

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of New Media

Kathryn Barton looks at the perks and perils of new media tools, including the dangerous practice of 'sexting' among teens; why four-in-10 young people are too wired to sleep; and, what does all this 'connectedness' mean for learning.

Back in the mid-Sixties, we got the phone on at home. It took Mum and Dad ages to work out where to put it. Talking on the phone other than Dr Who-style inside a big, red telephone box was to be a brand-new experience.

I was just a little kid when the man from the Post Master General's came knocking, but I remember it clearly. It was an event – like man walking on the moon, or the 'colour' Dulux commercial that turned itself inside out trying to flash the colour spectrum on our black and white TV.

Once the real phone arrived, we lost interest in our mobiles – two IXL Apricot Jam tins and a great length of sturdy string. Up until then, we had given them a real work out. If our phones were lost or broken or – hard to believe – stolen, Mum would quickly run up new ones, stabbing the base of the cans with a skewer, threading string through the holes, and tying it fast with sturdy knots. Two of us would then run in opposite directions until the line stretched taut. The 'caller' would then speak into one can while the 'called' cupped the other can to an ear that, occasionally, would finish up ringed with jam if Mum had been in a bit of a hurry.

It was fabulous speaking with one another through such a high-tech device! And, as far as we knew back then, our Mum invented this cutting edge (in more ways than one...) technology, and it rapidly caught on. Soon all the kids at school had mobiles and, while infinitely portable, they did suffer from coverage that was, sadly, a little inferior to Telstra's NextG.

Throw in our leaving messages scrawled in chalk on our blackboard, kicking off a game of Chinese Whispers, sticking notes on bedroom doors, or on half-slobbered Easter eggs in the fridge, and that was it – social networking in the Sixties.

Forty-odd years later, and it's a very different story. The market is flooded with all manner of communications tools and social networking sites and we're flocking to them in our millions. Human beings have never been more plugged-in and connected – and that's a notion that has given rise to a number of questions and concerns.

In a challenging digital age, even parents who know little about cyberspace can teach their children the importance of safeguarding their digital footprint – the indelible record left by anyone who uses the internet, email and/or social networking as a means of communicating, be it joining conversations and sharing images with online friends or friends online, or 'tweeting' instant thoughts to a wider audience.

Perhaps a useful definition of 'social networking' may help the conversation. Associate Professor Catherine McLoughlin, from Australian Catholic University's School of Education, describes social networking sites as places to share information, channels for informal interaction, such as Facebook, MySpace, Habbo and more, "and they are also informal learning environments". Yes, learning environments!

The phrase 'Web 2.0' is a similar term and describes the invisible line in cyberspace where the internet morphed from a largely passive set of static web pages to become much more dynamic and loaded with shareable content (videos, photos, text), which is the basis of the interactive nature of social networking.

Parent's 'top list of worries'

Parent groups who spoke with *About Catholic Schools* said social networking had climbed to the very top of their list of worries. Some of the questions and concerns worrying parents are:

- Is all this connectedness harmful?
- What can young people do to keep themselves safe?
- Is social networking habit-forming?
- Are there benefits? How much is too much?
- Is social networking to blame for my teen's poor sleeping habits?
- How can parents better cope with their children's 'need' for constant connectivity and immediate social communication?
- Should they be concerned?
- How can they narrow the gap between their skills and their children's'?

Our report – *Malice in Wonderland* – will attempt to answer those questions, and others.

What can parents do?

Parents should be open-minded, talk to their children about their use of technology and understand why it's important, Dr McLoughlin said. "Increasingly, parents need to understand that the traditional emphasis on print is being overshadowed by multimodal texts (sound, vision and graphics) and digital technology," she said. "Today, words and images are combined and the reading of visual information involves quite a different process than the reading of words. Students can create texts that combine words, images, sound and animation, a very simple example of which could be a PowerPoint presentation."

Parents also need to know that online tools are subject to fads and fashion and that while Twitter is catching the headlines this year, it may be a passing trend, Dr McLoughlin said. "What is here to stay however, is the internet, and of course the vast array of social networking tools that can enable mutually beneficial sharing of ideas and skills, connecting with friends and peers and keeping up-to-date and participating in global communities. For parents, I believe that this that entails recognising that there are a whole series of things they don't know about their children's patterns of communication and socialisation that are important for them to learn and to understand."

The Council of Catholic School Parents executive director Danielle Cronin said many parents were, indeed, worried about social networking and its propensity – in the right environment – to get quickly out of control. But many more were "totally unaware of the types of behaviours their children are (or potentially could be) engaging in when it comes to their mobile phone use and other social networking tools".

"Of course the approach to tackling this needs to be a balanced one," Ms Cronin said. "It needs to balance good information about what the dangers are with good information that builds the capacity of parents and young people to monitor/use these tools in safe and useful ways."

Technology and social networking have become part of the fabric of our lives, opening up many and varied opportunities, most of them positive, Ms Cronin said. “Parents can’t afford to be left behind and nor should they become scared of social networking. Rather, parents need to know and understand the purpose and capabilities of these tools and support their young people to be responsible and safe ‘digital citizens’. This month, the CCSP – in collaboration with the CEO, Sydney and others – launched its iConnect Conference with the aim of closing the digital divide between parents and their children.

President of the CEO’s Sydney Federation of Catholic School Parents (FCSP) Susanne Bickmore-Hutt – also a mother of five young adults – said the federation received many calls from concerned parents on the topic. “And I do mean ‘many’,” she said, adding that the topic was “top priority” and firmly on the federation’s radar.

“We, in conjunction with the CEO, Sydney, provide information workshops for parents on topics such as cyber bullying, and we have local police talk to schools and parents throughout the year, and have done so for quite a few years now.

“The concern I have is that parents are not the issue here,” Ms Bickmore-Hutt said. “Parents are mostly well informed and generally do their best to supervise and scrutinise their children’s networking time. But the children themselves have created this problem and, without the benefit of maturity, do not fully comprehend the consequences of their actions. Or do they?”

Ms Bickmore-Hutt said that – following the iConnect Conference – the group would look at the possibility of organising a student forum, which may even take place online.

“It really is a child’s world today in regards to technology,” she said. “They were conceived and have grown into a world that can be foreign to their parents. They have the advantage and always will. It’s not their fault, but they have to take responsibility for it. Why not trust that children can create change that will benefit the next generation? If we can encourage student leaders to run a forum and gather ideas that may combat problem areas, I think we are focusing on the problem and not just creating knee-jerk reactions.”

Dr McLoughlin said technology and social networking were having a big – but not bad – impact on young people and their learning. “There is evidence that technology supports, motivates, and improves performance, creating more opportunities for interaction and communication,” she said. “However, using social software tools also raise questions about literacy and identity issues in literacy and learning.”

E-safety and the Digital Divide

(Breakout) “Parents who take the time to learn the new tools are closing the digital divide between themselves and their kids...” Dr Catherine McLoughlin

“Parents who take the time to learn the new tools are closing the digital divide between themselves and their kids, and expanding their thinking about social communication and information exchange,” Dr McLoughlin said. “These parents will be more aware of the competencies, the understandings and the knowledge that kids need in order to survive and thrive in an increasingly media-saturated world.”

Current and emerging practices within social networking point to a widening digital divide between adults unfamiliar with social networking norms and teenagers whose lives appear to revolve around the creation and maintenance of friendship networks – and their own identities – online, Dr McLoughlin said. “The very language of social relationships is being reframed and a new vocabulary

marks the divide between youth and their parents. Today, adolescents go online to construct their 'profile', make it 'public' or 'private', they 'comment' or 'message' or 'poke' their friends on their 'wall', they 'block' or 'add' people to their network and so forth," Dr McLoughlin said.

While such activities may appear harmless, Dr McLoughlin said the practice was far from risk-free and could leave the social networker exposed to victimisation and harassment from online predators. This was particularly so if young internet users lacked the strategies for managing privacy and ethical aspects of online exposure where personal details were made public in cyberspace, thus exposing them to further risks. Wise parents become active participants in their children's social networking, if only to identify the risks and help their child navigate their way through the settings which help protect their personal information, images and other content, Dr McLoughlin said.

Facebook, perhaps the best-known social networking site with more than 500 million members worldwide, is sending a member of its security team to Australia this month (September) to help thwart cyber predators. Facebook will work with child-safety advocates to create workshops on the topic. The move follows the arrest of eleven men – three of them Australian – who, police say, are part of a major child pornography ring currently operating within Facebook. The Australian Federal Police said while Facebook 'deactivated' the men's accounts within hours, the groups were said to be reforming the international child exploitation ring by opening up new accounts. Visit Facebook's Safety Centre here: www.facebook.com/help/?safety

Sexting

One form of very risky behaviour that has become more frequent in Australia is known as 'sexting' – a play on the word 'texting', Dr McLoughlin said. Sexting is the distribution of sexy words and/or pictures via mobile phone, possibly intended for the recipient only, but are just too easy to upload onto social networking sites. Once there, the pictures are visible to a bigger audience than perhaps first intended – and sometimes that audience is global. "Sexting involves taking pictures of oneself alone or with others in sexy poses, engaging in intimate behaviour, or exposing a body part," she said. The consequences of such risky behaviour – such as public humiliation, cyber bullying and, in some cases, sexual assault – are detailed by the NSW Government in its fact sheet '[Safe Sexting: No such thing](#)'. The person in the photo(s) may be harassed, victimised or ridiculed when the photos are made public without their knowledge or consent, Dr McLoughlin said.

Respected children's charity and online portal, Kids Helpline – an initiative of BoysTown – also details the consequences of, and warnings about, risky behaviour such as sexting on its website (www.kidshelp.com.au). For instance, taking, sending or receiving sexual images of a minor – **and all school children aged 18 and under are minors** – is illegal. "If you're found to have a naked or semi-naked photo of someone under 18 on your phone or your computer, you can be charged with a criminal offence," BoysTown General Manager – Counselling Services, Wendy Protheroe, said. "If you forward the photo to someone else you can be charged with a criminal offence even if you delete it from your own phone. You can be charged even if it is a photo of yourself and you agree to the photo being sent."

Breakout: *In 2007, 32 Victorian teenagers were charged with child pornography offences.*

Remember that everything you send might become public. Think how easy it is to forward a photo or a message. In 2009, a Year 12-equivalent student, Jessica Logan, from Ohio, USA sent a sexy picture to her boyfriend. After they broke up, he sent it to some friends, who sent it to some friends... Soon, the picture had made its way around seven high schools. "People she didn't know were texting her and she had messages left on her Facebook page calling her a 'slut' and 'porn

queen' and other nasty names," Ms Protheroe said. "The harassment and persecution overwhelmed her and, sadly, the young woman suicided."

Ms Protheroe said all who engage in social networking would do well to remember that "once you've sent something you can't get it back". "Think about your future and how you might like people to see you," she said. "Maybe you will try to get a job, or join a sports team, or fall in love with someone else. You probably won't want these future relationships jeopardised because you once sent a sexualised image to someone to try and 'hook up' with them."

The portal also asks would-be sexters to "think about how the person receiving the text will feel" when the sext arrives. "Maybe they do not want you sending them these types of messages or images," he/she said. "This sort of communication is not always welcome and can be highly embarrassing for the person sending the message as well as for the recipient. You might think what you have sent is 'sexy', however the person receiving it may feel it is abusive and/or pornographic." And if they do, they may think about telling someone in authority – the picture and information about who sent it may even end up in the hands of the police.

The legal side of things

Australian Lawyers Alliance director and criminal barrister Greg Barns said teens who sent sexts risked being prosecuted under child pornography charges due to a grey area that exists because of a mismatch in State and Federal laws. Minors could even find themselves listed on the child-sex register which could have devastating effects on their future employment and travel plans.

The law was not crafted in the era of sexting, texting and emails, and needed to be redefined so that new laws would not "make criminals out of teenagers", Mr Barns said. But, until such time as the rules were modified, 'sexters' should be aware that they could be judged under the same laws that see those who engage in child pornography taken into custody.

Along with the NSW Department of Education, parent groups such as the Council of Catholic School Parents (CCSP) said any form of sexting was dangerous. CCSP executive director Danielle Cronin said young people tended to live in the moment, with little concern for the future.

While statistics on sexting had yet to be compiled, but NSW Police crime statistics show that threats and harassment, under which sexting can be categorised, have spiked by 5.5 per cent in NSW in the past two years.

What you can do if things go wrong

KidsHelpline's Wendy Protheroe said all was not lost if someone had sent an image or text and was worried about what might happen. "There are some things you can do to try and make sure that your texts don't get passed on and/or you don't get accused of sending inappropriate things:

- You may have sent it to your boyfriend or girlfriend; if so, consider asking them to delete the message from their phone or inbox
- If you have sent an image or text that you feel is now out of your control, talk to a trusted adult or contact a Kids Helpline counsellor to work out what you can do.

You could feel you are being pressured to send them. Remember, like any form of sexual behaviour you have the right to say 'No' and to let them know that you are serious.

If someone sends you a 'sexy' image:

- Do not forward the image to anyone - consider what this could mean to the person involved
- If the text is from a friend, tell them you do not want any more texts like that from them
- If the texts keep coming, then block that sender. 'Unfriend' them from your social networking account. Block their number on your phone
- You might need to change your mobile number. If you do, make sure that only friends you trust get your new number

"Remember: don't be pressured into doing something you don't want to do," HE/SHE said. "We're not just talking about sexting now. If it makes you feel uncomfortable, and you're really not OK with something, then don't do it. Talk to your parents, another adult that you trust or Kids Helpline. If you've got yourself in a mess, they might be able to help you out of it."

The NSW Government – through its schools.nsw.gov.au portal – has also weighed into the topic, advising parents to:

- Warn their children about the consequences of sexting.
- Remind children to think before they act.
- Tell children that sending or possessing child pornography is illegal.
- Warn them about sexual predators.
- Parents should learn how to use and monitor their children's mobile phones.
- Parents should check photo galleries on their children's Facebook and MySpace accounts.
- Give your children clear rules on what they can and can't do with their mobile phone.

Why can't my child sleep?

All this connectedness is costing some young people their sleep – and, if it goes on for long enough, their health.

Associate Professor Amanda Gamble said poor sleep was a common and debilitating problem affecting around one million Australian teenagers. In fact, 20 to 30 percent of all teenagers suffer from a sleep problem that is serious enough to warrant diagnosis as a sleep disorder, she said.

"Adolescence is a critical period for the development of sleep problems and the most common amongst teenagers is insomnia which is persistent difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or waking too early," Dr Gamble said. Based on her clinical practice with young people, Dr Gamble said the main culprits affecting children's sleep were computers – especially search engines and social networking sites, gaming systems such as Playstation, Nintendo DS, and mobile phones. "These are the most frequently used technologies at night that impact sleep," she said.

"There are positive and negatives to social networking technology," Dr Gamble said. "It really depends on how much you use it. Like anything, moderate use is usually best. On the plus side – it's a great way to feel connected to your friends. On the down side – spending too long on the computer or mobile, particularly at night, can disrupt sleep."

Dr Gamble said it was "likely" that sleep problems in young people would continue to rise. "As society becomes more and more 'switched on', the expectation to be available 24/7 will get stronger," she said. "In general, there is increasing pressure on young people to balance school, work, family commitments and socialising, all of which impacts sleep."

Parents should talk to their child about their sleep and their use of technology and, if parents or the young person are concerned about sleep they should seek help," she said. "Insomnia is a complex area and there is no one piece of advice that will work for everyone. Treating insomnia involves more than just evaluating the young person's use of gadgets but certainly making a decision to switch off appliances an hour before bed would not hurt."

Dr Gamble says it is normal to experience the odd night where it took a while to fall asleep, however if a young person is regularly having trouble falling asleep, it is important to figure out why. "Many teenagers find it hard to 'wind down' at night," she said. "Even though they feel tired, they might lie awake in bed thinking about stuff that happened at school, worrying about school, family and friends, solving problems, or just feel frustrated because they can't drift off to sleep."

Difficulty falling asleep can also arise because of lifestyle factors, she said. "During adolescence, teenagers achieve greater independence and responsibility, which can affect sleep. They have more demands on their time such as school, work, socialising and staying out late. Teenagers also tend to use electronic devices like computers and mobile phones late at night. These devices increase arousal making it harder for the brain and body to sleep."

Regardless of why teens may be having trouble falling asleep, "practising good sleep hygiene" will help them sleep better.

Here are Dr Gamble's basic tips for good sleep hygiene:

- Keep the same bedtimes and wake times every day. This will help regulate your sleep/wake patterns.
- Exposure to sunlight is a strong cue that controls when the body sleeps and wakes. Get outside into the bright light in the morning. Use dim light in the evening.
- Avoid caffeinated foods (chocolate) and drinks (coffee, tea, Coke, and energy drinks).
- Make your bedroom a comfortable environment that is conducive to sleep.
- Avoid mentally stimulating activities or exercising prior to bed.
- Turn your mobile and computer off when you are going to sleep.
- Develop a relaxing bedtime routine that 'signals' the brain and body to fall asleep.
- Go to bed only when you are sleepy.
- If you can't get to sleep, don't lie in bed stressing or feeling frustrated. Instead, get out of bed and sit somewhere quietly. Do something non-stimulating (eg read) until you feel sleepy again and then go back to bed.

Dr Gamble said that most high-school age young people needed about nine or 10 hours sleep each night. "Unfortunately, most Australian teenagers get about seven hours of sleep a night, leaving them feeling chronically sleep deprived," she said. "That means that as the school week progresses, young people accumulate more and more sleep debt. By the time the end of the week arrives they feel exhausted and 'pay off' this sleep debt by sleeping in on the weekends."

Poor sleep in the short-term can cause daytime sleepiness, fatigue, difficulties concentrating and learning, as well as moodiness and irritability, Dr Gamble said. "In the longer term, sleep problems increase the risk of psychiatric and medical conditions such as depression, suicide, anxiety, substance abuse, obesity and cardio-vascular complications. Therefore, it is important that teenagers seek help if they are concerned about their sleep."

Dr Gamble said that many young people she sees in her clinical practice have tried taking herbal supplements such as valerian or 'rescue remedy'. "Some people have also been prescribed sleep medications by a doctor," she said. "Unfortunately, medications don't help fix the underlying

problem, so they are not a long-term solution. The treatment of choice for insomnia is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT involves helping people to change the negative thinking and behaviour patterns that maintain sleep problems. CBT is designed to be short-term and goal-focused and is an active process of discussing and understanding why a particular problem may be occurring, and then learning skills to 'fix it' or cope better."

The client takes an active role by learning and practising skills, Dr Gamble said. "This enables clients to make positive changes quickly and to maintain the changes they have made beyond the course of therapy. Carefully-controlled studies have shown that CBT reliably improves an individual's ability to fall asleep, stay asleep right throughout the night, and improves the overall quantity and quality of sleep. Treatment gains are maintained up to three years after finishing treatment."

Left untreated, sleep deprivation can affect the health and wellbeing of young people. Dr Gamble said that warning signs that teens are not getting enough sleep include:

- taking longer than 30 minutes to fall asleep and/or waking frequently throughout the night
- Sleepiness and fatigue during the day
- Needing to 'nana naps' or sleep-ins on weekends to 'catch up'
- Reduced attention, concentration and learning (for example, poorer results at school)
- Increased irritability, aggression, hyperactivity and disruptive behaviour
- Increased anxiety and depression
- Feeling overwhelmed, 'on edge', and easily upset

A young person's perspective

Computer-hacker-turned-cyber-crusader Tom Wood said there were a couple of hard-and-fast rules when it came to using social networking sites. Mr Wood recommends that social networkers ask themselves these questions before uploading anything at all: 'Would I say this thing to the person's face?' 'Would I want my siblings, parents or grandparents to see me like this?'

Mr Wood shot to fame a three years ago when, on national television, the then-16-year-old schoolboy managed to get around the Federal Government's \$83m internet safety filter. He broke it down within 30 minutes of the filter going live. Having just completed his HSC, Mr Wood – among other things – now consults to government on cyber and internet safety. And he knows a thing or two about keeping safe online – Tom Wood was once the victim of cyber bullies.

"The best approach, I think, is to treat all online publishing and publications as something that your teachers, parents, potential employers would read as it's possible they will," Mr Wood said. "I don't think it's sensible to tell kids not to put any personal details online: that defies the entire point of social networking, but having a balance is an imperative. It's important to understand that everything online creates a 'footprint' of each person accessing or contributing to the net." Mr Wood recommends "Googling yourself". "If you do that, between quotes (eg "Tom Wood"), you can get an idea of what your footprint is. Then you should ask yourself 'What would others think of me if they searched my name?'. I think you should make all your profiles private, especially by selecting 'friends only' on Facebook, posting your location as a large city or state – and not a suburb or address, and only accepting friend invitations from people you explicitly and actually know in real life, and do not post anything you wouldn't want adults to see."

There were other concerns, Mr Wood said regarding social networking. "These are addiction and security". To help prevent an over-reliance on social networking sites and the internet, Mr Wood suggests taking frequent breaks, even setting an alarm as a reminder to do so. "And don't automatically jump straight onto the net after other activities just for something to do and turn off phones overnight. That's also a very good idea," he said.

“And there are a lot of ‘phishing’ scams about. These are fake look-alike sites set up to steal your passwords so you’ve always got to make sure you visit the real site only and do not share passwords.”

Another tip from Mr Wood would be to take the time to “think up smart secret questions”. Such questions are used by some sites to make sure that you are the proper account holder. They are also used as stumbling blocks to block hackers and predators. If you choose too-simple questions, such undesirable people may well be able to guess your answers and break into your account and access personal details.

“Australian kids still face considerable issues online, including addiction, privacy, harassment, security, inappropriate content, contact and illegality,” Mr Wood said recently on his [The Wood Verdict](#) blog site.

“What more I would like to see the Federal Government do about it is:

- Seek and allow more time for original, local research, and provide more funding for it
- Be more responsive to research recommendations
- Have better co-ordination between government departments to remove large inefficiencies
- Continue engaging young people and ensure responsiveness to their ideas
- Ensure there is adequate training for all people working with young people, including Principals, health professionals (counsellors, chaplains, psychologists), librarians and authorities
- More awareness and training for parents
- Support for community and private programs such as the video '[Photograph](#)', movie '[Best Enemies](#)', [Project Rokit](#), I could go on...
- Promote and provide more training to helpline operators
- Collaborate with State governments to help provide resources and to apply pressure for cyber/social networking education to be compulsory in curriculums
- And make sure they keep things up-to-date as the landscape changes.”

The new literacy

It is clear that social networking sites are having an impact on the written word. Cyber communities such as Facebook and social spaces like wikis and also informal learning environments where youth communicate, learn and develop friendships are also places where they engage in new forms of literacy.

Dr Catherine McLoughlin of the School of Education at Australian Catholic University, Canberra said the technical activities of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ on the web to establish and form friendships were forms of literacy that required students to be creative, and to participate in new social practices and forms of expression required to communicate in the digital world.

Different media (eg podcasts, webspaces, blogs and social networking spaces) all have different expressive properties and therefore foster new ways of thinking and learning. “To make a comparison: how we think when we write can differ from how we think when we draw, play music, paint or use a piece of software,” Dr McLoughlin said. “So the new tools of Web 2.0 are actually allowing young people to express themselves in novel and creative ways, to interact in cyberspace and to produce their videos, podcasts and publish their ideas on blogs. The process is a big change for students who are now not simply consumers of syllabus content, but also creators and designers of media, audio and digital content (for example, a Facebook page with images).”

Text messaging and literacy

More than 30 billion email messages and 5 billion text messages were exchanged in Australia last year.

“The conventions of text messaging require that words have to be reduced to nonstandard abbreviations and symbols,” Dr Catherine McLoughlin said. “In view of this, many adults and teachers are concerned about the future of literacy. However, I would argue that technologies have in fact put a new emphasis on reading and writing, the evidence being the sheer volume of Internet traffic and countless number of emails written and delivered every day. Being able to use digital tools is not only a social activity where youth connect round the clock with each other, it is also an economic activity and more and more companies rely on SMS to convey information, sell product and manage customer relations. In fact, technologies and text messaging are adding layers of complexity to what we understand as literacy. For example, the internet and social media literacy give students access to a wealth of information and resources unimaginable even ten or twenty years ago. Students are able to access, create, design and present information in so many new and exciting ways parents and sometimes teachers are having trouble keeping pace.”

A new literacy “media or digital literacy” has emerged and with it comes a toolbox of skills, and responsibilities and challenges for parents and teachers, Dr McLoughlin said. “It is time to consider the benefits of information technology to learning, to literacy skills and to communication processes. Some researchers use the term multiliteracies to refer to the capacity to communicate and think using a variety of media, and understanding how to use different styles and types of language for different situations. For example, the ability to switch from the informal language of a text message to a more formal mode of expression to respond to a teacher’s question is a practice that many learners can do with ease.”

Dr McLoughlin said some adults may be less comfortable with these conventions and may use SMS less frequently. “It is clear that text messaging is a major part of how young people communicate and SMS can be regarded a different language mode, but looking at it optimistically, is an indicator of creativity and is a form of multiliteracy as it is a current mode of communication among youth who do have access to mobile phones.”

For those who don’t, Dr McLoughlin said there was a growing concern about a digital divide, between societies who were resource rich and had abundant access to technology and those who do not.

“Despite the convenience, versatility and endless possibilities of digital tools for communication, the curriculum must ensure balance by providing young people with skills to engage in more traditional forms of literacy, and books and libraries should be significant resources at primary and secondary levels,” she said. “The rise of the e-book may in fact promote more appreciation of great literature. For youth, who have grown up in a technology-saturated society, e-books give them the thrill of using a new technological device along with the access to a raft of bestselling novels.

“The overall message about technologies and literacy is therefore positive!”

ru ok with netlingo?

By Christine Dryden, English Co-ordinator, St Ursula’s College, Kingsgrove

In the last ten years, there have been momentous changes in technology and this has had an enormous impact on English. Some people decry these changes saying that “English, as we know it, is dead.” This thinking stems from the idea that there is some form of standard or correct English. Nothing could be further from the truth. English is a living language, constantly altering to fit society, technology and its users. Even before these changes in technology, users of English spoke a variety of English languages, and the variety of language used was dependent on appropriateness. The type of language used to speak with the parish priest differed from the language a child would use in the playground. The formality of a thank-you letter for the hand-knitted woollen jumper had little resemblance to the written request on the kitchen table to, “Bring in the washing when you get home.”

The Internet and the popularity of mobile phones, text, chat and twitter sites has resulted in a form of English not easily recognised or accepted by all users of English. Abbreviations, lack of punctuation, use of punctuation marks as language itself has resulted in a new type of English, or netlingo.

When texting on a mobile, why bother keying in, “I cannot talk now. My mother has just come into the room”, when “AITR” (Translation: adult in the room) will convey the same message? A simple, “?” can denote “I do not understand”, or “I need more information”.

At St Ursula’s College Kingsgrove, in English classes, students are taught to constantly question themselves while composing tasks. “Students need to decide what the purpose of a task is,” said English Coordinator, Chris Dryden, “Is the purpose to describe, to explain, to narrate or to recount? After deciding the purpose of the task, students need to decide on the intended audience... what is the age of the audience, how familiar is the audience with the topic under discussion? Finally, students must look at the occasion or situation. Is it a formal occasion, like a full school assembly or an ANZAC Day service? Or, is the occasion less formal, such as a speech at a 21st birthday.” Ms Dryden said that having the students question audience, purpose and situation would always assist them in deciding the type of language which should be used to fit the occasion. “Students are fully aware that there are different types of English, all with their rules and conventions and they know how to use these different languages,” she said.

“English is a living language, constantly adapting, making new words and shedding old ones,” Ms Dryden said. “When the English language is used, it changes to fit the society which is using it. Correct language is language which is appropriate to purpose, audience and situation. Yes, the changes are occurring more quickly and the situations in which language is used are becoming more diverse. There will always be a place for long, Dickensian sentences, and the irony of Jane Austen, but now we have to make a place for the new technologies and the language which is appropriate to those technologies.”

It’s really 2G2BT (too good to be true)!