

Revolutionary reflections

The Internet is an extraordinarily diverse medium, holding a mirror up to many sides of our linguistic nature. Its several domains - e-mails, chatrooms (those which exist in real time and those which do not), the world of fantasy games, instant messaging, and the World Wide Web - offer us novel possibilities of human communication, and each presents a teaching challenge, for children have to learn to manage their Neteracy and Netiquette well, if they are to control the new medium and not be controlled by it. The first step, accordingly, is to understand the ways in which these domains work, for they are fundamentally different from anything we have seen before in speech or writing.

The styles of communication widely used in interpersonal Internet communication are noticeably more informal than anything we have seen before - omitting capitalization and punctuation, for example - but they do not present teachers with a new linguistic world. Teachers have been helping children to be sensitive to the differences between formal and informal speech and writing for generations, and the same pedagogical techniques can be used now in relation to the new medium. Internet styles, as any other, need to be used appropriately, if they are to be effective. There is nothing revolutionary here. The big differences lie elsewhere.

What is revolutionary about e-mails is the way the medium permits what is called *framing*. You receive a message which contains, say, three different points in a single paragraph. You can, if you want, reply to each of these points by taking the paragraph, splitting it up into three parts, and then responding to each part separately, so that the message you send back then looks a bit like a play dialogue. Then, your sender can do the same thing to your responses, and when you get the message back, you see the replies to your replies. You can then send the lot on to someone else for further comments, and when it comes back, there are now three voices framed on the screen. And so it can go on - replies within replies within replies - and all unified within the same screen typography. There's never been anything like this in the history of human written communication. And this is where teaching becomes trickier - for we have to advise on such things as how to maintain order through a thread of messages, to achieve a consistent style, and to maintain clarity of expression. And much of this is uncharted territory.

Real-time Internet discussion groups - chatrooms - also offer a revolutionary set of possibilities. You see on your screen messages coming in from all over the world. If there are 30 people in the room, then you could be seeing 30 different messages, all making various contributions to the theme, but often clustering into half a dozen or more sub-conversations. It's like being in a cocktail party where there are other conversations going on all around you. In the party, of course, you can't pay attention to them. In a chatroom you can't avoid them. It has never been possible before, in the history of human communication, to 'listen' to 30 people at once. Now you can. Moreover, you can respond to as many of them as your mental powers and typing speed permit. Some youngsters are virtuoso chatroom interactants, but many are not, and they need help to handle the pressures of such multi-party interaction efficiently and effectively.

The pages of the Web offer a further domain of revolutionary language use. The one thing we can say about traditional writing is that it is permanent. You open a book at page 6, close the book, then open it at page 6 again. You expect to see the same thing. You would be more than a little surprised if the page had changed in the interim. But this kind of impermanence is perfectly normal on the Web - where indeed you can see the page changing in front of your eyes. Words appear and disappear, in varying colours. Sentences slide onto the screen and off again. Letters dance around. The Web is truly part of a new, animated linguistic channel – more dynamic than traditional writing, and more permanent than traditional speech. It is neither speech nor writing. It is part of a new medium, and many new conventions are emerging, affecting such matters as column-width, paragraph length, and sentence complexity. The unreadability of many Weblogs ('blogs'), presenting screenfuls of unbroken text, illustrates what happens when Internet enthusiasm is allowed to reign ungoverned and untutored. It is a brave new world indeed, and one which needs teachers in it.

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