

## Digitalk as Community

*Students' online communications provide an engaging platform for discussing audience, purpose, and voice. Samples of digitalk and classroom activities are included.*

**A**udience. Purpose. Voice. For years I have tried to develop my students' understanding of these basic, yet complex, concepts. What I didn't realize until recently, however, is that teenagers of the digital age already bring knowledge of audience, purpose, and voice to the classroom. They have developed their understandings as members of a community of digital writers, a community that is grounded in *digitalk* (Turner, "Digitalk: A New Literacy").

Teachers, parents, and popular media do not always accept the nonstandard linguistic practices of digitalk as legitimate. However, I see digitalk as a complex and fascinating combination of written and conversational languages that adolescents use when they text, when they instant message (IM), and when they participate in social networks. Recently I shared this view with a group of diverse teens who attended a workshop on digital citizenship. Their raised eyebrows questioned my valuing their written talk, yet I pressed on, hoping to convince them of their competencies as writers and language users.

"I would like to introduce you to two writers, Lily and Michael," I said as I projected the following conversation onto a screen at the front of the room.

**Lily:** heyyyy (:

**Michael:** wasz gud B.I.G.?

**Lily:** nm, chillennn; whatchu up too?

**Michael:** WatchIn da gam3

**Lily:** mm, y quien ta jugandoo?

**Michael:** Yank33s nd naTi0naLs.

**Lily:** WHAAAATT A JOKEEEEE, dime como yankees lostt againtt them yesterdaii.

**Michael:** i n0e, th3y suCk.

**Lily:** & the nationalsss won like only 16 games . . . one of the worst teams homieegee.

**Michael:** t3lL m3 b0uT it, i b3T y0u flv3 d0lLaRs th3Y g00nA l0s3.

**Lily:** AHA, naw gee thats easy \$ for youu ! =p

**Michael:** lol i waS plAyInG wl y0u. =D

**Lily:** lol imma talk to you later . . . i got pizzaa awaitinggg meeeee (;

**Michael:** iight pe3cE

I asked the class the same question I ask teachers when I share this chat in professional development sessions. "Who can read and understand this conversation?" When I work with adults, few raise their hands. In this group of teenagers, every student nodded affirmatively.

"Would someone please translate it for us?" A volunteer read the lines easily, switching them to a standard form. After noting his ability to read, comprehend, and translate this message, something many adults cannot do with ease, I attempted to shift the students' view of this series of instant messages. Rather than seeing it as talk between two people, I wanted them to see it as text, as words written by authors for an audience.

"Who are these writers?" I asked the class. "Can you make some judgments about them based

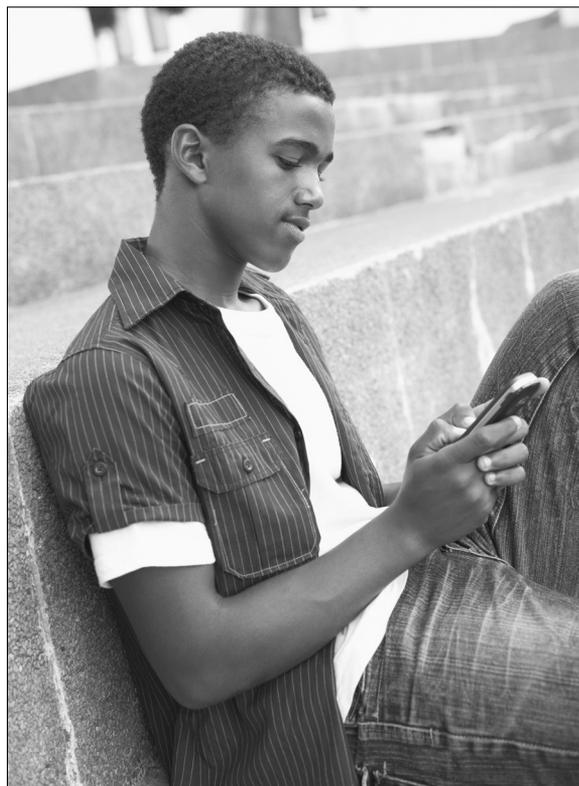
on the language they use?” Twenty pairs of eyes quickly scanned the conversation, and then 20 adolescents turned to their partners and began to talk, easily drawing inferences about the personality, the ethnicity, and, in some cases, the hometown of Lily and Michael.

Lily and Michael represent a community of individuals who have developed and continue to negotiate their own set of conventions. They are teenagers who experiment with language, manipulating Standard Written English (SWE) in ways that reflect both the norms of their community and their individual needs for self-expression. Their use of digitalk ensures acceptance into and facilitates participation in a digital community of adolescent peers. That digitalk is often not understood, nor even accepted, by adults emphasizes the community membership even more strongly. As a community of writers, users of digitalk bring knowledge of audience, purpose, and voice to the classroom, competence that teachers can harness in the teaching of writing.

### Language, Identity, and Agency

In his discussion of literacy, James Paul Gee identifies the roles of language and identity within a culture or community. He explains that individuals possess multiple discourses, which include language as well as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (3). These “ways of being in the world” lead to “socially situated identities” (3). In other words, identity develops from the interactions an individual has within what Etienne Wenger calls *communities of practice*, or groups of individuals who share common interests and learn from each other.

Adolescents in the 21st century have established communities of practice in a virtual world. As these virtual communities evolve, they adopt literacy practices that must be negotiated by individual members. Because digital writers often break from SWE, they have the ability to adopt language that defines insiders from outsiders (Cherny; Crystal). Linguist David Crystal claims that this practice in Internet communities helps to “demonstrate their solidarity by evolving (consciously or unconsciously) measures of identity” (60). Like most social situations where there are norms and rules, “People who fail to conform . . . risk . . . being excluded from the



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group” (71). Individuals can be marked as outsiders immediately by the language they use.

Adopting the register of a community contributes to *groupness* (Moje and Luke). Manipulation of the language, or what composition theorists call *voice*, allows for individuality within the group discourse. This process offers adolescents agency (Moje and Luke), an ability to choose their level of engagement and participation that is often lacking in school settings. In their digital writing, adolescents decide how to represent themselves via language. In their academic work this choice is severely limited, causing a disconnect between their literate lives outside of school and the expectations of writing in school.

Adolescents, empowered by the community of their peers to experiment, have embraced the creativity afforded by the nonstandard language of digitalk and internalized the structures that allow for shared meaning within their communities of practice. Interestingly, teens make authorial choices when they use digitalk in their social communication. They attend to audience and purpose, and they attempt to capture authentic voice in their writing. In many cases, they manipulate conventions of SWE to achieve these goals. However, many adolescents have not considered consciously that they make these decisions. When prompted

to reflect on their texting, instant messaging, and social networking, they might be surprised to find that they behave like authors.

### Uncovering Audience, Purpose, and Voice in Digitalk

Lily and Michael are clearly members of the same language community. They easily communicate using nonstandard conventions. However, what is striking about their conversation is the *difference* between the two authors. Each has adapted language to project a voice that might be difficult to capture using SWE. Lily's blend of Spanish and English, her choice to reverse emoticons, and her use of all caps and symbols (e.g., &) mark her onscreen personality. Likewise, Michael's choice to replace *e* with 3 and his use of informal phonological (e.g., da) and syntactic (e.g., they gonna, L33T omitted) constructions help to develop his voice. An outsider reading Lily's and Michael's words may recognize many of these linguistic markers as conventions of digitalk (Turner, "Digitalk: Community"). A member of a community of practice that embraces digitalk is able to make assumptions about these individuals based on the language choices they make.

When I asked the adolescents participating in the workshop on digital citizenship to make judgments about Lily and Michael based on their language, they easily characterized the writers. For example, one student determined that Michael was either black or Latino because of his use of the phrase "wusz gud," a commonly used greeting among members of this student's own community. Other students concurred, pointing out that Lily mixed Spanish with English and that Michael appeared to understand the dual languages.

In this group of ethnically diverse teens, no one questioned these inferences about Lily and Michael. A similar comment related to gender, however, sparked debate. One group of students suggested that Lily is a tomboy.

**Student:** She's a tomboy because she was like, "ah gee, that's easy money for you." And she was like, "homey" . . .

**Me:** So you're saying her language is more masculine?

**Student:** Yeah.

Almost immediately another group countered that, on the contrary, she seems very feminine. This group suggested that Lily is "energetic and very happy" because she uses emoticons and "she ODs on the letters at the end" of some of her words. A third group made the case for "how strong she is," stating that Lily is opinionated. These students said that "she expresses very strongly in capital letters" her view on the Yankees and Nationals. The debate came to a close when one young man pointed out that "text language is never gender specific—because anybody can use anything."

In these ruminations the teens moved quickly from making judgments based on content and diction to drawing inferences from the conventions of digitalk used by Lily and Michael. They were able to deconstruct the language choices to construct identities for the writers. To accomplish this task, they drew on their own experience as digitalk users.

### "So we're authors now?"

As the students deconstructed the text produced by Lily and Michael, the conversation turned to their own use of language in various settings. They use some nonstandard conventions in their digital writing for purposes of efficiency. For example, several of the teens in the workshop noticed that Lily and Michael used periods at the ends of their lines. One class member said, "It fascinates me that they actually put periods and that they have punctuation." When we discussed this feature of language, the students acknowledged that the end punctuation serves little purpose in conveying the meaning, and they themselves omit it to send messages more quickly. They suggested similar reasons for not using capital letters in their digitalk.

Breaking from these standard conventions seems to be motivated by a goal of efficiency. Many of the language choices that these teens make, however, contribute to what the students themselves call "style" or "voice." In describing Michael, one individual said, "He has really created his own style of texting. I feel like everybody has their own style and their own kind of language, the way they text. But everybody understands it. . . . Everybody who texts with me knows that [the person] texting is me."

Many of the other students agreed, suggesting that Michael might have a "signature" of using

the numeral 3 in place of *e*. Several people shared their own digitalk tags, including the use of random smileys, the addition of “digits,” or the use of short words to begin conversations. When I asked two friends in the room how they knew who was texting, without looking at the number or the name, one boy said, “Oh there’s a way I know it’s him. You almost hear his voice when he texts.”

These teens make purposeful choices that contribute to voice in their digital writing. In virtual communication, they know how to make their voices unique. They manipulate language to achieve this goal, and their digital communities reward these choices and embrace the creativity.

Similarly, these writers understand audience and purpose. During our conversation, several students acknowledged that they text differently with their parents than they do with their friends. The language they use represents their relationships, and they know that adults live outside of their community of practice that includes digitalk. Inside that teen community, however, “You got to be cool.” One girl explained the influence of her community: “I realized when I first started texting, I used English, correct Standard English. And my friends would be like why do you write like that? And they started teaching me.”

Peer feedback drives many decisions of these writers. The students noted that it is important for them to project enthusiasm so that they do not “sound plain and boring.” If a writer is not enthusiastic, they said, people “probably don’t want to talk to you.” These teens clearly understand that their digital writing is “not a professional thing.” As one class member said, “We’re not writing a paper. We’re writing text.”

Despite all this knowledge that students brought to our conversation, they appeared incredulous when I pointed out to them that they “do the things that writers do.” One young man asked cynically, “So we’re authors now?” His comment reveals an important prejudice that these students possess, a prejudice against their own literacy practices.

The participants in this workshop made it clear that digitalk is meant for people that they “already formed a relationship with.” With their friends, they use the nonstandard language constantly. As one student said, “It’s like drinking water.” Because they text and IM more than they write formally,

some of the students admitted that they make errors in school essays. One girl suggested that writing in digitalk “becomes a habit. But then when we’re writing a formal essay, it becomes a bad habit.”

The idea that digitalk is “bad” highlights the disconnect between the community of these writers outside of school and the expectations for writing in school. Digitalk allows teens to experiment, to make decisions that are tied to audience, purpose, and voice. If teens have the opportunity to step back from their digital writing, to see value in the choices they make, and to see themselves as authors of text, they may begin to recognize their competencies as writers. Teachers can facilitate this process.

## Writing in School

In their digital communities of practice, teens do the things that authors do. They manipulate language for a purpose. Part of that purpose is related to speed and efficiency, yet part of it is an attempt to capture individual voice. Their proficiency with digitalk comes from the feedback they receive from real audiences; their peers validate their language choices, and they also serve as models for language use. At its core, digitalk invites authors to create, to manipulate, and to use language to mark their identities. Conventions are not prescribed. Rules can be broken or re-created. The freedom encouraged by digitalk stands in stark contrast to the norms of SWE, the writing accepted in school and the larger society.

In the digital world adolescents choose the communities to which they belong; they decide to what extent they will engage in the norms of those communities; they determine the level of language play that will mark their individual identities. In school, however, this power to choose often does not exist, and tasks assigned have little value to teens beyond the assessment. Elizabeth B. Moje, Melanie Overby, Nicole Tysvaer, and Karen Morris argue that students must develop “metadiscursivity” (112), or the ability to consciously participate in various discourse communities. These authors recognize that “some literacy activities may be more motivating and engaging to youth than others” (112), and school tasks are often “demotivating” (112). Asking students to include out-of-school writing, such as text messages, IMs, and social network posts, as part of their portfolio in school would value these discourse practices and the

language that is associated with them. Adolescents could begin to see their communications as *real* writing and appreciate their individual competencies.

In addition, helping students to articulate the choices they make in their out-of-school digitalk may bring to consciousness what they do automatically in their digital communication. In another *English Journal* article I suggest some ideas for teaching students to code-switch (Turner, “Flipping the Switch”). The goal of these activities is to ask students to think about the language they use in various contexts. The following series of activities expands the conversation about language use in an attempt to bring to adolescents the realization that they are indeed writers when they communicate digitally.

**Activity 1: Translate a Text**

From their writing via text, IM, or social network, students select a line written in digitalk. Though it legitimizes the writing they do out of school to have them access a real conversation, written for a real audience, they can also compose a line during class time.

Students write the line at the top of the “Translate a Text” handout (see fig. 1), which includes four different settings and audiences. They then translate the message into language that would be appropriate in each of the four contexts.

Finally, students reflect on this task by answering the question, “What did you notice about your use of language?” This reflection can lead into a discussion about audience and purpose. Students may notice that not all messages are appropriate for all contexts; they may also note how their language becomes more formal in certain situations.

**Activity 2: (de)Constructing Two Digital Authors**

Share with students a conversation between two digital writers. This conversation might be provided by the students themselves, or it might be writing from outside the class community (e.g., Lily and Michael). Ask students to deconstruct the text, looking for language cues that reveal the personalities or identities of the authors.

**FIGURE 1.** Digitalk Activity

Translate a Text	
Text or IM written in digitalk:	
How would you say/write it in this situation or with these people?	
A teacher or principal in a classroom	
A friend in the lunchroom	
A reverend, priest, or rabbi in a place of worship	
Your sibling or parent at dinner	

What do you notice about your use of language?

This activity can be isolated to the text itself, where the students discuss what they infer about the writers based on their use of language. For an adaptation, teachers can provide students with an outline of a body (see, for example, Winnipeg School Division No. 1), and ask students to construct one of the authors, labeling the figure with words, images, and clothing that represent the individual they select to analyze.

Regardless of the mode of analysis, class discussion should focus on *why* the students made the inferences that they did. What features of language led them to make their judgments? During this conversation, the teacher can facilitate students' reflection on their own language choices.

### Activity 3: "I don't want to be stereotyping, but . . ."

This activity requires teachers to partner with a colleague from another region to collect lines of text that use digitalk from both geographies. Show the lines one at a time to the class, and ask them to determine whether a student from their school or the other school wrote the text. Students should defend their decisions by examining the writing for potential audience and purpose and by identifying language choices that contribute to voice. It is likely that students will make judgments that stereotype the two communities; these inferences can be discussed, focusing on how language use contributes to community identity and personal voice.

### Digitalk and School Writing

These activities allowed the diverse students attending the digital symposium to have deep conversations about the power of language and their purposes as writers in their digital communities.

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Reflections by these teens indicated that they had never before thought about language choices in their digital communication. After discussing Lily and Michael and their own texts, IMs, and social network posts, they began to see the writing that they do both in school and out of school in a new light. These adolescents bring to the classroom knowledge of audience, purpose, and voice. By making them aware of these competencies, teachers can harness students' strengths as writers in digital communities to improve school writing. 

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

With the increasing popularity among today's teens of email, texting, and instant messaging, a recognizable change has occurred in the language that students use in their writing. "Audience, Purpose, and Language Use in Electronic Messages" explores the language of electronic messages and how it affects other writing. Further, it explores the freedom and creativity for using Internet abbreviations for specific purposes and examines the importance of a more formal style of writing based on audience. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/audience-purpose-language-electronic-159.html>