

THE EMOTION FOR OPENING THE TEXT MESSAGE

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A former drug dealer, who loved to write, was in my first-year writing class several years ago. His name, for the purposes of this essay, is Jericho. He and I became close over the course of the semester for two reasons. The first was that he loved writing and was vocal about this love. The second was text-messaging, known as texting, via cellphone, which falls under the broader form of communication referred to as Short Message Service (SMS). He told me he learned to text-message before he learned to type. He told me he sent over a thousand text-messages a day.

Now, even if those text-messages are no more than a few characters, Jericho was, and probably still is, writing massive amounts. I asked him how long his texts were. He told me some of the messages were actually several texts in length, counting one text as several hundred characters (a standard, singular text is 160 characters). I'm guessing conservatively that Jericho probably wrote hundreds of words every day.

In *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*, Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi note that researchers should not judge their participants (33). Instead of dismissing Jericho's text-messaging as irrelevant, which would be a judgment, I asked him what text-messaging offered that traditional academic writing did not.

He said emotion. He said it was fun. Then he smiled and said love. He said it offered romance. When he texted his girlfriend, she knew it was him and only him.

I asked Jericho how she knew he was addressing only her. He said his girlfriend knows his texts because he always puts her name in the text. "You think a lot about texting," I said. He replied that he had to take it seriously because the texts he sends represented him to his audience. He said he thinks of what his girlfriend wants to read but also what he needs her to read.

Audience Awareness

I heard Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy" in the conference with Jericho. Ede and Lunsford present two sides for teaching audience: The first side addresses an audience while the second invokes one. The first "emphasize[s] the concrete reality of the writer's audience" (156), while the second "stress[es] that the audience of a written discourse is a con-

struction of the writer” (160). They conclude that instructors must strike a delicate balance between these two factions to teach about audience in more complete and nuanced ways. Marilyn Cooper has critiqued this idea as not seeing “real readers,” implying Ede and Lunsford view audience as part of the writer’s cognitive process (371–2). On the other hand, Rosa Eberly responds to Ede and Lunsford by pointing out that writing teachers “might...find *public* a more useful concept than *audience* or *reader* or *community* for producing and analyzing discourses in the shared space of classrooms and beyond” (166). Lunsford and Ede have critiqued their own stance as not “positioned within larger institutional and discursive frameworks” (170). Still, they claim that a balance between these two sides “emphasizes the creative, dynamic duality of the process of reading and writing, whereby writers create readers and readers create writers” (169). Jericho’s statement about an audience’s needs and wants echoes this duality. For Jericho, like Ede and Lunsford, audience and writer co-create one another and are dependent on each other.

Later in the conference, Jericho referenced the connection between audience and his ethos, or character: “My texts are my image.” He made sure to represent himself “right.” He had to be aware of who was “looking” at (reading) him (the text of the text-message). He cared about what his girlfriend and others think of his character, which is fragile considering his former life as a drug dealer. Many scholars, including Nedra Reynolds, have noted that *ethos*, or one’s character or representation of character, can be a complex space and a dwelling place. In “*Ethos* as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority,” she writes, “Writers’ identities, as well as their associations with writing and writing instruction, are constructed by space and the spatial; a writer’s subject positions are determined by the space of the body, her geographical location, her shifting intellectual positions, her distance or closeness to others, to texts, to events” (336). Jericho understood that his *ethos* was created not merely by himself but by the surrounding intellectual and physical contexts, including his girlfriend’s perceptions. He was aware that his identity and *ethos* were shaped, in part, by the text-messages he sent, those who received them, the phone he used (the interface), and even the reliability of the phone company’s network. His rhetorical position as text-message author was dependent on his writing decisions and the way other people perceived those decisions. His *ethos* as text-message author was inherently tied up with various audiences, both addressed and invoked.

During the next class meeting at the northeastern state university where I teach, I asked Jericho’s first-year classmates which of them sends text-messages every day. Most of these students are middle class and own cellphones. *All* hands went up. Hence, I began a series of questions that had no goals or hypotheses. Robert Stake might say I was after an intrinsic line of inquiry, which is the need to learn more about the object of inquiry itself (3). I was simply trying to understand my students better. I asked, “who sends at least ten texts a day?” All hands stayed up. Twenty-five? A few fell, but not many. Fifty? A few more. A hundred? Of twenty-two students, half of the hands remained hovering.

Background

Since that informal survey, I have researched text-messaging, a difficult task because the phenomenon changes so rapidly that it outpaces current academic publishing. For many critics, including Huatong Sun, Crispin Thurlow, and David Crystal, one of the most common difficulties in studying SMS is whether to categorize it as speech or writing because it has features of both, depending on the specific use-context.¹ Text-messaging and Instant Messaging (IM) both fall under the broader category of SMS because they're both textual forms of communication that echo verbal communication. However, text-messaging, because of its pace and specificity, differs from IM because it is limited to 160 characters per text and uses the interface of the phone. Text-messaging can occur while walking or, worse, while driving, but IM frequently happens in front of a computer. Thus, text-messaging occurs through a mobile device often without an explicit composing process, whereas IM typically occurs in a stable writing environment.

¹ For further analysis of text-messaging see Sun, *Expanding the Scope of Localization*; Thurlow, *Generation Txt?*; Crystal, "Texting"; Haggan, "text-messaging in Kuwait: Is the Medium the Message?"; and McBeath, "R U Ready 2 TXT?"

Naomi S. Baron, in "Are Instant Messages Speech?" sees the linguistic characteristics of both speech and writing, but concludes that IM is both "but not as much speech as we have tended to assume," implying that IM is closer to writing (19). Carmen K.M. Lee's "Affordances and Text-Making Practices in Online Instant Messaging" considers the semiotic and linguistic resources of writing and speech, claiming that "text-making practices in IM are shaped by...people's perceptions of the possibilities and constraints offered by the resources...available to them" (245-6). Text-messaging and IM are shifting, changing practices that depend on people's perceptions, semiotic resources, and interfaces. SMS is dependent on the resources available to writers, and therefore SMS can be speech or writing depending on context and use. In "The Nature of SMS Discourse: The Case of Hebrew" (2010), Esther Borochofsky-Bar-Aba and Yafit Kedmi analyze Hebrew in spoken, written, and SMS language, positing that texting is diverse and dependent on the rhetorical situation, which means that SMS is a contextually-based activity. SMS, therefore, is difficult to study because of numerous changing factors in the composing process. All three authors ultimately see SMS as an activity closely related to speech and writing but *different* from either in ways that we have yet to quantify. For me, one of these differences is that texting is *emotionally expressive* in ways that traditional writing may not be.

The Emotion of Texting

In discussing subtle differences in word choice in my first-year writing class, I introduced text-messaging because a single word can hold much significance. I began with this question: What do you like about texting and what don't you like about it? Students loved its quickness, its pace. "Text-messages are like the little notes I sent when I was in grade school," a student told me. She continued: "But you don't have to be in the same place as anyone. We

can send notes to anyone, anytime, anywhere.” The text-message was (and is) simultaneously local and global, mediated continually through alphabetic and visual texts created by a particular cell phone model and interface.

Then students voiced their concerns: unlike in face-to-face communication, users don’t have gestures with the text-message. Text-messaging was vague, according to my students. It didn’t have a tone. “My boyfriend is mean in his text-messaging,” a student said. I asked why. She replied that he never sent her smiley faces and she couldn’t tell how he felt. “Have you ever asked him to send you smiley faces?” I asked. She said no. I remembered Jericho personalizing his text-messages. He was not only aware of his *ethos* but also of how to manipulate the way people perceived his *ethos*. He was aware of who was reading his texts. He was aware of his audience and texted according to his expectations of that audience. He accounted not only for the message but also its tone. Good texters, as students referred to those who frequently text, accounted for tones and the emotional response of the receiver. Bad texters did not account for such tone or emotion. There was a way to be a good or bad author of text-messages, an etiquette based on tone. Accordingly, feelings were part of the composing process of text-messaging. Text-messages, in this way, were and are emotional. I realized texting made authors not only aware of the fundamental concept of audience but also aware of the audience’s emotions.

“You have to tell him that you want some sort of tone,” I told the student who complained of her unemotional (at least in text-messaging) boyfriend.

“He should just know,” she said.

“But,” I replied, “don’t you always ask me what my expectations are of the paper assignment?” The class looked at me blankly. “You don’t just write however you want,” I said. “You write how you want with me hovering in the back of your mind. Those choices are being aware of your audience. You have to be aware of what the person receiving your text-message might think.”

Emoticons and Ethos

My students were already creating emotion in their audience through the use of emoticons. I brought up emoticons in my classroom to show the possibility of emotion while text-messaging. Emoticons encode a broad range of verbal and visual cues such a smiley face :-)) or winky face ;) or clown face <:0) and any number of abbreviations including LOL (laugh out loud), LMAO (laugh my ass off) and HAHAHA (laughter). We discussed and free-wrote about the various emoticons. Sometimes abbreviations came up. “I’d like to see people stop using ‘n e thing.’ It’s the same number of characters!” Students liked these abbreviations because this idiom allows for development of personal style.

Emoticons are visuals that use alphabetic text; they are complex multimodal compositions because they cannot be separated into their visual

and alphabetic-text components. Using them allows texters to manipulate their *ethos* while being aware of their audience. But how are the emoticon and the emotion it generates relevant to writing or multimodal composing processes? In “The Heat of Composition,” Heather Palmer concludes with the following:

Learning to write, to use the materiality of words as an expressive force, becomes a passage of light from one being to another through burning words that are more than individual beings or enclosed subjectivities. Learning to write is not the transmission of a predetermined process or *techne* from teacher to student; instead it is an opening to these forces, which can occur only beyond the familiar and stable self and its *ethos* (506).

Ethos is not merely one’s character, but one’s expressive force. A text-messenger’s *ethos* is bound up in the audience’s *ethos*, and in this exchange there is emotional investment. In this way, texting is writing because alphabetic text, especially punctuation, becomes visual emotions, thereby creating an emoticon.

If students were and are already engaged with this writing, how can I help them be critical of this activity? What better way than to frame text-messaging as an activity in which students create themselves under the constraints of linguistic rules while also manipulating and subverting that authority. Text-messages can’t really be wrong, just unclear or “bad.” Texting is a place where students and writing teachers agree: writing needs to be precise, condensed, purposeful, and meaningful.

A Quick Text ;-)

Examining text-messaging brings up several problematic issues. Students might not all have cellphones and they certainly do not have the same cellphone, cellphone plan, or text-messaging skills. The emergence of smartphones has added numerous material, ideological, and technical issues because of their price, ability to use the internet, and interface changes. Since I began experimenting with text-messaging, however, I have noticed fewer students without cell phones, though concern over cost has always been an issue with which students grapple.

Another important issue at stake is the negative effects of text-messaging on expository writing. For instance, when composing a text-message, students do not necessarily engage with sustained thought processes or arguments. Further, while I have deliberately taken a more positive view of texting, I have witnessed its deleterious effects on standard grammar and punctuation. Text-messaging’s infiltration into contexts where it is inappropriate, however, means that writing instructors could examine how texting is different from other forms of audience awareness, thereby assisting students to situate their writing more effectively. In a classroom activity I use every semester, I lay out a pedagogy that differentiates text-

messaging from other kinds of writing aimed specifically at an audience.

In my first-year writing classes, I emphasize that text-messaging is dense and efficient. Pedagogically, texting relates to condensing phrases, sentences, and concepts for both research and general academic-responses essays. Yet this efficiency also demonstrates that ambiguity can arise from text-messaging. For instance, my free-writing assignment asks students to reflect on a moment when their texts were misinterpreted. This notion is not new, of course. The ambiguity of language is a concern for many writers and teachers of writing. Students experience this concern in text-messaging in their everyday lives. Furthermore, this reflection asks them to denaturalize the terms “dense” and “efficient.” Dense and efficient writing, as a pedagogical goal, is highly situated and context dependent.

Accordingly, I ask students to make a list of possible texts their audience would and would not like to receive, and to generate acceptable grammar and punctuation rules for that audience. We then brainstorm lists of possible emoticons and abbreviations. We analyze what these symbols and abbreviations mean as well as why and how they come about in the “common” lexicon of a text-message. From this point, I ask what is taboo to discuss in text-messages and what is acceptable. Often, students voice their displeasure over one-letter texts, like “K,” because it is a waste of a text-message. Also, in regards to people they are not close with, students avoid using sarcasm because it is often misunderstood. I further encourage students to identify and discuss the rhetorical situations in which text-messaging language is *not* appropriate, thereby revealing the context-dependent nature of text-messaging.

This assignment helps students go beyond “considering an audience,” whether addressed or invoked, because it demonstrates that text-messaging has a bodily audience with concrete expectations that can nevertheless change according to context or rhetorical situation. Because of this change, texters must not only account for the needs and wants of a real audience, but they must also consider the emotional effects of their language. Audience expectations change quickly with text-messages, and the circulation of text-messaging is often extremely fast, if not instantaneous. In this way, text-messaging brings attention to the pace and specificity of the changing rhetorical situation.

Texting builds a rhetorical awareness of *ethos*. Such an awareness reminds us that *ethos* is co-constructed with an audience. While traditional composition and rhetorical studies examine the difficulty of navigating addressed/invoked audiences, text-message senders are aware of an *actual* recipient. Yet because of its pace and specificity, text-messaging develops rhetorical skills in dialogic, emotional ways with real, physical audiences. Consequently, the text-message, as a genre, emphasizes that textual emotions can be dialogically transmitted. In the case of text-messages, the sender and receiver (or perhaps author and reader) have a role in creating the emotion of the other. Those emotions complicate constructions and implications of an author’s *ethos*.

The Changing Text-Message

Text-messaging is a continual conversation. In the past five years, I've seen the emergence of expensive smartphones that are as powerful as my computer. On average, my informal polls show me that the students in my classroom are sending more text-messages every semester. Phones are now equipped with qwerty keypads. Perhaps because of this advance, many students voice their displeasure over abbreviations when such abbreviations aren't necessary, like the letter "u" substituted for the word "you." Further, many phones are equipped with an auto-correct feature that completes their words for them, which may be another reason for the displeasure over abbreviations.

Any use of text-messaging in the classroom must first understand that such a conversation is rhetorically dependent on the context of the classroom. Still, text-messaging, and SMS more broadly, use emoticons to express emotions, a feature academic writing looks down upon. While emoticons are not always useful, the emotion they represent should be examined for more fruitful ways of writing and communicating. :-)

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