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Debunking *Instant Messenger* Myths: Meeting Student Needs in a Digital Age

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As computer technologies continue to develop and as students become more digitally literate, educators are faced with the task of regularly updating their knowledge of technology. Students' digital literacies—meaning a working knowledge of how digital technologies manipulate and are manipulated by their users—present unique challenges for instructors teaching print literacy as defined by their institutions, while simultaneously holding the attention of tech-savvy students. One way that instructors have incorporated students' digital literacies with the teaching of print literacy is through the use of *computer-mediated communication* (CMC), which can mean using email, discussion boards, instant messenger, weblogs, podcasts, or other digital interfaces for one-to-one or one-to-many communication. While some suggest that certain forms of CMC are more useful than others, Instant Messenger (IM)—an Internet relay chat (IRC) medium through which users communicate via the Internet in real time—receives the most criticism. What some find troubling is that IM requires significantly different literacy practices that usually conflict with the norms of traditional print literacy.

One place where we see this conflict is in the popular press. For example, *USA Today* author Steve Friess states that IM “lends itself to linguistic shortcuts, shoddy grammar and inappropriate or absent punctuation” (D8). While Friess's statement may appear to be true when situating instant messenger conversations against Standard English norms, his choice to degrade this digital literacy practice is unsettling.

When conflicts between digital and print literacies occur in the popular press and in the classroom, they perpetuate myths about how these literacies function. One particular myth as described by Jonathan Alexander in

Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web is that the writing skills of digital youth are victimized by digital media. When students are framed as either victims or leaders, as Alexander suggests, instructors, parents, and administrators overlook the ways in which students use existing, and learn about, new literacy practices. In the discussion that follows, I explore three dominant myths that have circulated among educators with regards to the use of CMC in an effort to raise awareness about how they have affected our perceptions of IM, as an example of CMC and a commonly overlooked medium in the composition classroom. By exploring these myths and their implications as a composition instructor, I argue for a more frequent use of IM and other CMC media as a means for contributing to the academic needs of students in a digital age.

Myth #1: Technologies Are Tools for Efficient Teaching

As technologies emerge in education, instructors tend to first look at how the tools such as email, discussion boards, instant messenger, podcasts, etc. can be used to make teaching easier and more efficient; however, these tools offer the possibility of classroom learning. When we are encouraged by teachers and researchers to look at technologies as more than just tools in an effort to recognize their roles in digital literacy practices (Handa; Selfe), we can often find the means for avoiding this trend. Many have created a number of ways to extend the perception that technologies are merely tools, by examining how these tools are talked about, or the discourse used (e.g., Baron; Johnson-Eilola; Nardi and O'Day; Rouzie; Selber; Wysocki et al.). Johndan Johnson-Eilola refers to changing technologies, like IM, and how we may sometimes dismiss them as “toys” and unimportant in terms of shifts in culture and history. Not only are our cultural views of CMC framed by our discourse and perceptions of toys, but also by the terminology we assign to these technologies. When we refer to digital interfaces as “chat” rooms and our actions as chatting online through, for example, IM, it reinforces “a trivial, depthless leisure that

hardly resembles the rich interactions synchronous conferencing can foster” (Rouzie 253). Some could argue that these technologies were originally created for social communication and, therefore, deserve to have this terminology attached to them; however, doing so implies that technology is static and incapable of contributing to additional spaces and purposes within communicative exchange.

In the case of Instant Messenger, we can look at the medium as an opportunity for information to be exchanged, rather than only a tool that produces a particular type of exchange. For example, when IM is used to facilitate individual writing conferences it can be a means for both instructor and student to collaborate online in real time. At the same time, IM can be an opportunity to create teachable moments across distance barriers that would ordinarily prevent such moments from occurring outside in-class meetings. Questioning the roles that IM plays inside and outside the classroom, and being aware of the terminology we use when discussing those roles, can help us “contextualiz[e] technology so that we do not see and use composing technologies as neutral tools without effect on what we write, on who reads what we write, or on who we become through writing” (Wysocki et al.).

Instant Messenger can be more than a tool. Writing conferences through the use of IM can be places where a conference turns into composing rather than a discussion about composing. Online communication through IM gives students and instructors the opportunity to archive their discussions, whereas face-to-face writing conferences make it easy for students and instructors to misinterpret or forget the nature of the discussion when they need to recall it at a later date. While not all instant messaging software automatically archives chat sessions, Trillian keeps a detailed contact history for every user on the IM buddy list, thus making it easier for students to revisit transcripts of their conferences at any point in the writing process. Also, IM lends itself to directly teaching students the language of writing as they compose through online writing conferences. Instructor and student are unable to look at the student paper simultaneously through IM, and therefore both depend on using writing terminology to communicate effectively. These logistical

constraints on the medium can then encourage students to explore, through writing, rhetorical strategies.

Myth #2: Computer-Mediated Communication Erases the Power Roles Among its Users

One claim often made about CMC is that it gives users the opportunity to modify their identities, thus erasing the power roles that would normally exist in face-to-face exchanges. That is, the identities of instructors and students are easily defined in the physical space of the classroom, but when we use IM we are likely to see student identities that reflect their personal lives outside the classroom. For example, instructor Kathryn Wymer sees students’ differing, classroom identities and social identities using IM. She explains, “[S]tudents use new technologies as a way to express themselves and their individuality. They develop identities related to those technologies and those identities are not always the ones they would like to bring into the classroom” (C2).

Though it is possible for students to intentionally modify aspects of their identities, due to the social nature of CMC, erasing power roles that are reflective of those identities is difficult. In the classroom, CMC is facilitated by the instructor, and students inevitably realize that the performance in these discussions is monitored. Against our best efforts as instructors, the institutional framework in which we teach prevents us from appearing as anything other than authority figures, regardless of the communication medium. Bill Anderson refers to class discussions in online forums as places where students sometimes feel scrutiny from their instructors who appear to be always evaluative and from their fellow classmates who appear to be more knowledgeable, which affects when and how they post in the environment (119).

The nature of IM and the role it plays in the classroom is heavily dependent on the instructor’s perception of its value for meeting students online. Screen names of students like NDSoccerAsh and delooter863 may suggest identities that are contrary to the identities we see from students face to face, but this is not to say that we cannot see these identities as useful for learning how they influence student literacy practices. One student

who may appear to have a withdrawn identity in class may unconsciously signal to the instructor a lack of interest in the subject matter; however, seeing a more engaged identity through the medium of IM can help the instructor better understand that student's literacy skills.

Bridging the Identity Gap in Classrooms

To negotiate these power roles more effectively online, Anderson suggests a number of actions that educators take when communicating with students in online environments: (1) encourage students to reflect critically on their digital literacy practices; (2) develop skills for recognizing the difference between what is said and what is implied online; and (3) be willing to reflect on personal biases toward the medium (122). Though user identities are considered in a variety of media, the identities created through IM are even more crucial than other more widely used forms of CMC. Given that IM was originally created for social communication between users with relatively equal power roles (i.e., it wasn't originally created for student-teacher conversations), adding it to the number of media used to facilitate student-teacher communication requires some adjustments.

While students may be already capable of communicating fluidly with IM, instructors may struggle with the medium because they have yet to acquire the digital literacy skills needed to communicate effectively. One aspect of IM that may be disconcerting to novice users is the amount of time that can elapse between posts. Experienced users are aware that posts may not occur with the same immediacy as oral conversation because the medium implies that users are multi-tasking during online exchanges. Novice users may not feel comfortable letting time elapse between when a message appears on screen and when they choose to respond. Also, students whose IM literacy practices are acceptable when communicating with friends may not be aware that those same literacy practices can be perceived adversely by their instructors.

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However, the potential for miscommunication between instructor and student through instant messaging is likely to be compensated for when both parties agree on acceptable means of exchange. In this case, IM can serve as a unique place where students learn the value of audience awareness in their writing, and instructors develop their digital literacies.

Myth #3: Computer-Mediated Communication is a Distraction in the Classroom

CMC can be seen as a distraction when it is used in computer-aided classrooms. In particular, IM can even create problems for instructors who are avid technology users. Johnson-Eilola, an advocate for using computer labs for the composition classroom, will admit that students who instant message friends outside the classroom make him want to look for a more traditional classroom, "one with chairs and desks that we can arrange in a circle and just, you know, *talk to each other without distractions...*" (24). Like Johnson-Eilola, many of us have felt this sense of frustration while teaching in computer labs. These frustrations should be considered while recognizing that the traditional role of teacher as the "fountain of knowledge" is no longer applicable when we teach students that bring a variety of digital literacies to the classroom (Frechette). Rather than avoiding technologies that may change this traditional role, it is useful to consider ways in which the technologies can help instructors facilitate better classroom practices that are more attuned to students' needs. After all, many of us will agree that time spent policing students' practices is time taken away from our efforts to effectively teach (Fletcher).

Instant Messenger does not have to be a distraction. Rather than looking at IM as a space for distraction we can look at how it can become a valuable space that emphasizes collaboration over evaluation, whereas other online conferencing methods, such as an electronic whiteboard do not. In an electronic whiteboard, as used by Beth L. Hewett, both instructor and student can make marks on a

a digital paper that is viewed in real time by both users. The instructor or student can highlight or mark on the paper and both users can view the updates with minimal delays. Though tools like electronic whiteboard are useful to the online writing conference, such tools can still resemble the comments that are placed on a paper document, which suggests evaluative feedback. IM does not project this type of feedback, which makes conferences within this medium appear more collaborative between student and instructor. The absence of such evaluative cues gives the student the opportunity to take more control over his or her paper.

Implications for Classroom Practices

Today and Tomorrow

As instructors develop their digital literacies, they may need to make adjustments by acknowledging that their learning strategies differ considerably from their students,' as a result of growing up with different technologies. When we recognize that our students may resist our teaching strategies when they conflict with students' learning strategies, it can help us understand the resistance we feel when the roles are reversed. James Gee mentions a similar point in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* when he describes his frustration and feelings of inferiority at the lack of ease in developing new gaming strategies with his son. He mentions that students who are well equipped in gaming and other digital literacy practices do not learn (as earlier generations did) with traditional cognitive science-based pedagogy. Given Gee's views, instructors can look at their struggles with new digital literacy practices as opportunities to enhance their learning styles as they learn with their students.

To meet the challenge of acquiring literacy practices associated with IM, users (like the novice gamers mentioned in Gee's piece) must be prepared to develop a slightly different set of learning skills to negotiate new medium-specific tasks. For first time instructors using the medium it may not be clear as to what the expectations should be for communicating; therefore, time for experimenting is crucial for both students and instructors. Framing the medium among other classroom practices is essential for an effective use of IM. Establishing norms

for instructor availability, language use, response time, initiating conversations, closing conversations, etc. are all areas that should be open to critical analysis as students and instructors navigate through the medium.

Instructors and students can learn navigational strategies through IM with any of number of experiences. For example, during IM conversations novice users may find it difficult to use the medium when two threaded discussions take place in the same chat window. This can happen as a novice user types a response to a posed question and the experienced user begins another conversational thread before the novice user has responded. The first reaction to this IM-specific communication strategy may be to delete the response before posting in order to answer the most immediate question. This becomes a problem because the experienced user is still expecting a response to both questions. When communicating with students who are experienced IM users, it is likely that they will expect their instructors to keep up with multiple threads, which is why it is important to discuss varying digital literacy levels as a class. When educators facilitate these discussions they can both learn from and teach students who bring multiple digital literacies to the composition classroom.

As with all new media, IM in the composition classroom should be heavily examined prior to, during, and after it is incorporated through practice. Recognizing the myths surrounding commonly overlooked media is not only necessary when evaluating their uses, but essential if teachers and researchers intend on keeping abreast of changes in technology. The myths that govern popular beliefs about technology and its effect on literacies are likely to continue; however, through reflection and practice the influences of such myths will dissipate over time. Embracing the challenge to acquire new digital literacy practices provides opportunities for instructors to empathize with students who may feel the same frustration when navigating among multiple academic literacies. Further research in the field of education on IM and other CMC may continue to reveal alternative strategies for meeting the needs of our students in a digital age.

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