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Txting: the end of civilization (again)?

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This paper begins with the author's recent participation in an Australian radio interview on the topic of SMS txting. It takes this as an entry point for an analysis and discussion of the discourses around txting to be found in a series of newspaper articles and taken up in the radio interview. Moving on from the initial analysis, the paper addresses some of the underlying tensions that come into play as new technologies and new literacies are taken up by young people and move with them into classrooms with existing institutional traditions around text and literacy.

Introduction

I was interviewed on Australian radio this morning. From the perspective of text and literacy, it was a particularly interesting 20 minutes. The focus of the interview was a news item originating a day or so earlier from the BBC. According to the story, an unnamed 13-year-old Scottish schoolgirl had submitted an essay to her teacher written entirely in 'txt'. Apparently, the girl's essay was as follows:

> My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.

Translation:

> My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place. (BBC News Online, 2003a)

This report (Figure 1) was picked by a range of Australian daily newspapers, and its obvious urban-legend potential drew enough attention to warrant further discussion on many breakfast and morning radio programs. This was a topic that resonated with the public and as a result, I found myself on morning radio.

Orchestrated by the host, the radio discussion wound its way through the appropriateness of submitting an essay written in txt and further, submitting it via mobile phone. The phone submission aspect was not mentioned in the original article but reflects the way in which this single report fed into larger currents of

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Figure 1. Text 1

concern about the relationship between young people and new communications technologies. The discussion then moved to the challenge posed by txting's distinct style to traditional, 'correct' spelling and grammar. This was where my contribution to the debate was supposedly positioned: to comment on the legitimacy (or not) of txt as a form of text. But what came to interest me as I listened to the currents and eddies of the discussion was the way in which txting was being discursively positioned along with the selective representation of those who txt. This article and the debate it engendered were not freestanding. They were enmeshed in a discursive chain which linked txting to youth to declining standards to poor academic achievement to social breakdown.

The ways in which language is used in these skirmishes over control, access and legitimacy are both fascinating and pertinent to this discussion. And while the momentary settling of the voracious and fickle media gaze on one newspaper article published on the other side of the world may seem haphazard and therefore to be written off as programmatic filler, the ways in which these chains of discourse develop are not as random as they might appear and can and should be scrutinized.

As a consequence, my purpose in this paper is to draw attention to the constructions of txting and txters running through these debates, as evidenced in the following newspaper articles, and interrogate these in relation to broader themes relating to language and literacy. To do this, I begin by examining the initial newspaper article (Figure 1) along with another article, also reporting on txting, published the preceding day in the same newspaper (Figure 2).

Table 1. Lexical classification

| Teenage girl	Teacher	Standard English	Txting
13-year-old	Flabbergasted	Standard English	Riddled with hieroglyphics
Scottish girl	Asked not to be named	Page	Easier
She wrote	Not impressed	She wrote	Blamed
The girl's	Could not believe	Warned	Simple texting skills
Anonymous		Degree of crisis	Addicts
Scottish schoolgirl		Written English	Easier
		Normal writing	Shortcuts
		Pleasure of reading	Message
		Declining spelling and grammar	Little space as possible
		Simply could not translate	Shorter
			Short
			Rewritten in txt
			Teenage
			Spoil

Figure 2. Text 2
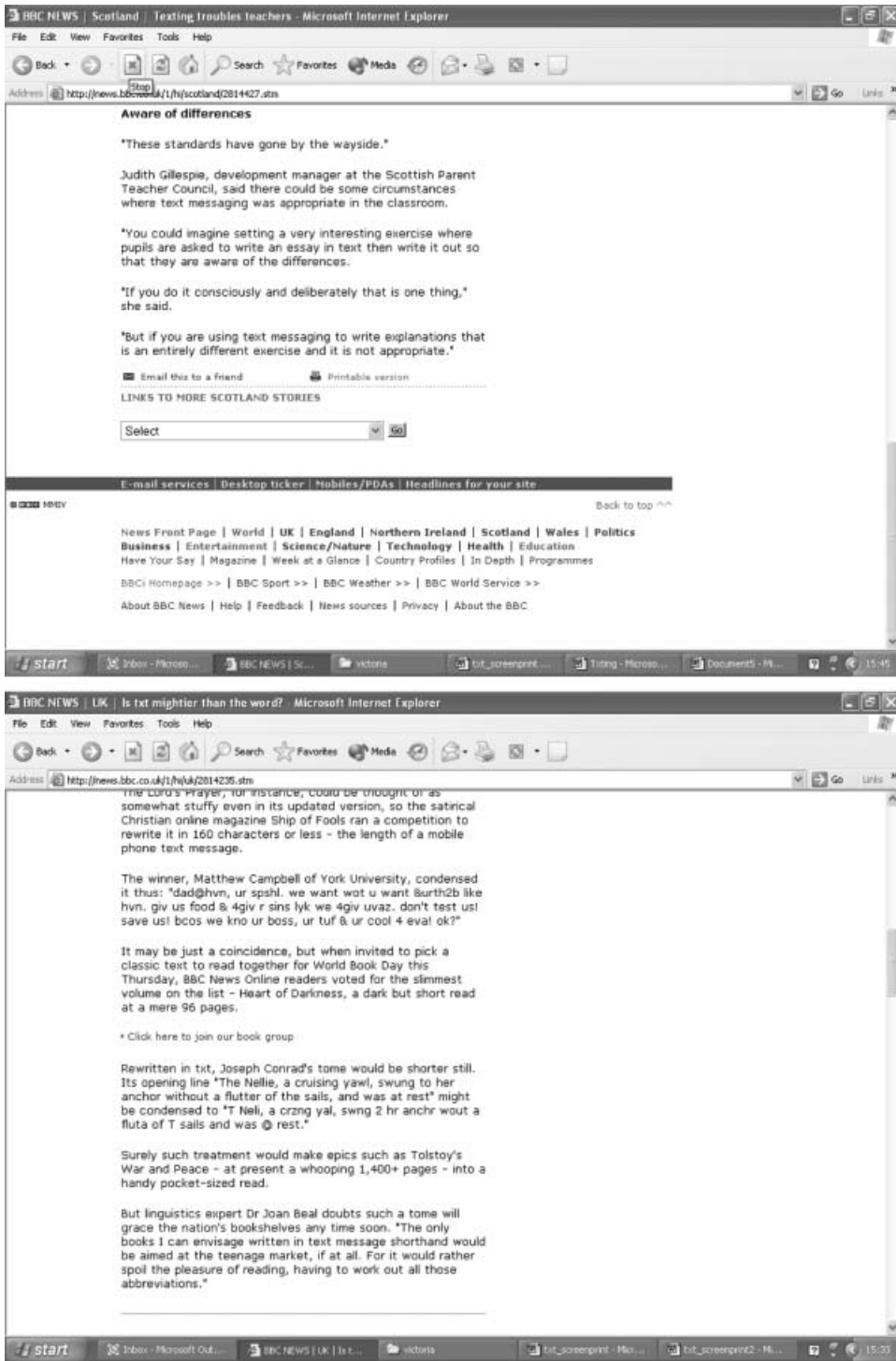
t'teing tfciiization (again)? 165
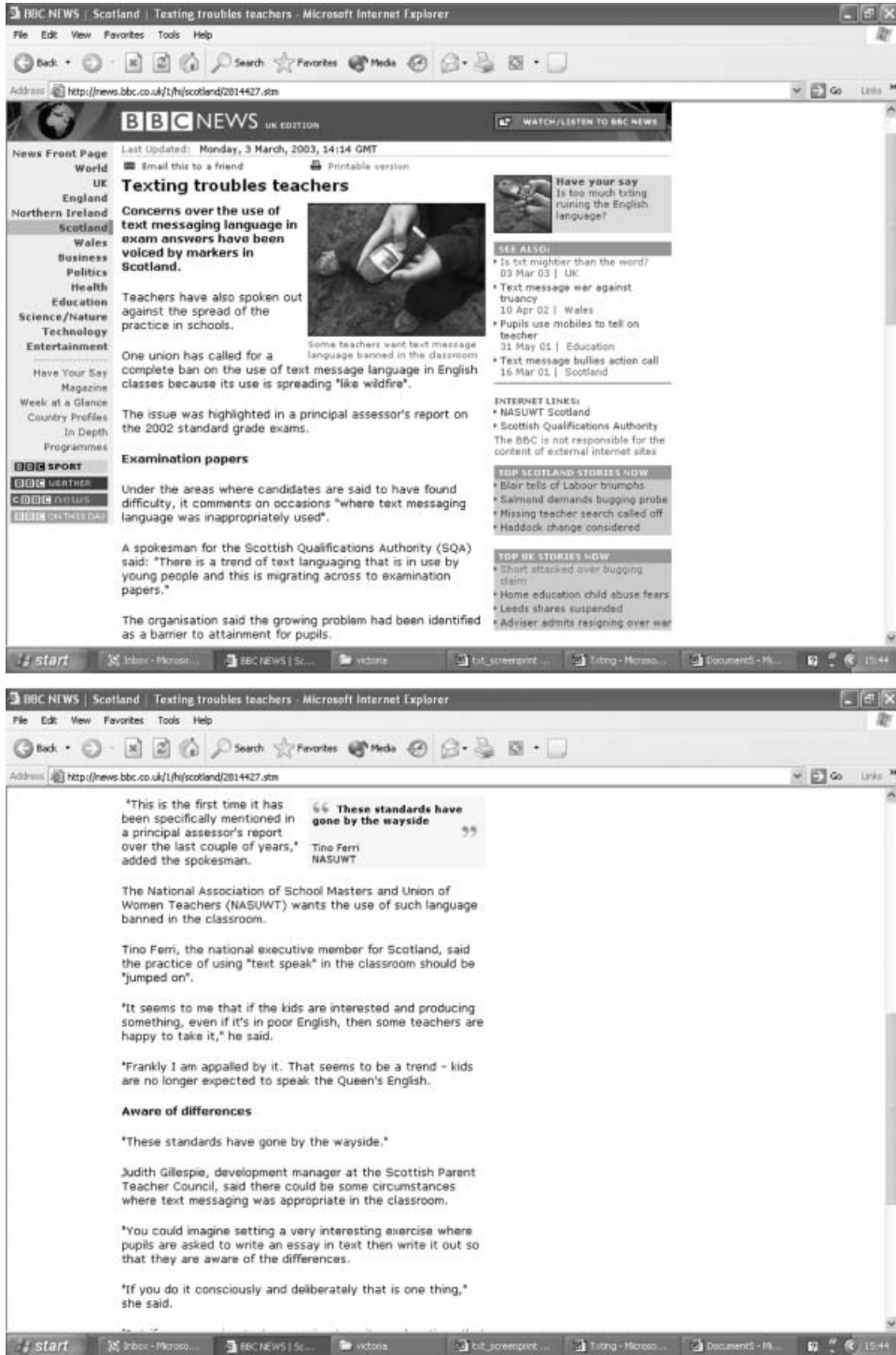
Figure 2. (*Continued.*)

Discourse analysis

The use of discourse analysis provides the analytic tools that allow us to 'read' below the surface, following the audit trail, as it were. In what follows, I have applied a very modest selection of the techniques of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Kamler, 1994) to two consecutive news articles related to txting. In particular, I have chosen to identify and classify lexical items as a mode of access to deeper readings of these texts because as Halliday (1978, 1982) and Kamler (1994) have noted, lexical classifications allow insight into the ideological positionings of the text and its authors. I too believe it to be a highly effective tool. In drawing upon lexical classification, I have analysed each article individually, taking note of the major participants (e.g., individuals, groups, institutions, countries) and have listed the lexical items associated with each participant. These items—nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs,

Table 2. Lexical classification

Teachers	Educational associations	Standard English	Txting	Txt users
Teachers	Union	English classes	Spread	Candidates
Spoken out against the practice	Principal Assessor's report	Difficulty	Inappropriately used	Pupils
Some teachers are happy to take it	Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)	Examination papers	Complete ban on the practice	Classrooms
	Organization	Queen's English	Spreading 'like wildfire'	Kids
	National Association of School Masters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)	Standards have gone by the wayside	Migrating	Kids
	National executive member	Essay in text	Growing problem	Young people
	Development manager	Then write it out	Language	Pupils
	Scottish Parent Teacher Council Appalled	Aware of differences	Banned	They
			Not appropriate	
			Complete ban	
			Inappropriate use	
			Barrier to attainment	
			'Text speak'	
			Should be jumped on	
			Poor English	
			It	
			Trend	

adverbs—together, construct and carry the meaning of the text. In addition to the lexical analysis of each text, I have then given thought to the implications when taken as a group. The combined 'network of wordings' (Kamler, 1994, p. 132) allows the pattern and power of discourses to become more readily apparent.

Four participants can be identified in this text—teenage girl, teacher, Standard English and txting. All four, however, are not equal. The two key discursive players in this text are not the girl or the teacher, but rather Standard English and txting. Standard English is linked to the traditional 'page' where 'normal writing' takes place and where people are able to enjoy the 'pleasure of reading'. Clearly, reading txt cannot be an intrinsically pleasurable activity. There is also a very strong representation of Standard English as under attack from txting and the 'addicts' who use it. The use of a number of lexical items connoting decline is significant. Use of the terms 'crisis', 'warning' and 'declining', when added to the terms 'normal writing' and 'written English' convey a powerful message about the relative legitimacy and moral standing of each form of text. Taken as a group of lexical items, they also point to the perilous position of Standard English as it is 'attacked' from without and within.

The girl and the teacher are not named, remaining nameless mechanisms via which the tension between Standard English and txting are introduced. Their presence in the text is to provide a context for the other discourses. So we see that the girl features only in very vague terms and remains as anonymous as her description in-text. As Kamler (1994) has noted, the use of pronouns is a powerful marker of social relationships and distributions of power—to remain unnamed in a text renders the participant powerless and insignificant. The teacher's (genderless) role is to signify the shock/horror of decent educators everywhere when confronted with the attack on standards inherent in the 'hieroglyphics' of txt. The anonymous teacher was 'flabbergasted', 'not impressed', and 'could not believe' (presumably her/his eyes) when confronted with the txt presented by the equally anonymous schoolgirl.

Polemic, or oppositional positions, between Standard English and txting are discursively constructed, with txting represented as the abnormal intruder. Its association with the 'addicts' that use it brings txting very close to representation as a social disease that threatens the very fibre, and health, of our society and core language. The use of the term 'addicts' is interesting. There is almost the unspoken comment here that recreational use of txting may ultimately lead to addiction and a lowering of an individual's ability to shift between text types according to social context—that increasing mastery and use of txt must ipso facto lead to withering skills around other text forms embraced within the parameters of Standard English. In the end, the addict finds little comfort or pleasure in her/his addiction. There is no recognition here that the term 'Standard' is problematic itself, or that all competent language users shift between various types and forms of textual and other language use on a daily, even hourly basis in the course of our daily activities. There is also no room for an engagement with, or co-option of, new forms of text as they evolve around new technologies and social practices.

The language of the article and the relative power, the article, ascribed to Standard English and txting construct a particular and highly positioned 'reading'. This is continued in Text 2.

This second text brings institutional discourses to bear as the focus shifts away from teachers as institutional representatives to official associations. Again, a range of participants can be identified: teachers, educational associations, Standard English, txting and txt users. In this article, a spokesperson for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) was quoted as claiming that the 'growing problem' of text language 'migrating' to examination papers was becoming a 'barrier to attainment'. Reflecting this concern, the National Association of School Masters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) reportedly argued that txting language should be banned in classrooms. These are quite strong opinions reflecting the depth of the issues at stake. Teachers have a dual positioning in this text. On one hand, they are representatives of the canon and have therefore 'spoken out against the practice' of txting. On the other, they are the ones who are, by their inactivity, allowing the spread of txting into classrooms, incurring the ire of the more powerful associations. Standard English is again one of the key discourses, identified in relation to its decline. There is a clear discursive link between Standard English and the ability to do well in exams with the use of lexical items such as 'essay in text', 'difficulty', 'exam papers', 'attainment'. Examinations have become firmly established as a high stakes, highly particularized form of textual practice that are shrouded in an institutional aura of difficulty and secrecy.

Examinations, then, are also a key participant. In the above analysis, I have included the single lexical item 'examination' under the participant heading of Standard English. However, the central role of the examination in educational and literacy discourses makes it a silent participant in its own right. By comparison, most lexical items are associated with txting, ranging from it being a 'barrier to attainment', a 'trend' and 'inappropriate'. The disassociation of txting from the 'Queen's English' is made clear via words such as 'spreading like wildfire', 'migrating'. Txting, then, is an alien and inferior form of language that is infecting the 'real' English language and resulting in lower standards in examinations. In each of these articles, txting itself is given higher priority than the people who are using it.

The defence of civilization

The two texts work synergistically to construct a window on the world that is shaded and coloured in particular ways. Txting is clearly constructed in direct opposition to legitimate language, represented by the notion of Standard (or the Queen's) English. The 'network of wordings' collude to guide the reader to a view of txting as a spoiled version of legitimate text and language use, used by individuals—always young—taking shortcuts and falling victim to a 'fad'. Txt as a form of text is criticized from this position and so is its actual use, leading to implied critique of the conditions—social and technological—of production. By contrast, Standard English is represented in terms of institutional sanction and correctness. This establishes

battle lines between competing textual forms and social practices. The stakes at both institutional and individual level are also identified in the logical chain strung between academic failure, declining standards and txting and in the purposeful anonymity of the other participants in each article.

It is well established in the literature that the version of literacy recognized and valued in classrooms and schools is but one version of the many literacies in operation within a society (Gee, 1992; New London Group, 2000). Consequently, its selection as legitimate and transmission via literacy curricula has more to do with particular power relationships and patterns of social organization than with intrinsic worth per se. Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1987) took up the issue and argued convincingly that much of what takes place in the name of education acts to naturalize and reproduce existing social hierarchies and power inequities. In turn, having mastery of the literacies and knowledges valued within institutions such as schools builds and maintains powerful sources of individual and group cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, literacy instruction and texts are highly pedagogic and highly politicized, not just in the sense of 'teaching' literacy skills but more importantly, in the inculcation of a structured misrecognition of the naturalness of the status quo and the daily social and economic advantage of some individuals and groups at the expense of others. This concern underwrote Friere's (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* and his drive to develop and implement a transformative educational agenda which would give the socially and economically marginalized the skills to 'read the world' and even more radically, to transform it. Rigorous standardized testing, published leagues tables and the normative curricula and surveillance regimes of the type enveloping the United Kingdom are the flip-side of this concern. Left unsupervised in classrooms to interpret and deliver the official curriculum and its version of literacy, teachers are the ultimate loose canons who may, wittingly or unwittingly, provide students with the skills to enact substantive social change. As a result, teachers, the schools in which they work, and those who train them are increasingly monitored and controlled and to complete the gordian knot, much of the rhetoric around this increasing surveillance is couched in terms of maintaining or improving literacy standards. This is why debates around what constitutes 'legitimate' language use are always so intense. There is always much more at stake than would appear at first glance.

One of the sub-texts of the radio discussion was discipline, understood primarily in relation to the authority of teacher and traditional printed text. This invisible layer of meaning could be seen in the use of terms, both in the radio interview and in the original BBC article—'addicts', 'hieroglyphics', 'easier', 'declining standards of spelling and grammar', 'normal writing', 'succumb', 'travesty'—that positioned both txt and txt users as deviant in relation to the established model of literacy practice. It is also interesting to note where responsibility for ensuring the maintenance of the existing language form is positioned. Returning for a moment to the BBC articles, while much of the discussion revolved around falling standards and inappropriate use of technology, a portion of the blame for the seeping of txt language into classrooms and exams and the concomitant lowering of achievement, was attached

to teachers. Given the trend towards increasing control over teacher practice this is not unexpected. The NASUWT representative noted:

> It seems to me that if the kids are interested and producing something, even if it's in poor English, then some teachers are happy to take it. (see Figure 2)

Here, teachers are clearly positioned as custodians of a particular 'correct' version of English and, additionally, found to be acting inappropriately if they are not vigilant enough. Following Bourdieu's arguments one step further, for the 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 2001) of existing language and social structures to continue to be reproduced, the roles of those most closely connected to young people and the development of literacy and language skills must themselves be strictly monitored. This oblique attack on the vigilance of some teachers is but one example of this monitoring. There are others related to literacy and text. Motherhood is another example. It is well established in the family literacy and women's studies research literature that a connection has often been made between discourses of 'good' mothering and print-based early literacy experiences (Leira, 1990, 1992, 1998; Morisset, 1997; Reay, 1998; Arandell, 2000). 'Good' mothers and 'good' parents spend time with their children, enculturating them into the patterns and relationships of print literacy so that young children arrive at school already knowing how to be school-literate and already sharing in the dominant cultural mores.

Standards and youth

At a deeper level, this patterning of discourse also acts to position both young people and standards as in need of protection. Protection from what is an interesting question. The easiest answer is, of course, txt. Young people require protection from addiction to a deficit form of text and from allowing its use to jeopardize their success in the strictly regulated examination processes in place in the UK. In this sense, they require protection from themselves and from txt. The clear focus here is the risk posed to the educational futures of students by the infiltration of txting into classroom activities. Fears for young people are, of course, not limited to txting. Hosted by the mass media, there is ongoing concern, manifested in a continuum of public debate from informed discussion to outright hysteria, with the risk to young people of unsupervised access to technology. This theme of youth as risk and at risk can also be seen running through other issues—access to Internet pornography and risk of interaction with online paedophiles is a current example. The crisis being constructed around txting is linked very specifically to the activities of early adolescents, quite overtly to the vigilance of teachers and less obviously, to the supervisory role of parents. There is silence in relation to the use of txting by adults.

Standards and their protection is a more complex discourse, linked to Bourdieuian arguments about control of language and maintenance of existing patterns of influence and power. These are deeply embedded, in Bourdieu's terms via 'doxa' in our culture (Bourdieu, 2001). But on another level, these discourses connect to more immediate political contexts. In the climate of testing and accountability in which contemporary educational institutions and associations dwell, any deviation

from the 'standard' can have dire and rapid consequences including public humiliation in the published leagues tables of examination and school results, in the probability of increased external regulation and control of their programs as a consequence, in the potential for fiscal pain as funding is withdrawn or withheld. Txt is therefore a legitimate threat on multiple levels.

When additional tensions around funding and institutional surveillance are added to the mix, is it any wonder that one young person's use of txting to either resist or merely respond to the highly predictable 'What did you do on your summer vacation?' essay assignment received such a high-profile and immediate response.

Txting is being linked to a new 'literacy crisis' as once again, change and instability are experienced by individual and institution alike. Adding to the rhetoric of 'crisis' are concerns over the increasing legitimacy that popular culture is finding in the work of educators and researchers (see, for example, Buckingham, 1993; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Carrington, 2001; Marsh, 2003). Luke *et al.* (1996a, 1996b) gathered empirical data connecting a series of literacy crises with changes in broader social and economic contexts. Their work established very quickly that literacy crises are historically constructed and contextualized and are more about change and perceived 'moral' decline—in effect about changes in the status quo—than reading and writing per se. Literacy is always a litmus paper for social change and the tensions this creates and the same increasingly holds true in relation to popular culture. The issues around txting unpacked here are an example of the overlap between popular culture and literacy—for some, a worrying trend indeed. When we consider the connection between language use and the construction of particular belief systems and identities (see, for example, Gee, 1994; Gee *et al.*, 1998), and the added complication of institutional pressures, tensions such as the ones that can be extracted from one radio interview and two news items—mere slices in time and discourse—are understandable.

Conclusion

Whatever else txt may be and what it may represent to various sections of our community, it remains an emergent form of text with quite explicit skills, social practices and knowledges associated with it (Carrington, in press). Regardless of institutional politics and pressures, these should not be discounted by literacy educators, particularly those of us working from a critical social perspective who believe that the ultimate purpose of literacy lies outside the classroom, that its raison d'être should be to enhance individual and group opportunities for imagining and enacting different configurations of social and economic access. If this is the view of literacy underpinning school policy and curricula, then txting takes its place as one of a range of texts, literacies and social practices with which students, as 'researchers of language' (Comber, 1994, p. 661) will engage critically.

It is my view that the key to being literate in post-industrial information economies is to have a grasp of the most valued and useful genres and to be able to shift between

them as required by context. These genres are increasingly multimodal (New London Group, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2003). While many of the pre-existing print-centric forms of text are still socially and economically valued, a range of new technologies and new economic and political contexts are ushering in new texts, social practices, and accompanying literacies. Txt is but one. Like Gee (1994, 2003) and many others, I am arguing that 'literacy' must be understood to extend beyond the ability to encode and decode print. Much of the meaning of contemporary text is embedded in the graphics, symbols, images and sounds that surround print (Kress, 2003). Complementing this view, Gee (2003) argues the prioritization of semiotic domains that position the concept of print literacy within a broader notion of communicative practice. Consequently, to effectively 'read' these new genres and work within and across semiotic domains requires skills that extend beyond older notions of reading and writing and draw upon quite different social practices, technologies and worlds. Unfortunately, as the articles and discourses analysed here suggest, schools and curricula remain wedded to an older and increasingly inadequate view that will not equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in a range of semiotic domains. The strictures of standardized testing and normative curricula and pedagogic frames continue to locate reading and writing as a set of print based 'facts and principles' (Gee, 2003, p. 19) or 'content' to be mastered.

If we are to believe Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1991) then the emergence of txting and institutional responses to it must be read in light of the potential challenge that a new textual practice poses to the established social structure. And, as noted earlier, the institutional concerns reflected in the news articles are entirely logical. This stand-off has implications for our roles as literacy educators. On one hand, we are constrained by long-standing institutional pressures to restrict the 'literacy' of our classrooms to a particular set of practices. To do other than this is to leave ourselves and our schools open to critique and sanction. On the other, it is increasingly evident that new texts and new social configurations are in currency outside school where the children in our classrooms will need to adroitly read and construct hybridized and emergent forms of text, as well as the more traditional texts of modernist society, in order to ensure their own successful participation in economic and information flows (Gee *et al.*, 1998; New London Group, 2001).

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this dilemma. What is required, I believe, is a professional dialogue around the purpose of literacy in contemporary society. It is time to move beyond a call to repackaged modernist 'basics' or to the traditional canonical texts of the white, middle classes, and it is well past the time to argue over method or to propose yet another integrative model of curriculum or pedagogy. At this point, the questions become more substantive: What is the purpose of literacy given the power and reach of information economies and the inequities left in their wake? What does it mean to be 'literate' in contemporary economies and cultural landscapes? What kinds of texts will the students in our classrooms find it necessary to 'read' and manipulate and produce in order to effectively participate in civic life?

These questions then lead unerringly to a consideration of how school-based curricula, along with teacher education and professional development might reflect these changes within, and perhaps stretching, the parameters of institutional and political priorities. Staffrooms, professional journals, email discussion lists and car pool journeys must resound with dialogue focusing on these core issues. Until the profession addresses these fundamental questions, discussions about the relative merit of new texts and new literacies versus old texts and old literacies will go nowhere and stay there.

Returning to the initial news report, the worst that could be said about that 13-year-old schoolgirl was that, unaware of the high stakes surrounding institutional literacy practices, she chose an inappropriate genre in which to respond to a class assignment. I doubt very much that her actions signal the beginning of the end of civilization as we know it and suspect that 'standards' will survive for some time. Her use of txting was, in fact, quite sophisticated and she was clearly experimenting with how far into other discursive spaces her mastery of txting could reach. It is my view that she was mastering and using a new literacy with positive social payoffs in her out-of-school contexts. She was clearly demonstrating literate skills, utilizing new technologies to carry out social functions, carve out an identity within particular semiotic domains, and in the process, incidentally ran foul of the deeply embedded norms of classroom literacy practice.

Unfortunately, as the discourse analysis shows, this young woman was rendered nameless and invisible within the various institutional discourses of resistance that came into play as a response. But, in an interesting twist, her emergence as anonymous urban-legend may provide a discursive space for the kinds of substantive dialogues that are long overdue in our profession.

Notes

1. With the term 'doxa', Bourdieu attempts to describe the process whereby traditions and social rituals (everyday practices) become self-evident and self-reinforcing.

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