Merchant, G. (2001). Teenagers in cyberspace: An investigation of language use and language change in internet chatrooms. *Journal of Research in Reading, 24*, 293-306.

Key Words: technologies, diverse texts

Summary:
This study reports on the use of language and writing by six teenage girls (ages 14-16) who engage in Internet chat, post on bulletin boards, and write and read e-mails. In their literacy work on the Internet, the participants learn about, develop, and critique multimedia texts. All of the participants in this study had access to a computer at home, where their web-based activities took place.

Assumptions:
- Younger people adapt to technology more quickly and easily than do adults.
- Use of e-mail and chatrooms opens up written communication with friends.
- Writing done in chatrooms, on bulletin boards, and in e-mails has its own conventions and rules and is different from the writing taught in the school setting.
- Although writing is the main media used for Internet communication, its format is similar to face-to-face conversations.

Findings:
- Chatroom interactions are combinations of interactive writing (done at a very fast pace) and face-to-face talk.
- Unlike the writing done in school, on-line interactions tend to use very informal styles of writing with little or no punctuation or capitalization. Spelling conventions used in on-line writing are based on phonemics and how words sound in actual conversations rather than correct spelling.
- To mimic the fast pace of face-to-face conversations, members of online communities use and understand abbreviations.

Conclusion:
Through experimenting with writing, media, and language on-line, students are developing useful writing and communication skills. However, the middle-class to upper-middle-class students in this study participated in on-line writing at-home during their leisure time. Students from more economically fragile backgrounds may lack these opportunities unless given them during school.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Rather than ignoring online writing behaviors or considering them erroneous, help students learn to use written language flexibly. Help them see when online writing style is appropriate and when it isn't.
- Provide class time for online communication, especially for students who may not have access to computers at home.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Help teachers learn to see online communication as an evolution in language use.
- Ensure that students have access to computers and the Internet at school.