Instant Messaging

In just a few short years Instant Messaging (IM) has become a communication technology uniquely popular among adolescents in the United States and abroad who have Internet access at home. Instant Messaging services [e.g., AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), or Microsoft’s MSN Messenger Service] allow users to carry on real-time online conversations with their peers. Users assemble personalized buddy lists of up to 150 people, and, depending on who is also online at a certain moment, they can chat with their buddies instantaneously. Messages tend to be short (one or two lines), with one small window assigned to each buddy, and with users often negotiating up to twenty conversations at a time. Mimicking face-to-face conversations, Instant Messages are peppered with a distinct shorthand lingo (e.g., how r u?)—often the shorter the better—and the norm is to type and send short overlapping messages in the spirit of continuous interruption. As both a communication practice grounded in new technology and an engaging social scene, IM has become the favorite activity among huge numbers of 12-19 year olds with home Internet access. While being a relatively new force in popular culture, IM use may have important implications for literacy education. Young people with well-honed typing skills and a strong desire to communicate through the keyboard are developing increasingly refined rhetorical strategies during their often lengthy communication sessions. These strategies point to the role of popular culture in the classroom, and the potential of using IM to connect with adolescents’ informal literacy practices, and their desire to integrate this knowledge with formal learning.

Three Levels of Interaction:

Adolescents self-consciously finesse IM technology to their own creative benefit on three levels: language use, social practice, and surveillance (Lewis & Fabos, 2000). On the level of language use, they manipulate the tone, voice, word choice, subject matter, narrative flow, and visuals of their messages to fit their communication needs. Creativity occurs in a user’s witty one-line reply; in the way a user can quickly enter a window and seamlessly continue a story line (before exiting again and jumping to another story line), in pausing suspensefully before hitting the “return” key and sending a reply; in the satisfying narrative flow of an entire conversation (which is visibly constructed, can be referred back to, and can be printed out in full); and in the successful creation of multiple narratives between windows that leads to narrative tension, intrigue, and pleasing juxtapositions. These narratives are further flavored by clever user names, visual icons, quotes, message beeps, opening/closing door sounds (to signify a buddy coming or going), and “away” signs that appear in user profiles or pop up when a buddy has temporarily left the computer.

On the level of social practice, IM users negotiate patterns of communication through IM to enhance social relationships and social standings in school. For example, users often talk more with their classmates in the IM environment than they do at school, reaching new levels of intimacy. Intimacy is partly possible because IM can erase
potential awkwardness when talking to the opposite sex face-to-face: there is no fear of turning “bright red” or running out of things to say. Furthermore, IM users can appear more popular by conveying to their buddy audience that they are busy juggling multiple conversations (when in fact they are not): they simply wait before replying to buddies they intend to impress.

On the level of surveillance, IM users monitor the IM landscape for their own benefit, combat excessive or unwanted messages, assume alternative identities, and overcome parental restrictions on their on-line communication. For example, an IM user may try to surreptitiously discover who is talking to whom by asking friends to administer a set of questions (which can be copied and pasted), pass along investigative information, all of which further extends their layered multinarratives. Users also develop savvy ways to block or subvert their identities by breaking into parental control accounts. IM as a literate practice thus demands multiliteracies as it defines and mediates social status.

The Writing Process and Critical Literacy

Researchers of youth cultures and education have begun to examine the social and political uses of popular culture and technologies (e.g., Gee, 2000) and new literacy practices emerging from the digital age (e.g., Sefton-Green, 1998). There has been little research, however, that specifically investigates the impact or benefits of IM on literacy education. Considering the sophistication of IM users’ rhetorical choices compared with the simple linearity of the writing process often represented in the classroom, some researchers argue that we need to be aware of these multiliteracies and adjust our concept of the writing process as it is currently taught (Lewis & Fabos, 2000).

The proliferation of IM communication among adolescents also suggests the need for literacy discussions that go beyond text evaluation and consider the social, political, and economic context of Internet technology in and out of school (Luke, 2000). While IM services have inspired rather compelling literacy practices, these practices are certainly not neutral with regard to corporate interests and the desire to influence youth culture and spending habits. As a free Internet activity, Instant Messaging has proved to be one of the Internet’s “stickiest” applications, meaning that users tend to leave the Instant Message screen on for long periods to monitor incoming messages; users’ eyes (and thus, their attention) are “stuck” to the screen. Stickiness is good for business: besides delivering a constant stream of targeted advertisements to IM users, the service also acts as a doorway into all the other services offered by AOL, Microsoft, or Yahoo!, such as search engines, content directories, and e-commerce channels. From a corporate perspective, having a popular IM portal, then, is to gain user patronage for a whole range of commercial Web services—for the long term.

By far the most dominant instant message service is AOL Instant Messanger (AIM), which in 2000 had 90 percent of the U.S. market. AOL purchased ICQ, the template for AIM, in 1998. Together with ICQ, which continues to dominate instant messaging in Europe, AOL boasts over 80 million IM subscribers. Since AOL and ICQ prohibit their users from exchanging messages with competing IM systems, such as Microsoft’s MSN Messenger Service and Yahoo!’s Messenger, AOL has been under considerable attack for exhibiting monopolistic tendencies. The fight, from Microsoft and Yahoo!’s perspective, is worth fighting: besides its potential as a sticky application,
IM users also fill out detailed profiles when signing up for the service, providing advertisers with multiple ways to surgically target them as they chat with their friends.

References


