Our Semi-literate Youth? Not So Fast

By Andrea A. Lunsford

Two stories about young people, and especially college-age students, are circulating widely today. One script sees a generation of twitterers and texters, awash in self indulgence and narcissistic twaddle, most of it riddled with errors. The other script doesn't diminish the effects of technology, but it presents young people as running a ratrace that is fueled by the Internet and its toys, anxious kids who are inundated with mountains of indigestible information yet obsessed with making the grade, with success, with coming up with the "next big thing" but who lack the writing and speaking skills they need to do so.

No doubt there's a grain of truth in both these depictions. But the doomsayers who tell these stories are turning a blind eye on compelling alternative narratives. As one who has spent the last 30+ years studying the writing of college students, I see a different picture. For those who think Google is making us stupid and Facebook is frying our brains, let me sketch that picture in briefly.

In 2001, I and my colleagues began a longitudinal study of writing at Stanford, following a randomly-selected group of 189 students from their first day on campus through one year beyond graduation; in fact, I am still in touch with a number of the students today. These students—about 12 percent of that year's class—submitted the writing they did for their classes and as much of their out-of-class writing as they wanted to an electronic database, along with their comments on those pieces of writing. Over the years, we collected nearly 15,000 pieces of student writing: lab reports, research essays, PowerPoint presentations, problem sets, honors theses, email and textings (in 11 languages), blogs and journals, poems, documentaries, fan fiction, even a full-length play entitled "Hip-Hopera." While we are still coding these pieces of writing, several results emerged right away. First, these students were writing A LOT, both in class and out, though they were most interested in and committed to writing out of class, what we came to call "life writing," than they were in their school assignments. Second, they were increasingly aware of those to whom they were writing and adjusted their writing styles to suit the occasion and the audience. Third, they wanted their writing to count for something; as they said to us over and over, good writing to them was performative, the kind of writing that "made something happen in the world." Finally, they increasingly saw writing as collaborative, social, and participatory rather than solitary.

So yes, these students did plenty of emailing, and texting; they were online a good part of every day; they joined social networking sites enthusiastically. But rather than leading to a new illiteracy, these activities seemed to help them develop a range or *repertoire* of writing styles, tones, and formats along with a range of abilities. Here's a student sending a text message to friends reporting on what she's doing on an internship in Bangladesh (she refers in the first few

words to the fact that power has been going on and off ever since she arrived): "Next up: words stolen from before the power went out****~~~~~Whadda-ya-know, I am back in Dhaka from the villages of Mymensingh. I'm familiar enough with the villages now that it's harder to find things that really surprise me, though I keep looking ☺." In an informal message, this student feels free to use fragments ("Next up"), slang ("whadda-ya-know"), asterisks and tildas for emphasis, and a smiley.

Now look at a brief report she sends to the faculty adviser for her internship in Bangladesh: " In June of 2003, I traveled to Dhaka, Bangladesh for 9 weeks to intern for Grameen Bank. Grameen Bank is a micro-credit institution which seeks to alleviate poverty by providing access to financial capital. Grameen Bank provides small loans to poor rural women, who then use the capital to start small businesses and sustain income generating activities." Here the student is all business, using formal academic style to begin her first report. No slang, no use of special-effects markings: just the facts, ma'am. In the thousands of pieces of student writing we have examined, we see students moving with relative ease across levels of style (from the most informal to the most formal): these young people are for the most part aware of the context and audience for their writing—and they make the adjustments necessary to address them effectively.

Ah, you say, but these are students at Stanford—the crème de la crème. And I'll agree that these students were all very keen, very bright. But they were not all strong writers or communicators (though our study shows that they all improved significantly over the five years of the study) and they did not all come from privilege—in fact, a good number far from it. Still, they were part of what students on this campus call the "Stanford bubble." So let's look beyond that bubble to another study I conducted with researcher Karen Lunsford. About 18 months ago, we gathered a sample of first-year student writing from across all regions of the United States, from two-year and four-year schools, big schools and small schools, private and public. Replicating a study I'd conducted twenty-five years ago, we read a random sample of these student essays with a fine-tooth eye, noting every formal error in every piece of writing. And what did we find? First, that the length of student writing has increased nearly three-fold in these 25 years, corroborating the fact that students today are writing more than ever before. Second, we found that while error patterns have changed in the last twenty-five years, the ratio of errors to number of words has remained stable not just for twenty-five years but for the last 100 years. In short, we found that students today certainly make errors—as all writers do—but that they are making no more errors than previous studies have documented. Different errors, yes—but more errors, no.

We found, for example, that spelling—the most prevalent error by over 300% some 25 years ago—now presents much less of a problem to writers. We can chalk up that change, of course, to spell checkers, which do a good job overall—but still can't correct words that sound alike (to,

too, two). But with technology, you win some and you lose some: the most frequent error in our recent study is "wrong word," and ironically a good number of these wrong words come from advice given by the sometimes-not-so-trusty spell checkers. The student who seems from the context of the sentence to be trying to write "frantic," for example, apparently accepts the spell checker's suggestion of "fanatic" instead. And finally, this recent study didn't turn up any significant interference from internet lingo—no IMHOs, no LOLs, no 2nites, no smileys. Apparently, by the time many, many students get to college, they have a pretty good sense of what's appropriate: at the very least, they know the difference between a Facebook friend and a college professor.

In short, the research my colleagues and I have been doing supports what other researchers are reporting about digital technologies and learning. First, a lot of that learning (perhaps most of it) is taking place outside of class, in the literate activities (musical compositions, videos, photo collages, digital stories, comics, documentaries) young people are pursuing on their own. This is what Mimi Ito calls "kid-driven learning." Second, the participatory nature of digital media allows for more—not less—development of literacies, as Henry Jenkins argues compellingly.

If we look beyond the hand-wringing about young people and literacy today, beyond the view that paints them as either brain-damaged by technology or as cogs in the latest race to the top, we will see that the changes brought about by the digital revolution are just that: changes. These changes alter the very grounds of literacy as the definition, nature, and scope of writing are all shifting away from the consumption of discourse to its production across a wide range of genre and media, away from individual "authors" to participatory and collaborative partners-in-production; away from a single static standard of correctness to a situated understanding of audience and context and purpose for writing. Luckily, young people are changing as well, moving swiftly to join in this expanded culture of writing. They face huge challenges, of course—challenges of access and of learning ever new ways with words (and images). What students need in facing these challenges is not derision or dismissal but solid and informed instruction. And that's where the real problem may lie—not with student semi-literacy but with that of their teachers.

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