A Response to Michaela Cullington

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Michaela Cullington's essay "Texting and Writing" explores the possible effect of teen texting on formal writing in school. Cullington lists three different hypotheses scholars pose about the correlation between the two: those who criticize texting for its negative impact on writing, those who believe texting is actually a beneficial exercise in writing, and those who see no relationship at all. Cullington begins her analysis with the first theory, quoting concerned teachers, citing the shocking statistic that "only 25% of high school seniors are 'proficient' writers" (90), and adding testimony from two of her former teachers. Cullington then explores the second take on texting and writing by providing contrasting testimony from other teachers who believe that texting is a blessing to their students' writing. Cullington retrieves support for these two opposing views from interviews and previous studies. To explore the theory that texting is irrelevant to formal writing, however, she performs her own research, gathering results from seven students, two teachers, and an analysis of students' written work. Despite the testimonial evidence against and in support of texting, Cullington's own results show that texting has "no effect, positive or negative, on [students'] writing as a result of texting" (95).

Although her study supports the hypothesis that texting and writing have no relationship to one another, Cullington (and the researchers whose work she analyzed) recognizes the significance of new technology and society's evolving modes of communication. She writes, "The use of text messaging as a common means of communication is becoming increasingly popular; therefore, this issue should continue to be examined" (94). Not surprisingly, the popularity of texting has increased since the time of Cullington's article and so too has research on its effect on student writing. What Cullington may not have anticipated, however, are the ways in which texting itself has changed. How might innovations such as Internet access, various "apps," and software advancements have changed texting in the mere two years since Michaela Cullington published her article in 2011?

One of the most notable differences between now and two years ago is the diminishing prevalence of abbreviations and the use of acronyms. When instant messaging and text messaging first emerged, there wasn't a word or phrase in the English language that could not be shortened. While the same ability may still be present today, the actual presence of such terms as "gtg" (got to go) and "u" (you) has largely decreased.[1] So, whether consistent or, as Cullington put it, "anecdotal," the appearance of these terms in formal writing should have, in theory, decreased as well. This fall in acronym popularity may in large part be due to the vast popularity of the smartphone. The iPhone, Android, Blackberry, and similar devices are all members of the smartphone family, recognized as having "advanced functionality in addition to the standard functionality offered on a feature phone" (AT&T). The capacity to function beyond the mere act of making a phone call is important to the identity of a smartphone; however, what has made the device so distinctive is that texting has actually gotten "smarter." People with smartphones have the assistance of spellcheck, reference "apps," autocorrect, autocompletion and, most recently, voice-control capability (most

commonly referred to as "Siri," the response voice of the iPhone's voice-control system). In the past, text messages were ultimately just instant, electronic versions of a brief note jotted down on a Post-it note and left for someone on his or her door. There was little time or reason for revision and little space in which to fit the message. There was no judgment of spelling and grammatical errors, nor was there confusion about improvised shorthand; senders and recipients alike recognized the restrictions of this method of communication. In short, there was a reason for writing messages in the "Post-it" style ("c u @ ur apt 2nite"). It was this kind of texting that evoked discontent and concern in the teachers interviewed by Cullington. Though rational for the teachers of the first common texters, that fear is now largely outdated.

When revising a paper written on a word processor, one of the first things a student will look for is that red squiggly line under a word indicating its flawed spelling. For the most part, writers who use spellcheck successfully correct the majority of their spelling errors; furthermore, when the red line has perpetually plagued the same word throughout a paper, the paper's author may even learn from his or her mistake, thus making spellcheck not only an aid but also a teacher. One of texting's simplest yet most significant new accessories is spellcheck. It works the same way, red squiggly line and all, alerting texters to their spelling indiscretions, including intentional abbreviations and acronyms, and potentially planting the seed for future correctness.

On a broader scale beyond "Post-it" shorthand, Web access has a tremendous effect on people with smartphones. Smartphone users have so much information at their disposal; they can find the answer to nearly any question in a matter of seconds. The idea that this accessibility may have a positive effect on writing is not implausible, and while all Internet users should be cautious about relying on the information they find, the fact that problems can be solved, debates can be settled, and the occasionally received acronym can be explained (ROFL is "rolling on the floor laughing") more efficiently than ever before is immensely significant. The ability of texters to know more is, at the very least, not harming their ability to write well.

What is more clearly a benefit of smartphone Internet service is users' access to millions of "apps," short for "applications." Apps are essentially widgets for the smartphone—things the smartphone user didn't know he needed but now can't live without. Buried within the chaos that is the "App Store" are apps that are useful to student writers. By simply opening up a dictionary app and tapping his thumbs on the screen, the person who keeps his phone on his person—which today is almost everyone—can now find out what desideratum means just moments after it is said in passing conversation. Maybe he'll even use it in a paper. Maybe he'll even use it in his next text to his girlfriend.

While spellcheck and an Internet connection seem to be advantageous (or at least no worse than inconsequential), not all of the cell phone's innovations are necessarily beneficial to the texting and writing process. In fact, it is possible that there may be some "upgrades" that are indeed detrimental. Two dangerous and notably smartphone-associated texting innovations are autocorrect and autocompletion. Autocorrect recognizes a misspelled word and automatically replaces it with what is likely to be the intended word; similarly, autocompletion replaces an incomplete word with what is likely to be the word in its full form. In many ways, autocorrect and autocompletion are very useful in their efficiency; however, it is reasonable to assume that they have the opposite effect of the spellcheck squiggly on learning. Instead of giving a texter the itching need to correct his or her mistakes, autocorrection notifications are so brief that the texter is barely aware of a mistake before it is erased from existence altogether. In sending her accurately spelled text, the texter fails to realize her errors and thus will continue to misspell the same words over and over again. Of course autocorrect is not the direct cause of writers' mistakes; however, its ability to reinforce a trend by covering it up with perfection is almost worse than leaving the problem and failing to point it out at all (as in the early form of texting). Word processing does not have autocorrect, after all.

Michaela Cullington propped the door open for future students to explore this topic, and it is important that they continue to do so. Texting has its costs and benefits now just as much as it did in 2011, but the expansiveness of those factors has greatly increased since then. Because of advancements in technology, what was once a method of efficiency is now no more convenient than writing words and phrases in their original, elongated forms, and the use of texting lingo and shorthand is far less common; however, spelling and grammatical mistakes as well as abbreviations and some acronyms still in use are not discouraged. If formal writing is suffering, the correlation to texting may be disguised in the cloak of autocorrection services.

Despite these ever-changing observations, what seems both consistent and obvious over the years is the fact that, no matter what we teach or how we innovate, texts will be texts. The iPhone 5, one of the "smartest" phones on the market, neither autocorrects nor offers red squiggly lines on "rofl," "lol," (laugh out loud), and "gtg."[2] For now, our available solutions are limited: we can teach ourselves and others to be intellectual beings who do not rely on notifications and widgets to determine the future of our writing abilities; or, better yet, we can simply tell Siri to autocorrect our acronyms into their actual phrases. ~~SMH.~~ (Shaking my head.)

Notes

[1] Based on personal observation through personal text conversations that have occurred over the period of 2009 to March 2013.

[2] Information acquired from my personal iPhone 5.

Works Cited

AT&T. "What Is a Smartphone?" 2013. AT&T.com. Web. 21 Mar. 2013.

Cullington, Michaela. "Texting and Writing." *Young Scholars in Writing*: *Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 8 (Spring 2011): 90–95. Print.