We Learn What We Do: Developing a Repertoire of Writing Practices in an Instant Messaging World

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Instant messaging (IM) and its cell-phone sibling, texting, are much used and beloved by young people but sometimes are ridiculed or even reviled by adults. Periodically, newspaper articles recount how teachers are finding non-standard spelling and writing forms common to IM in students’ writing (see, for example, Cobb, 2002; Helderman, 2003; Lee, 2003). Despite the reassurances of educators such as William Kist (cited in Martineau, 2007) and Linda Christenbury (cited in National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2003) and a number of teachers’ creative lessons that use IM to teach audience and purpose (NCTE, 2003), there remains an undercurrent of fear and distrust among teachers and parents toward these new literacy practices.

In response to these concerns, and drawing on my experience as a high school English teacher in the late 1990s when IM became popular, I spent two years with a 15-year-old white girl whom I call Lisa (a pseudonym) who lived in an urban area in western New York state. I wanted to learn more about adolescent use of IM and its implications for literacy learning. I found that part of the distrust comes from not understanding what IM practices entail (Thurlow, 2006) and the meanings youths apply to the practice (Jacobs, 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

Beginning with the assumption that we learn what we do within a community where a particular practice is valued (Rogoff, 1995, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), I discuss how Lisa developed skills in school-based writing even as she engaged in what she called “hardcore” IM. I argue that Lisa was able to develop proficiency in IM, as well as in the writing expected in school, because for her IM was part of a repertoire of literacy practices. I also draw on what we know about writing instruction to suggest ways to help students build a repertoire of writing practices in an IM world.

The Relationship Between IM and Formal Writing

In this section, I turn to existing research to explore the relationship between IM and formal writing. I begin with the research into computer-mediated
communication (CMC) and IM in particular. I then explore the relationship between the new, or post-typographic, literacies and the old, or typographic, literacies (Reinking, 1998). I argue that CMC is not poor writing but is a response to social needs as mediated by technological constraints. I suggest that IM is caught within the tensions between the new literacies and the traditional literacies.

Baron (1984) questioned whether CMC was a possible agent of language change, and subsequent research documented the development and use of short, fragmented sentences; emoticons, such as smileys; abbreviations; and initialisms, such as “lol” for “laugh out loud” (Walther, 1996). The research suggested that these forms served to approximate the rhythms and prosody of speech in a “lean medium” (Walther, 1996, p. 3) that lacked the feedback cycle possible in face-to-face interactions. With the advent of IM in the late 1990s and its rapid adoption by adolescents, CMC conventions became part of public consciousness. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, a “moral panic” (Thurlow, 2006, p. 667) arose that IM and texting would damage people’s ability to write sustained, cohesive texts in standard edited English.

There are only a few published studies that look specifically at the relationship between IM and literacy development. Lewis and Fabos (2005) indicated that IM supports the use of text for social purposes and provides an opportunity for youth to explore identity. Similarly, Jacobs (2006) argued that IM can create opportunities for adolescents to build the skills, attributes, and achievements that position them for participation in a fast capitalist, information economy. In a review of research across a range of disciplines, Jacobs (2008) found no empirical evidence to indicate that IM contributes to the deterioration of writing skills. Instead, she found that context of use, which includes consideration of the reader’s needs as well as the social purposes for which the text was being used, was the most important aspect of how language was used in IM—not the technology itself.

IM, however, is only one of the nontypographic literacies in which youth are engaged. As expanded definitions of literacy led researchers and teachers to look beyond traditional and school-based literacy practices, it became apparent that many adolescents engage in a wide variety of literate activities outside of school such as e-mail and IM (Alvermann, 2006), zines (Gustavson, 2007), e-zines (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004), and website creation (Davies, 2006).

In an effort to engage with and meet the needs of students, some teachers and researchers attempt to integrate students’ in- and out-of-school literacies (Millard, 2006). Accomplishing this is difficult, however, given the complex relationship between the traditional, typographic literacies and the new, posttypographic or digital literacies. Dressman et al. (2006) suggested that the new literacies and traditional literacies can be complementary, oppositional, or mutually exclusive. A complementary view is that the new technologies have the potential to open up a wide range of opportunities for youths to engage in literacy practices beyond what traditionally has been available in schools (Dressman et al., 2006). An oppositional view holds that youths may lose the motivation to learn traditional literacies if the new literacies gain in value (Dressman et al., 2006), and a mutually exclusive view is concerned that new literacy practices will be appropriated as we attempt to transfer them into the classroom (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006).

The literature demonstrates that literacy practices such as IM are part of the unsettled relationships between in- and out-of-school literacies as well as between typographic literacies and the digital literacies. Specifically, it is unclear whether to ignore IM as being exclusive of school, to see it as damaging to schooled literacy, or to see it as a way to engage students in writing. However, if we resist the tendency to dichotomize literacy practices as old/new, in/out-of-school, or traditional/nontraditional and instead see them as part of a repertoire, then we can move toward understanding how engagement in any literacy practice can provide insight on an individual’s literate development.

**Theoretical Considerations**

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) and the Carnegie Corporation (Graham & Perin, 2007) raise the specter of declining writing skills among young people. These reports claim that large numbers of adolescents are unable to write coherent, meaningful texts using...
standard conventions. It is beyond the purpose of this article to contest the findings of these reports, but the evidence does point to changes in people’s skill in particular textual forms. What we need to remember is that definitions of coherent and meaningful are determined by the context of the writing. What is good essay writing for a high school social studies class is not good writing for IM. Writing an effective memo for work is different from writing a letter of complaint, which is different from writing a real estate advertisement. In this article, the definition of “good writing” is based on The New Literacy Studies (NLS) definition of literacy as a social practice situated in the immediate context of use (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1995). Being literate means using text for culturally meaningful purposes within culturally meaningful activities (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivančič, 2000), and text is defined as being part of a meaning-making system within localized sociocultural, historical, and political contexts (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995). Good writing, then, is writing that meets the purposes of the author and fulfills the requirements of the audience as defined by the social and cultural expectations of the community in which the writing is used.

Conducting the Study

I spent two years observing and videotaping Lisa as she used IM in her home. I interviewed her and several of her friends with whom she regularly conversed online and attended after-school events such as soccer games and her pre-prom party. The interviews, observations, and videotaping sessions were supported by field notes, and interviews and videotaped sessions were transcribed. I collected 12 samples of Lisa’s school-based writing from a variety of courses and amassed over 100 online status postings (away messages) and 7 biographical sketches (profiles).

I used the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to code data and the tools of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996; Ochs, 1992) to develop an understanding of how Lisa and her friends constructed meaning in their IMs. I transcribed IMs from video data and included pauses, self-corrections, and the ways

Lisa negotiated multitasking (see Jacobs, 2004, for a detailed explanation of data collection and analysis methods). I transcribed each utterance as closely as possible to the spoken and did not edit it to remove extraneous words. My purpose was to capture a sense of who Lisa was as a teen and how she used language. I also drew on my background as an English teacher and writing instructor to analyze her writing for organization, tone, voice, diction, grammar, and mechanics.

Discovering Lisa’s World: Life as a Hardcore IM User and Award-Winning Writer

Early in the research, Lisa told me she couldn’t live without IM:

Like here’s the scenario. I hadn’t cleaned my room in like six months, and my parents were like—well it was probably, it was a long time—and my parents were like, if you don’t clean your room by the end of this weekend we’re going to ground you. And I’m like that would suck. But then they were like or we’ll take away IM. And I’m like ground me, just ground me, OK I’ll clean it. And if I don’t, ground me, don’t take away IM.

Lisa called herself a hardcore user of IM and that was the primary reason I selected her for my study. She was part of the 75% of online Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 who use IM (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). As I came to know her, I discovered that she was a high-achieving student and award-winning teen writer. Her ability to write across these two different worlds contradicted what I had experienced as a teacher, what I read in the news, and what other teachers told me. How was Lisa able to successfully negotiate the demands of school-based writing and those of IM? How did Lisa gain facility in different genres when other students seemed unable to do so?

Some answers can be found in the context of Lisa’s home and school life. At the beginning of the study, Lisa was a sophomore at Arts High School, a magnet school run by the City School District (CSD) in a midsized city in western New York state. Students at Arts High select a major from a choice of vocal music,
instrumental music, dance, drama, visual arts, theater technology, or creative writing. Lisa, a creative writing major, took courses such as poetry writing, playwriting, creative nonfiction, and journalism as well as core courses in English literature, Latin, social studies, math, earth science, biology, and chemistry. All courses were at either the honors or advanced placement level.

As a creative writing major, and as a student in a school where writing across the curriculum is part of the school culture, Lisa had multiple opportunities to write in a variety of genres. These genres included creative fiction, nonfiction, poetry, plays, literary response essays, article summaries, book reports, and responses to document-based questions. Lisa consistently received positive feedback on her writing in the form of high grades. She also submitted her creative pieces to locally and nationally adjudicated writing competitions and won several awards.

Lisa’s family also supported her writing development. Both parents are professionals with advanced degrees. The room where the computer was located and where Lisa did her homework was filled with a variety of texts. A full bookshelf covered one wall, a desk overflowing with household paperwork sat against another, and the family television, movie library, and video game collection were against a third wall. A desktop computer sat in one corner of the room, and the house had wireless broadband Internet, which could be accessed from almost anywhere in the house.

While online, Lisa was surrounded by traditional typographic texts and nontraditional, posttypographic, multimodal texts. However, Lisa said she did not read or write for pleasure, which she defined as reading novels or writing for her own enjoyment. All Lisa’s traditional typographic reading and writing was devoted to school assignments—even her summers were dedicated to reading for advanced placement courses. It was within the new literacies that Lisa engaged in reading and writing for fun.

During the first year of the study, Lisa spent several hours a day sending and receiving IMs. Because both parents worked, Lisa came home to an empty house and used IM to meet her need for socializing. She said she hated to be alone and messaging kept her from feeling lonely. Most conversations were playful and included word play, inside jokes, and the discussion of television programs. She and her friends also used IM to rehash events of the day, discuss homework assignments, and make plans for the weekend. She said that people who did not have access to IM were often inadvertently left out of social events because plans and announcements were made using IM. As such, rather than being a time waster, as it is sometimes construed, IM served as an important literacy practice for Lisa. Like most literacy practices, it served to connect her to her community.

Furthermore, Lisa developed skill at multitasking. Because she had a broadband connection, Lisa was able to use the telephone while messaging and would often be on the telephone while sending messages online. At one point during the study, Lisa was simultaneously on the telephone, messaging, and studying for an exam. Although this may appear to be detrimental to effective studying, analysis revealed that Lisa’s activities were all used for the purpose of preparing for the exam. Her IMs were short, her telephone conversation was focused, and her written notes and textbook were used to support the conversations.

During the second year of the study, Lisa learned to drive and took an SAT Reasoning-test preparation course. As such, she spent less time online because she was home less. She did not, however, abandon IM. Instead, she began to use the “away message” function more to notify her friends of her whereabouts. Similar to Nardi’s (2005) study of workplace use of IM, Lisa said away messages kept her company during late study sessions, and she found it comforting to know her friends were engaged in the same activities as she and that she could contact them should the need arise.

If grades and public accolades are used to measure achievement, Lisa was a successful writer of school-based texts. If participation is used as a measure, Lisa used IM to be successful socially. It is also clear that Lisa learned that text and text use vary across different contexts. I have yet to understand how she gained facility in each of these worlds. In the next section, I explore possible explanations for her success.
Finding Success by Creating Separate Worlds

Lisa may have developed facility in IM and school-based writing by keeping the conventions of the two worlds separate. Interviews revealed that for Lisa, IM was not considered writing; it was simply “talking.” Although literacy theory proposes that IM and note writing are literacy practices, for Lisa they were not. Lisa defined writing as lengthy and involving some level of thought, and IM did not fit that definition. Lisa’s attitude is consistent with the findings of a large-scale survey study that found that adolescents do not view their online communications as writing (Lenhart, Araféh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008).

Lisa also used her understanding of genre to guide her. In IM, if a message followed rules of academic writing, Lisa saw the writer as an outsider. For instance, she said it was annoying to watch adults IM because their responses were too lengthy, too labored, and overly correct. Furthermore, Lisa said that IMs that attended to conventions such as punctuation and capitalization were breaches of online etiquette; short entries, abbreviations, lack of punctuation, minor spelling errors, and typographic errors all connoted spontaneity and speed of response. Her reaction to adult efforts at IM reveals that Lisa recognized IM as having a set of conventions that differed from the writing she did for school.

Despite her avowed inattention to spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, analysis of Lisa’s IMs showed that she did attend to writing style when messaging. For instance, Lisa told me that she could tell a serious IM by the length and amount of thought that was put into it. She commented, “They think out what they’re saying more, so you can almost tell, and like people write like longer things and stuff.” A close examination of various IM exchanges revealed that serious conversations had fewer spelling mistakes and lengthier entries than playful exchanges. Observations showed that when Lisa shifted into a serious conversation, she took longer to respond and corrected misspellings as they occurred. Her sentences tended to be longer than average and more grammatically complex. This indicates that Lisa drew on her writing skills when engaged in serious online conversations.

Lisa was also aware of the requirements of school writing differences between classes. Lisa said she would carefully craft her creative writing pieces but would not craft papers for content area classes such as English and biology. She said first drafts for English papers were generally good enough to earn an A and writing a biology paper was simply typing.

Lisa: Like they um, the bio essays are just, they aren’t good writing. Like I mean, they’re, they’re just things that I sit down and like I’m typing and I don’t know what I’m talking about.

Gloria: So you don’t do the crafting on them like you do for creative writing.

Lisa: I do like no crafting on them. I just write them.

An analysis of her biology essays revealed her writing to be straightforward summaries of science articles. These essays contained a few minor grammatical and mechanical errors, but for the most part, the writing matched the depersonalized style typically associated with science writing. None of the conventions of IM appeared in any of the writing she gave me. When asked whether IM conventions crept into her school-based writing, Lisa answered that they did on occasion, but only when she was rushed or pressured.

When given time to write, Lisa demonstrated facility with not only the mechanics of writing but also with rhetorical structure, diction, tone, and voice. For example, in an English essay, Lisa analyzed a quote from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. She began her essay by explaining the quote and then illustrated the quote by describing an incident in her life. Her description, however, was not simply a narrative of an event; it included explicit explanations of how the event connected to the quote. She wrote,

When Thoreau says, “Things do not change; we change,” I am reminded of things in nature that remain completely unchanged by humans, but that humans still experience throughout their lives as they change.

Lisa then described three hiking trips and how she had changed against the seemingly never-changing face of Mt. Katahdin in Maine. In the essay, Lisa demonstrated
an understanding of Thoreau’s argument, and she did so by using an example consistent with the transcendentalist’s view of the world. Furthermore, she showed an awareness of Thoreau’s writing style by using a two-part sentence structure that attempted to echo the rhythms and patterns of Thoreau.

I propose that Lisa gained facility in IM and in school-based writing because she was aware of the differences between writing for school and writing for friends and made the effort to match her writing to her audience and purpose except when pressured by time constraints. I suggest that working with students to develop this metacognitive awareness of how they switch language and literacy practices according to context may contribute to a decrease in the crossover of IM conventions in school-based writing.

Finding Success Through Engagement in Communities of Writers

Lisa’s development as a writer was explicitly supported by the culture of Arts High, where writing activities connected Lisa to a larger community of writers. At her school, writing was not limited to classroom exercises, test preparation, or assessments. As a creative writing major, she took writing classes where she experimented with a range of genres. The school also embraced writing across the curriculum, and Lisa was required to write in every class including biology, Latin, and social studies.

At Arts High, writing extended beyond the walls of the school; students were encouraged to submit their writing to competitions and to participate in the local arts community. Furthermore, the English language arts teachers modeled membership in the arts community. For example, three were practicing writers as well as certified teachers. Lisa’s playwriting teacher published a book of fiction, her poetry and creative writing teacher was an award-winning haiku poet who gave workshops around the region, and her journalism and English teacher was a former actor who directed school plays and regional theater productions. Two of her teachers were National Writing Project fellows.

If we want students to develop as writers, teachers should be active writers as well (Atwell, 1998). It is one thing to critique student writing; it is another to actively model what it means to be a writer. By being active members of the arts community, Lisa’s teachers modeled how writing extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Moreover, because her teachers were connected to the professional writing community, they had an insider’s knowledge of the art and acted as artistic mentors. Although not all teachers can and should be expected to have such a second professional life outside of teaching, asking teachers to engage in writing as writers to better understand writing instruction is consistent with the recommendations of the National Writing Project (2007).

Implications for Teaching and Final Thoughts

I suggest that Lisa’s development as a writer was influenced by the following three primary factors:

1. She was surrounded by text at home.
2. Her school helped her develop writing skills in a variety of genres and for a variety of authentic purposes.
3. Her awareness of differences between genres helped her understand the need to adapt her writing to different situations.

These aspects provide us with insight into ways we can support students who struggle with school-based writing forms. Next, I discuss instructional implications in relation to points two and three.

Lisa’s success in school-based writing and the ways she shifted language use as she used IM demonstrate that, for her, IM has not gotten in the way of developing writing skills. She was able to select words, make stylistic choices, and attend to grammar, spelling, and mechanics according to the needs of her audience, her purposes, and the requirements of genre and mode of communication. IM was one of a repertoire of literacy practices Lisa used depending on her needs. Although Lisa may not be representative of most student writers, her successes as a writer demonstrate that IM does not have to be a negative influence on writing development.

Forces larger than CMC carry more weight in the development of adolescent literacy. Although I have not explored issues of identity in this article, we must remember that a person’s literacy development is tied to
identity and membership in Discourse communities (see for example Edwards, 2005; Gustavson, 2007; Knobel, 1999; Lam, 2000; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Warschauer, 2000). Research indicates that when taking up particular literate identities, especially those tied to school, youths may experience tensions between their different Discourse communities and their roles within each community (Gee, 1999, 2004). Lisa’s development as a writer is strongly related to her identity as a white, middle class, college-bound youth. The literacy practices she takes up in school are congruent with those of her home, her friends, and her vision of her future as a member of professional and middle class society.

Given that literacy and identity are linked, for other students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, taking up schooled literacies brings risks such as a loss of voice, distanced connections to home cultures, and a changed identity. For example, Hartman (2006) showed how working class girls in an English class silenced themselves to be seen as good students, and Rodriguez’s (1982) memoir captured the personal loss that occurs as a person takes up a new language, new literacies, and new identities. The work of Fordham (1996) and Ogbu (2003) explored the negotiations, compromises, and costs students of color experience as they struggle to find their way in an educational environment that is often hostile to their home cultures, languages, and literacies.

There are no easy answers; however, providing student choice and multiple opportunities to write for a variety of authentic purposes across a variety of genres may help students make connections between their lives inside and outside of school. These opportunities can include, but should not be limited to, activities such as contests, online publications, and writing for social action.

I also call for renewed efforts to integrate writing with content area classes and across the curriculum to help young people experience a variety of writing practices. When young people are engaged in one type of writing without being able to experience other forms, either through school or elsewhere, the conventions of that one genre tend to dominate. Using writing in the content areas allows students to see how writing changes depending upon context and thus strengthens metacognitive awareness of genre.

When working with students, I urge teachers to refrain from treating the appearance of CMC conventions as errors, but instead to use those “miscues” (Goodman, 1973) as opportunities to raise students’ metacognitive awareness of their writing decisions. Simple questions such as, Why did you choose this word? or Why did you choose this spelling? provide the teacher with insight on the student’s writing process as well as increase student recognition of the authorial decision-making process.

Additionally, I encourage teachers to become active writers within traditional forms and to explore different aspects of CMC. By engaging in writing and in online communities, teachers can model the behaviors and thinking processes of writers and demonstrate that writing is something that reaches beyond the walls of the classroom and can be used to connect to the community.

Granted, Lisa’s text-rich home life, which contributed to her development as a writer, is different from that of many students. This fact, however, does not negate my argument. Instead, I suggest that the need for the above-mentioned instructional actions, while not new, is more salient than ever. Rather than passing the blame for weak writing on to parents or popular CMC forms, teachers need to create spaces for their students to experience authentic and powerful uses of texts within communities that are meaningful to them. It is time to stop complaining and worrying and turn instead to developing opportunities for students to write.

Note
When the research was conducted, Gloria E. Jacobs was at the Margaret Warner School of Education and Human Development, University of Rochester. She is now at the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. School of Education, St. John Fisher College. This article is based on a dissertation conducted under the guidance of Joanne Larson (University of Rochester), Kathryn Douthit (University of Rochester), and Kevin Leander (Vanderbilt University). The author thanks Katrina Arndt (St. John Fisher College) for her thoughtful editing and feedback. Additional thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy for their guidance.

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