

A New Literacy?

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By Thessaly La Force

In this month's issue of *Wired* magazine, Clive Thompson writes about the work of Andrea Lunsford, at Stanford University. Lunsford is studying the papers of almost fifteen thousand undergraduates, in a project that spanned five years (including the students' first year out of college). She looked at anything and everything—essays, journals, blog posts, chats, e-mails. Her conclusion: “We’re in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven’t seen since Greek civilization.”

This, Thompson writes, offers a weighty counterargument to those who claim that language has suffered from the ubiquity of e-mail, online chat, and text. Those emoticons and abbreviations we use? They don’t, as some suspect, end up in a classroom essay. Students, Lunsford found, know not to write “Alexander the Gr8” in their Greek-Civ class: upon searching through the academic work of first-year Stanford students, Lunsford couldn’t find a single page with “texting speak.”

Instead, Lunsford offers a different vision of contemporary literacy, one in which people are writing more, not less, and using the written world to socialize. Thompson notes:

The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That’s because so much socializing takes place online, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing that the Stanford students did, a stunning 38 percent of it took place out of the classroom—life writing, as Lunsford calls it. Those Twitter updates and lists of 25 things about yourself add up....

But is this explosion of prose good, on a technical level? Yes. Lunsford’s team found that the students were remarkably adept at what rhetoricians call *kairos*—assessing their audience and adapting their tone and technique to best get their point across. The modern world of online writing, particularly in chat and on discussion threads, is conversational and public, which makes it closer to the Greek tradition of argument than the asynchronous letter and essay writing of 50 years ago.

I’m not surprised. It seems safe to argue that we still don’t know very much about how people are using social media and technology to communicate. Last year, Louis Menand wrote in the magazine about the linguist David Crystal’s new book, “Ttxtng: The Gr8 Db8,” one of the first of its kind:

Crystal's answer is that texting is, partly, a game. It's like writing a sonnet (well, sort of): the requirement is to adapt the message to immutable formal constraints. A sonnet can't have more than fourteen lines, and a mobile-phone message can't have more than a hundred and forty bytes, which is usually enough for a hundred and sixty characters. This is a challenge to ingenuity, not an invitation to anarchy.

But I'm curious. How has spelling fared in the aftermath of Microsoft Word? Mine is, admittedly, atrocious. This could be a product of laziness, but the argument could also be made that spelling was just as bad before spell-check: now, at least, it's possible to have the appearance of being a capable speller.