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Speak Out

Does text messaging hurt student writing skills?

"... there's little to no evidence to support the idea that Jill and her BFF are headed for a life of flunking and monosyllables."



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

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.

YES

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.