Digitalk: A New Literacy for a Digital Generation

Teachers who recognize that "digitalk" is different and not deficient can find ways to harness this language en route to improving students' academic writing.

By Kristen Hawley Turner

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 againstt them yesterdaii.
Michael: i n0e, th3y suCk.
Lily: & the nationalsss won like only 16 games . . . one of the worst teams homieeegee.
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 w! y0u. =D
Lily: lol imma talk to you later . . . i got pizzaa awaitinggg meeeee (;
Michael: iight pe3cE

As I copy this text conversation between two adolescents into Microsoft Word, the screen lights up with red. Every line in this exchange is marked. Mi-

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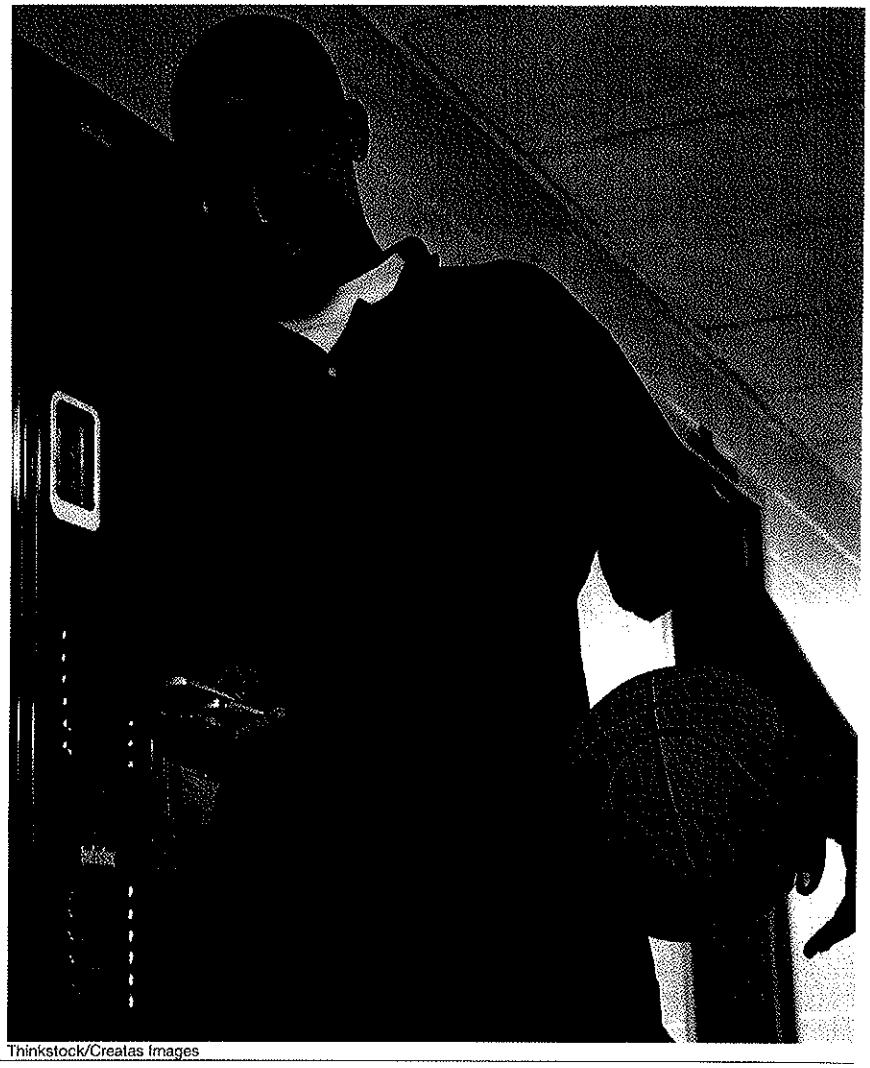

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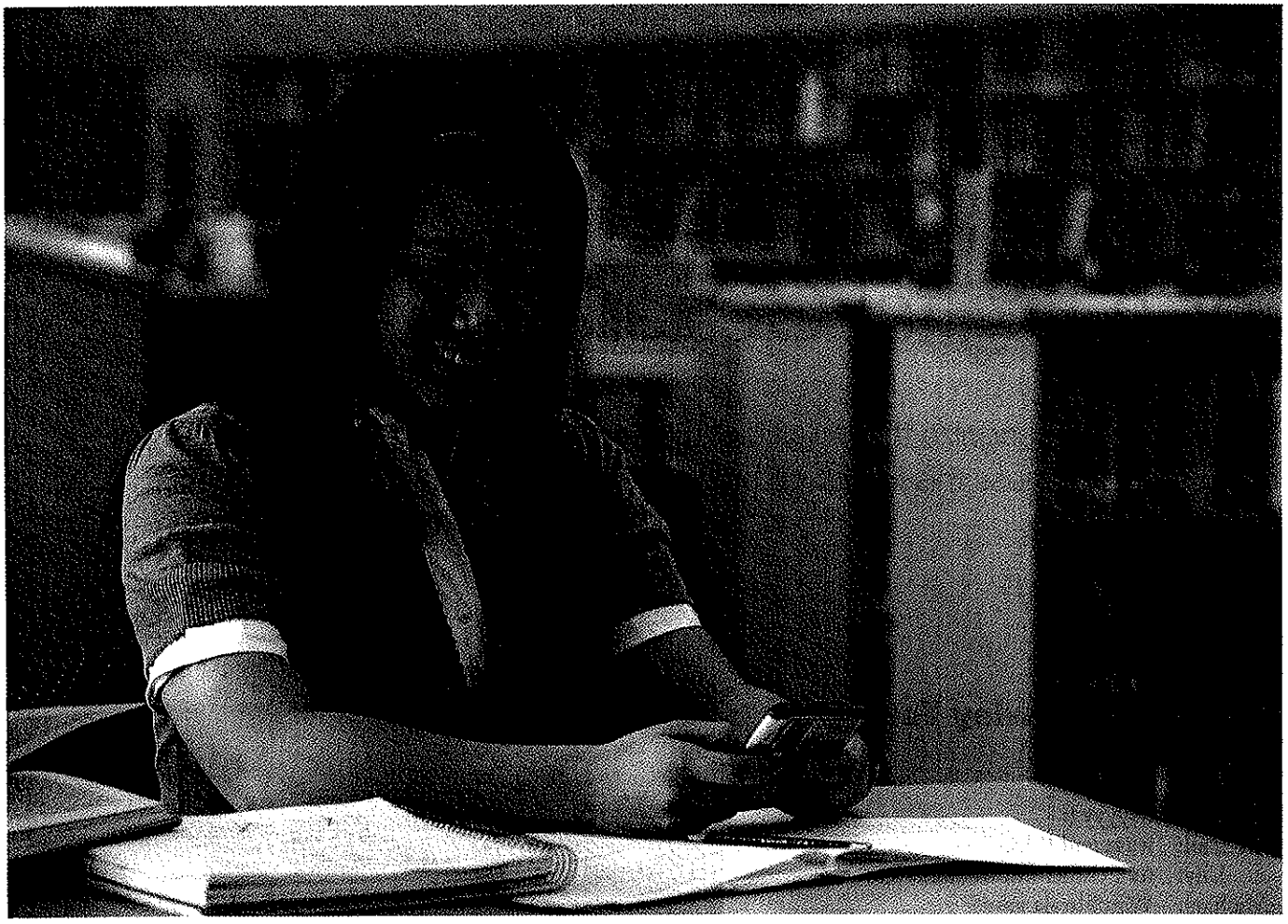

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Many adults fail to realize that today's teens are highly adept at using language and that their mastery of the digitally written word far surpasses that of many adults.

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crosoft Word, it seems, does not "get" the language of these speakers and attacks the black-and-white text with its red pen. For Microsoft Word, these writers are wrong.

When I first encountered "computer-mediated language" (Crystal 2001: 238), I was as confused as my word-processing program is today. An English teacher and one of our school's "grammar gurus," I couldn't understand why students were substituting "2" for "too" or "u" for "you" in their school writing. I was completely stumped by the language they were using to talk to each other digitally. Today, when I look at the exchange between Lily and Michael, I am amazed by their ability to manipulate language and to communicate effectively across time and space. I have evolved from being a grammar guru who questioned this teen language as a degradation of Standard English to one who sees adolescent *digitalk* as a complex and fascinating combination of written and conversational languages in a digital setting

THE JOURNEY OF A "GRAMMAR GURU"

I first ventured beyond e-mail into other forms of digital communication a decade ago when my

brother installed an instant-messaging program on my personal computer. He taught me how to "see" him online and to exchange messages. A few years later, I used a similar instant-messaging program to "chat" with group members as we completed a class project for graduate school. Our inability to find a time for five adults to meet in person led us to use this technology, and our success in working together in a virtual space made me consider the pedagogical applications of instant messaging in my high school classroom.

When I first assigned a book discussion to be conducted by instant message (IM), my high school students looked at me quizzically. They hadn't thought about using IM as a learning tool. For them, it was a social space *outside* of school. They humored me, however, happy to be doing something "fun" rather than writing a literary essay about the book. As with any initial assignment, I wasn't sure what I would get when these students submitted their work. What I received were pages of writing that impressed me with truly critical thought about the text — and that shocked me with language that was far from Standard English.

I worked hard to decipher those first chat transcripts. I mentally capitalized letters and added punctuation marks. I translated phonetic spellings. I asked my brother or the students themselves to explain unknown acronyms. When it was time to grade the assignment, I was faced with a difficult decision. As an English teacher, I needed to hold them accountable for their use of language, and I certainly wouldn't have accepted this kind of writing had they submitted a traditional literary essay. However, the discussions of the novel were rich, and I wanted to reward their thinking despite their seemingly substandard language.

Ultimately, I let the grammar slide that time and began discussions about the nature of language and the purposes of writing. Through those discussions in my classroom, I began to realize that, to my students, writing online was separate from school writing. They used different languages in each of those contexts. By asking them to complete school-related work (the discussion of a literary text) in a social space (their IM chat rooms), I blurred the line between home and school. What they produced was a rich blend of the two discourses.

DIGITALK

Since my first encounter with nonstandard IM language, the terms used to describe digital writing have changed. The shift from "netspeak" to "textspeak" followed developments in technology that affected how and where adolescents produced digital writing. However, like much in the digital age, where change occurs fast and frequently, these terms are already obsolete. Today's teens use both the Internet and their personal cell phones to communicate with peers, and patterns of language cross technological boundaries.

Digitalk Guide

02: Your, or my, two cents worth. Also: m.02, y.02

8: Oral sex

10Q: Thank you

143: I Love you

ACORN: A Completely Obsessive Really Nutty person

AITR: Adult in the room

book: Cool

C-P: Sleepy

CICYHW: Can I copy your homework

da: There

E123: Easy as 1, 2, 3

EML: E-mail me later

EOT: End of Thread (end of discussion)

FE: Fatal error

FS: For sale

G2G: Got to go

GI: Google it

I 1-D-R: I wonder

IDK: I don't know

J/C: Just checking

K: OK

KIPPERS: Kids in parents pockets eroding retirement savings

LTTIC: Look, the teacher is coming

M4C: Meet for coffee

MOS: Mom over shoulder

N2MJCHBU: Not Too Much, Just Chillin. How Bout You?

ne1er: Anyone here?

nth: Nothing

P911: Parent alert

potato: Person over 30 acting 21

r u da: Are you there?

smt: Something

soz: Sorry

s^: What's up?

u up: Are you up?

w's^: What's up?

W8: Wait

wru: Where are you?

X-I-10: Exciting

ysdiw8: Why should I wait?

zerg: To gang up on someone

Source: NetLingo

The manipulation of standard spellings and conventions most often occurs when teens "talk" to each other by writing in texts, IMs, and social networking tools. There are nonstandard conventions that cross these digital spaces. Writing in these venues blends elements of written discourse with those of the spoken word, and what the terms net*speak* and text*speak* share conceptually is an attention to the oral nature of the language used in these spaces. Whether teens are sending text messages or IMs, they invariably think of the communication as "talking." Talk, then, is the driving force behind much of the digital writing of adolescents.

For these reasons, I call the language that adolescents use in digital spaces *digitalk*. The term captures the nature of the writing, which in most cases replaces verbal communication, and it encompasses the wide variety of digital technologies (phone, Internet, computer, PDA) that allow for this exchange. Manipulating language so that it efficiently conveys an intended message and effectively represents the

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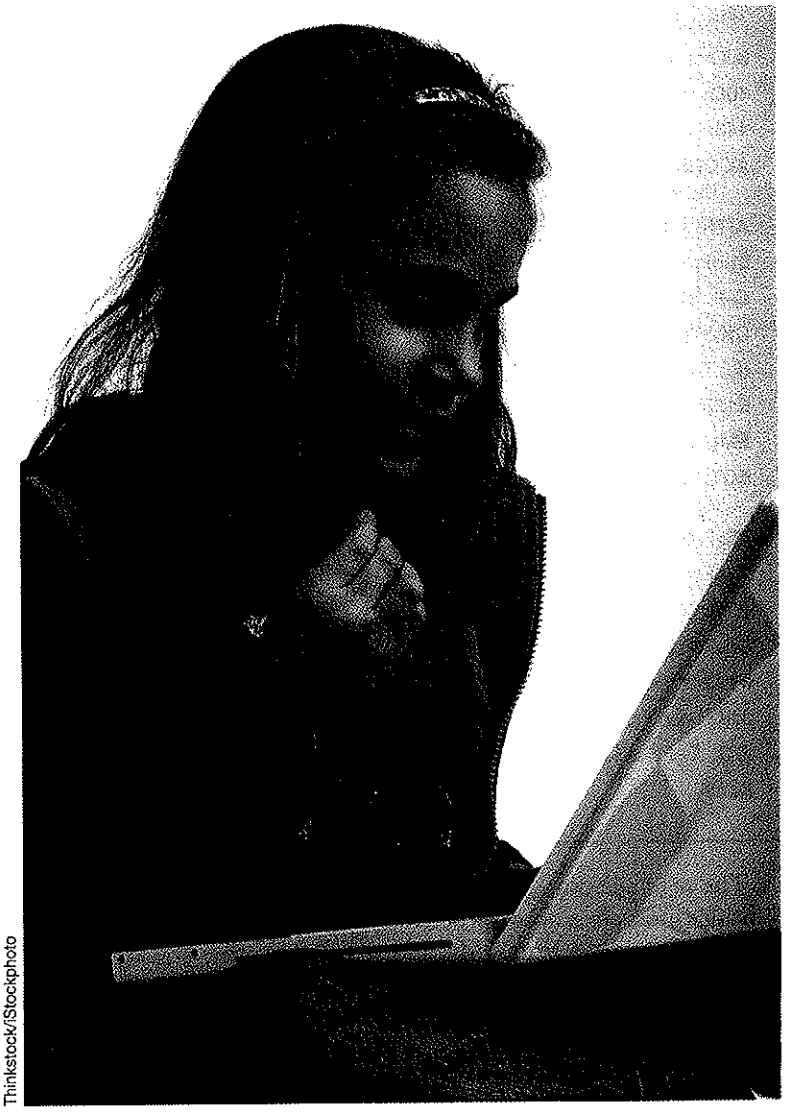
voice of the speaker requires both creativity and mastery of language for communicative purposes. Becoming an adept user takes practice and knowledge of the conventions of a community. For an outsider, it is difficult to decipher and even harder to produce in an authentic way. Digitalk, then, is a new literacy of the digital generation.



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By giving digitalk a place in the classroom, students are able to bring their home literacy into the academic arena.

A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that teens are writing more than ever and that much of this writing is done in digital spaces. Interestingly, 60% of teens do not see the writing that they do electronically as "*real* writing" (Lenhart et al. 2008: 4). Perhaps their view is shaped by the idea that they are talking to friends through IM, rather writing to them. However, their dismissal of digital writing also might be a product of the societal bias against the informal language they use in digital spaces.

The Pew study documents that "a considerable number of educators and children's advocates. . . are concerned that the quality of writing by young Americans is being degraded by their electronic communication, with its carefree spelling, lax punctuation and grammar, and its acronym shortcuts" (Lenhart et al. 2008: 3). I also hear these concerns from parents in my community. I'm alarmed by the prejudice that lies behind these statements.

Many adults fail to realize that today's teens are highly adept at using language and that their mastery of the digitally written word far surpasses that of many adults. Teens like Lily and Michael have learned to manipulate written language for social communication. They merge multiple language systems, break rules systematically, create and manipulate language and usage, and effectively communicate ideas with an intended audience. In the process, they create their own rules and rituals that are accepted by members of their language community. Their digitalk is intricate and complex. But in school and among adults, it is seen as deficient. In school, students are expected to use academic language, a discourse that may or may not resemble the primary discourse of their out-of-school language practices.

Lily and Michael, the two writers whose conversation opened this article, are *digital natives* (Prensky 2001), high school students who have grown up in a world saturated with communication technologies. They have access to computers in their homes and even in their bedrooms, and they carry cell phones wherever they go. Though they talk to their friends on the phone, they are just as likely, perhaps more likely, to communicate by text. Lily and Michael are immersed in a world outside of school where the written discourse differs from Standard English.

In discussing the language of urban students who speak African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords (2006) explain that students must be taught to make choices about language, dialect, and register. They argue that teaching code-switching allows both home and academic discourse to have a place in the classroom. By valuing the language that students use outside of

school, teachers can make school language more accessible. In short, out-of-school discourses are different, not deficient. Teachers should build on students' home literacy as they help them to acquire academic language.

PRIVILEGING DIGITALK

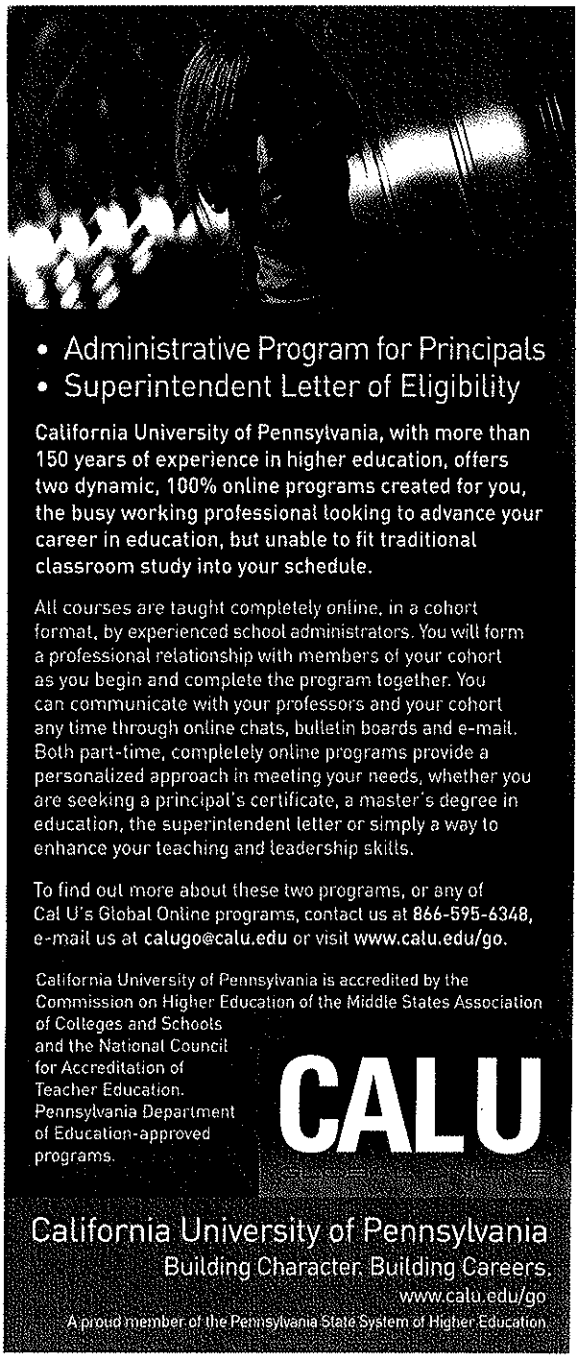
Wheeler and Swords studied the patterns of error in the writing of students who speak AAVE and found that they were directly related to the grammatical structure of AAVE. They contend that these writers "are not making mistakes in Standard English. Instead, they are following the grammar patterns of their everyday language" (2006: 9). As students translate thought to writing, they unconsciously conflate the two languages.

Similarly, teens write — and perhaps even think — in digitalk. It's not surprising, then, that they require practice to switch to a more formal language in school and that many teens admit that elements of digitalk do filter into their school work. Some researchers suggest that the prevalence of these errors is not what popular opinion believes. Anecdotal evidence from teachers, however, suggests that not all students are adept at making the switch. Thus, teachers need to ask two important questions:

1. If students have trouble switching from digital language to Standard English, thus making frequent errors of standard usage in their school writing, how can teachers help them consciously switch to the appropriate language?
2. If students use digital language outside of school in creative and analytic ways to discuss real issues with their peers, how can teachers harness its power to help students learn content?

Giving digitalk a place in the classroom helps answer these questions. For example, one way to make students aware of the different contexts for language is to have them write, "Hello, how are you?" in four distinct settings: classroom with teacher, text conversation with friend, lunchroom with friend, at home with parent. As the class analyzes the language of the settings, students can begin to look critically at the way they write in different situations. (See Turner et al. 2009 for lesson ideas.)

Conversations about language begin to ignite conscious choices for student writers. Following these conversations with an analysis of the writing they do in digital spaces will help them understand the choices they make in their digitalk. Some common patterns that emerge from the digital writing of adolescents include: 1) nonstandard capitalization, 2) nonstandard end punctuation, 3) use of multiple consonants or vowels within a word, 4) nonstandard use of ellipses, 5) lack of apostrophes, 6) use of phonetic spellings, 7) abbreviations, and 8) compound constructions to form new words (Turner et al. 2009). Instances of each of these patterns can be seen in the exchange between Lily and Michael. The writers choose the convention that best expresses purpose and voice, and they rely on the recipient's understanding of the convention to properly interpret the message. As with the conventions in Standard English that a writer might use unconsciously, teens who write daily in digitalk may not recognize



the conventions they use. If teachers help students identify these patterns, they can contrast digitalk choices with the conventions of Standard English. Teachers can help writers create checklists for editing that focus on these common translation errors.

Making students conscious of the conventions of digitalk can help those who struggle to make the switch from the informal language of digital writing to the formal language of academia. In addition, allowing students to write some assignments using digitalk may allow teachers to harness the power of students' out-of-school literacy. Proponents of writing-to-learn strategies have argued that writing is closely related to thinking and that writing can help students develop and retain content knowledge. In order to achieve these goals, students are often encouraged to write freely without attention to editing. Content counts more than form when writing to learn.

Rhoda Maxwell (1996) identifies three levels of writing that are useful in thinking about writing-to-learn activities. Level 1 writing allows students to develop their ideas or to reflect metacognitively on what they know about content. It does not focus on the presentation of those ideas to others. Level 2 writing, which may have a limited audience, attends somewhat more to form, but the purpose of the activity is to help students understand and develop content knowledge. Level 3 writing, on the other hand, attends to issues of grammar and mechanics. It is often published for a larger audience or to formally demonstrate a student's learning.

If language is less of an issue than content in some assignments (Level 1 and Level 2), then teachers might encourage students to use digitalk. Permitting students to take notes, write drafts, or complete other low-stakes writing assignments in whatever form of language is most comfortable places the emphasis on the content of the writing, rather than the mechanics. It also informs students that the writing they do outside of school is valuable. By giving digitalk a place in the classroom, students are able to bring their home literacy into the academic arena.

"Where do you enter the password?"

A SHIFT IN THINKING

My argument is bound to be attacked by adults who are concerned with standards and rigor, with state tests and federal mandates. Digitalk is, after all, an easy target. Virtually any administrator, teacher, or parent is capable of marking as deficient a text riddled with digitalk. As Microsoft Word demonstrates, red pens can attack the language easily.

We should consider a shift in thinking about digitalk. Rather than seeing it as a deficiency, a lazy representation of Standard English, we should recognize its power in the digital, adolescent community. Teens today are writing a lot, but they aren't necessarily writing in Standard English. Switching from their digital writing to the requirements of academic writing can pose problems for some students. However, by valuing the language that adolescents use outside of school and engaging students in writing about content in less formal ways, teachers can focus writing on content and critical thinking, and they can give value to the literacy that students bring to class. And by teaching code-switching practices, teachers can help young writers become conscious of the language choices they make.

There is no question that students must learn academic English. All students should be held accountable to societal standards in their learning. However, the method by which we achieve these goals can build on students' existing knowledge, using their out-of-school skills to enhance their learning. **K**

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