state writing exams. And many teachers believed that students' wide use of "text speak" was a key factor in their students' negative performance.

After poor performance on the direct writing assessment and the UBSCT, our district proactively implemented Vantage Learning's "MY Access!," an online writing program, to help improve declining test scores. The kids really enjoy using the computer for writing assignments, and the program offers them instant feedback and explains mistakes, such as why "2" cannot substitute for "two" or "too." The program not only improved overall writing skills by providing students instant feedback, but actually helped tackle the text-speak problem as well. And our 2006 test scores were up to 94 percent passing from 86 percent in the previous year.

Communication is never a bad thing, and having students text one another is great. I also believe it is our job as educators to prepare our students for the real world and instill in them the formal writing skills they need to succeed. Maybe the answer is to embrace that same technology in a different way and help further their writing capabilities rather than hinder them. In any case, text speak is a problem we all need to figure out together.

Kate Ross is instructional coach for the Alpine School District in American Fork, Utah.



"... many teachers believed that students' wide use of 'text speak' was a key factor in their students' negative performance."

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