

## A Digital Education for Students: Institutionalizing the Development of Digital Literacy

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Progress, the long-desired and slowly attained goal of a forward-moving nation, has shaped and spurred our country to be technologically innovative. As a result of this, the most recent generation has been exposed to a radically-rapid rise in digital consumerism. These digital devices have been accepted as educational aides, as they enrich the learning environment with a modern approach to collecting and producing information. However, they have also become extremely popular for their entertainment and socializing capacities, which has given rise to the concept of digital literacy. As an increasing number of students are becoming exceedingly computer literate, schools must teach proper methods of digital literacy so that they might complement, not compete against traditional academic literacy practices.

The stereotypical classroom, a room brimming full of desks, chairs, blackboards, and a teacher, has long been proven an adequate means of educating students. However, these traditional teaching settings have been questioned as to reaching their full educational potential in the face of modern-day technology: both failing to capture the attention of students and neglecting to provide a digital education. Before the age of digital devices and the Internet, traditional teaching methods were suitable for the learning environment. The staple subjects: mathematics, literature, science, history, and foreign languages, were taught in this environment because these subjects represented the general spread of information a student needed to know. Although those staple classes are still required, the upcoming generations of students need to be educated in additional subject matter, digital interfacing skills. Without these skills, students cannot be expected to succeed in the networked world of today. Undoubtedly many children are taught these skills in the household, but for students not given that advantage, the school must take responsibility for giving their students a universal, general knowledge. This will prevent the formation of a complete social stratum between the wealthy, able to afford digital communication devices in the household, and the poor, unable to afford such devices. Regardless of economic standing, every student must have access to digital devices and must be taught the proper way to use them.

While bridging the gap between old-age and new-age learning techniques, the inclusion of digital studies into the classroom will significantly improve the quality of education. In addition to providing students access to a seemingly endless amount of information online, digital studies will also expose students to an array of digital linguistic practices. The digital language created and continually shaped by these practices is frequently found while “plugged in” and must be understood to completely appreciate what digital language has to offer.

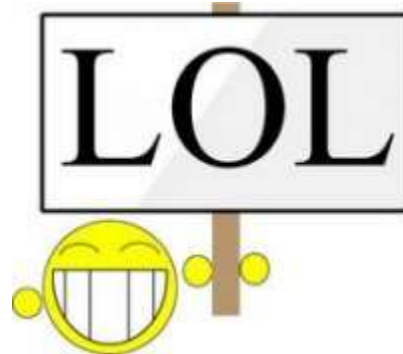
Perhaps before attempting to reconstruct the learning environment to promote the value of digital literacy, it would be prudent to give detail to the malleable meaning of digital language and its relationship with literacy.

Gunther Kress defines literacy as “the term to use when we make messages using letters as the means of recording that message” (Kress 23). A message is only intelligible when its readers hold a similar concept of literacy, when they give the same values to the same symbols. So with that stated, it is writers and their readers which mutually create and enforce a universal sense of proper language usage. These standards are easy to control in traditional print literature because of the confines of print equipment, but are not as easily maintained with the infiltration of digital devices into daily life. The interfaces of digital devices provide databases of obscure

marks, symbols of foreign languages, and the ability to create personal symbols. Arguably, the writing options of digital devices are bounded within the abilities of the device, but they definitely have more options than traditional print.

"a set of characters on a keyboard determines productive linguistic capacity" (Crystal 26)

Undoubtedly the freedom of language on digital devices, though having to stay within the confines of the device's abilities, gives its user a creative control over language usage. David Crystal poses the following questions: "Will the Internet herald a new era of technobabble? Will linguistic creativity and flexibility be lost as globalization imposes sameness?" (Crystal 2). These two consecutive queries have inherently different views of the future of literacy. One option, the "era of technobabble" will lead to the coining of a new online language, "Netspeak". The other potential occurrence, an imposition of "sameness", gives way to the acceptance of a singular and universally-held definition of literacy. Crystal's concern, much like any scholar curious as to the future of digital language, points out the distinct boundary between institutionalized language and its freer form. Benefits are to be gleaned from both as each provides its speaker a different hold over language. Creativity in language allows the speaker to experiment and make the language one's own, yet may fail to convey a message to a large mass who have little or no understanding of their "technobabble". An institutionalized digital language takes away from the freedom of the writer, but allows a greater number of readers to engage in the writing, creating a wider audience as well as a more respectable sense of authorship. Learning the lingo of the online world gives the user a sense of belonging and competence in their digital worlds. Refusing to learn Netspeak alienates a user from their instant message cadre, their World of Warcraft guild, their Second Life alter ego. Language makes a person. So with that said, the ways users harness language allow them to create a separate self, one of the online regions, which may act and speak completely differently from their real time self.



For students, this ability to explore language through a digital medium has a significant impact on their formation of writing habits and interaction with others. Angela Thomas addresses this issue in a series of interviews with constantly-online teens. One girl interviewed noted: "the way I talk-write in cyber started flowing over into my social life. I've found myself writing notes to people in real life with stuff like 'brb' and 'irl' in them! \*smile\*" (Thomas 41). In addition to transitioning her online speaking patterns to those of daily life, she replaces the physical aspects of communicating, which are usually done unconsciously, with verbal signifiers: "\*smile\*". The girl goes on to reveal: "it's much harder irl after being on here. ☺ You have more time to react here, to think out what you say...and when communicating irl, there is no real plan-out time

there” (Thomas 46). From her statements, it appears the world of online conversing has become a safe place to interact with others. She does not worry about inserting grammatically and orthographically-correct thoughts into a conversation. The issue of physicality is remedied with an asterisked gesture, and emotion is supplied with an emoticon. These patterns, while not problematic in a chat forum where the audience is undoubtedly fluent in “Netspeak”, are constantly reinforced online, and are in danger of being carried into other social atmospheres, real life verbal encounters as well as in the education system. As the girl noted, she involuntarily digressed into online speech patterns when writing notes to her friends. The trend to do so has attracted the attention and concern of several writers, notably Mark Bauerlein and Naomi Baron.

"A number proclaim that email, instant messaging, and text messaging have created a whole new language, apart from standard English" (Baron 162)

This generation has been heralded as “The Dumbest Generation” by Mark Bauerlein, as well as the generation of “linguistic whateverism” by Naomi Baron. In defense of her description of this generation of “linguistic whateverism”, Baron asserts that this:

generation of language users...does not care about a whole range of linguistic rules. Whether the issue is spelling or punctuation, verb agreement or pronoun choice, there seems to be a growing sense of laissez-faire when it comes to linguistic consistency. (Baron 169)

Bauerlein provides a potential explanation for generational decline in “linguistic consistency” with the statement: “The social settings of adolescence actually conspire against verbal maturity” (155). The users are not solely to blame for their degraded literacy practices; their constant exposure to flagrant disuse of grammar and spelling rules in the “social settings of adolescence” is the greater cause. With the influence of setting and peer-related behavior on a student’s linguistic practices, we are now at a pivotal point in the present and future of the educational system. From our next actions, the definition of literacy and concept of linguistics will be affirmed and practiced. At this point, in order to provide a clear and coherent linguistic example for students, educators can approach the outbreak of Netspeak in several ways. One extreme includes abolishing Netspeak and Internet lingo as a threat to “traditional language”. Another, more moderate approach, is teaching the appropriation of Netspeak in the proper setting.

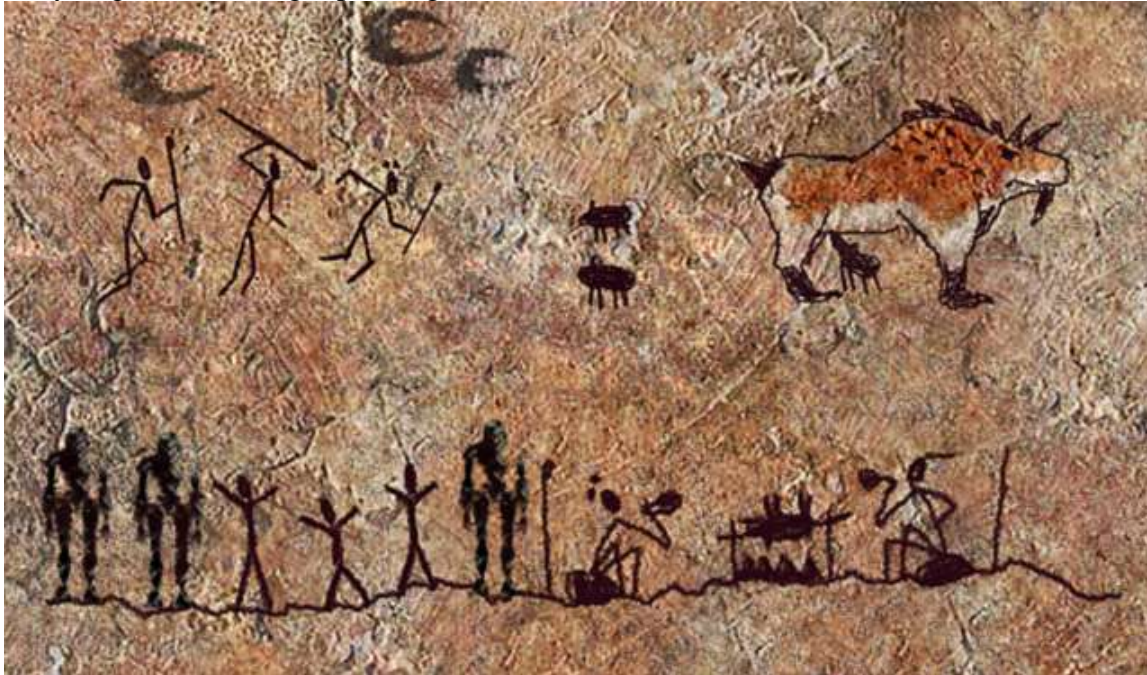
The First Scenario: Abolishing Netspeak

This scenario revolves around a prescriptivist outlook, which David Crystal summarizes as:

the view that one variety of language has an inherently higher value than others, and that this ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community. It is an authoritarian view, espoused for English in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, and propounded especially in relation to usage in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The favoured variety is usually a version of the standard written language which most closely reflects literary style. (67)

With the claim that traditional literacy practices must be upheld, educators must not tolerate the use of internet lingo or digital slang in the classroom; they have no formalized academic merit, so should not be taught to students. In addition to their lack of academic merit, Internet lingo and emoticons must be seen as degradative to language. The meaning of words is lessened as

abbreviations and pictures are allowed to take their place. Through their use of Netspeak, readers and writers revert to less-sophisticated and ill-educated verbal and visual transmissions of ideas. They might as well begin painting caves.



To counter the linguistically-degrading effects of digital immersion in Netspeak, educators must emphasize the value of traditional literary merit: being easily understood by one's readers, and therefore making a clear and recognizable argument. In order to eliminate the improper vagaries of Netspeak, educators must differentiate between the crass language of the internet and the language of the classroom. In addition, educators should encourage the use of traditional language practices online so that they can acceptably address a peer or instructor online, such as through email. Students fail to do this and only resort to Netspeak because the basic components of an effective email: a clear subject, a respectfully address and closing, and a brief, but informative message, are not widely taught or reinforced in classrooms. Since the Netspeak variation of language is becoming more prevalent and subconsciously entrenched into adolescent minds, it is imperative to recognize the dangers it poses to traditional language and act to eradicate Netspeak altogether. The place to do this is at the school.

"Being literate means using text for culturally meaningful purposes within culturally meaningful activities"  
(Jacobs 205)

#### The Second Scenario: Teaching Netspeak

Perhaps with the correct training and reinforcement, students should not be forced to abandon Netspeak, but can be taught to use it only in an appropriate setting, informally online.

The abbreviations and lingo that partially make up Netspeak are similar to the usage of verbal shortcuts in a workplace. For their setting, the abbreviations are helpful and add to a communal environment of mutual understanding. The abbreviations, however, are limited to usage in the work, or web, environment. To ensure users of Netspeak will conscientiously use

their internet lingo only online, users must become hyperaware of the context they implement Netspeak into and the social situations that do and do not call for it. Instead of attempting to omit digital language and entirely preserve traditional language, with the correct instruction, each variation can be beneficially used in different situations. Allowing this to take place and supporting it in schools would also serve to give digital language a definition of its own. Being able to be taught would partially rob Netspeak of its creative license as a mysterious language of only the computer-literate, but would regulate it to the extent that all users could be familiar with or well-versed in it.

When discussing the use of digital devices, it is crucial to make the distinction between generational concepts of utility. Regardless of a machine's abilities, its users will impose their own preferences on them, rendering the machine a tool, a means to an end. The exact definition of this "end" varies widely: from educational aide to a social platform, even to a means of idly passing the time. The latter two uses of digital devices, for social and entertainment purposes, lowers the credibility of digital devices as mandatory school materials, yet with the proper instruction of how to avoid these distractions they may be proven as effective and revolutionary additions to classrooms. Since the use of a device is defined by its users, we have the power to associate computers, not with Facebook or World of Warcraft, but with learning tools. We have the ability to explore and help create alternate forms of language. As David Crystal said, "I do not see the Internet being the death of languages, but the reverse" (275). The future of the definition of literacy is in your hands. Text, tweet, and virtually chat, but be aware of the implications your spelling and grammatical choices have over the concept of literacy as we know it and how our future will interpret it.

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