Chapter 6
Synchronous Text Chat (EduTexting) as an Online Learning Tool

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ABSTRACT
The increasing popularity and accessibility of affordable computer-mediated communication is rapidly changing the way in which we, as a society, interact and conduct business. This phenomenon is pervasive in all market sectors, including virtual K-12 education. This chapter examines collective and individual use of synchronous text chat to explore learner and instructor social and cognitive presence as well as their attitudes toward online learning. This mode of communication unilaterally enriches the observational learning experience for all participants. Overall, four meaningful social and cognitive functions of synchronous text chat in online learning contexts emerge: a) enhancing enjoyment, b) engagement and noticing, c) achieving community and providing interactive immediacy, and d) bridging of theory to practice. In the spirit of 21st century technological development, the authors coin this use of SMS (synchronous texting) in academic settings EduTexting. They argue for its application and appropriateness in K-12 online courses.

INTRODUCTION
More than ever, the current technological market is saturated with affordable computer-mediated communication such as Skype, FaceTime, and SnapChat- programs that become outdated and replaced by the “app of the day” overnight. The pervasiveness of such “instant access” forms of communication is not limited to consumer and social sectors. Rather they are rapidly advancing alternative forms of message transmission into markets, such as education, that have historically held fast to more traditional modes of communication. To say that technological advancements over the past decade have changed the way we communicate is a gross understatement. A remarkable

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75% of cell phone owners in economically diverse countries around the world report that they rely on texting as one form of communication (Pew Research Center, 2011). According to the International Association of Wireless Users (CTIA), the employment of Short Message Service (SMS) technology in 2011 resulted in more than two trillion text messages being sent from users with a, perhaps surprising, mean age of 38 years (CTIA, 2011; Cellsigns, 2010). Let’s face it, texting is here to stay, and as one educator asserts, “whether we like it or not that is how students communicate with each other these days. They actually thrive on connecting with their peers in numerous ways” (DeWitt, 2011, para 9).

That being said, it may to be time to open the doors more widely to this transilience in communication within the world of education, with its use in K-12 virtual education presenting itself as logical, and perhaps, inevitable. The increasingly common presence of online education classes quickly propelled the use of asynchronous text-based communication into the commonplace within the K-12 and university settings. However, synchronous text chat as a means of connecting to and maintaining student engagement is only now beginning to make its debut. Considering that the backgrounds and dispositions of those enrolled in online education are changing as rapidly as the technologies they are embracing, it would seem prudent that designers of online educational opportunities take into account these permutations and adapt traditional methods of instruction and forms of communication to more congruent modes of interaction. In the words of McCrory, Putnam, and Jansen (2008),

*Developing workable new discourse structures and routines through which learners can engage meaningfully with subject matter and through which teachers can monitor and guide learners’ thinking is essential for successful online learning environments (p.162).*

In order to emerge as a truly viable alternative to traditional K-12 settings, virtual education must find ways to meet traditional objectives through contemporary avenues. Thus, designers must capitalize on the under-developed potential of neoteric and perhaps unorthodox means of engaging students who appear perfectly content to be enveloped in a techno-crazed world. In this chapter, we describe one such case that tapped this potential in distance education courses. While our discussion centers on university-based online courses, the implications are widely applicable to K-12 virtual schooling.

The increasing popularity and accessibility of affordable computer-mediated communication is rapidly changing the way in which we, as a society, interact and conduct business. This phenomenon is pervasive in all market sectors, including virtual K-12 education. The focus of this chapter emerged from an exploratory study of the rich learning experiences of a cohort of participants in a distance teacher education program who engaged in computer-mediated dialog. We examined collective and individual use of synchronous text chat to explore learner and instructor social and cognitive presence as well as their attitudes toward online learning. We found that this mode of communication unilaterally enriched the observation learning experience for all participants. Overall, we identified four meaningful social and cognitive functions of synchronous text chat in online learning contexts: a) enhancing enjoyment, b) engagement and noticing, c) achieving community and providing interactive immediacy, and d) bridging of theory to practice. In the spirit of 21st century technological development, we coined this use of SMS (synchronous texting) in academic settings EduTexting. In this chapter, we argue for its application and appropriateness in K-12 online course based on the belief that there are significant educational benefits to using a form of communication that is congruent with students’ lives.