



## I'm Learning IM, I am ...

What an amazing variety of systems are available these days for communicating with other people! And what confusion there is about how to use them properly! At least, I'm confused, and I don't think I'm alone. (Do you think I'm using the contraction 'I'm' too much in this story so far? There is a good reason!)

Eight or nine years ago I started using email; it was quite thrilling at first to think that my messages were flying through cyberspace and arriving at the other end almost instantly. And on those occasions when the other person was at his computer and returned a reply straight away, it seemed almost magical that written communication could take place so quickly. I suppose this is the same feeling that the generation previous to mine felt when they first used the telephone.

As I came to use email more and more, I gradually learned that the 'rules' for using it were quite a bit different from the rules for letters sent by the post office. Email is less formal, and a bit more like an actual conversation. But this brings with it a bit of danger - we are using casual words and phrases, but because the vocal inflections are missing, it is very easy for the recipient to pick up the wrong mood, and to misunderstand what we said. A friendly joke can turn out to be a kind of insult. This is why we all started using the expressions known as 'emoticons', the ones that look like this :-)

But I have no sooner become familiar with proper email etiquette, than I find I must now learn a whole new set of rules - those for using IM, Instant Messaging. I visited one of my daughters last summer, and watched her one evening using IM to 'chat' with her friends. I use the word 'friends' in plural, because there were at least a half-dozen people involved. She had a number of tiny windows open on her computer screen, and moved rapidly from one to the other, typing cryptic messages in short bursts.

At one point, I asked her about something, and she turned away from the screen to talk to me, completely ignoring the IM conversations. I tried to tell her, "No please, answer me later; be polite to your friends ...". She just laughed at me, "Dad, we're only IMing, nobody cares!"

And I realized, that when one is using IM, there is an unspoken agreement between the members of the conversation - everybody assumes that everybody else is also doing something else while messaging. People join or drop out instantly, without even saying "Good-bye".

Imagine hearing the sounds of typing while talking to somebody on the telephone - this seems so rude. Then imagine somebody who hung up in your ear with no closing words - this would be unbearable. But with IM these things are completely normal; we know they are doing something else, and if they 'disappear', we just assume that something came along to interrupt them. They don't even need to type TTYL ... 'talk to you later' ...

I have an IM program on my computer, always active in one corner of the screen, and (very) occasionally use it for messaging when the content is not 'important' enough for telephone or email. But I'm a bit old-fashioned still; I can't bring myself to do other jobs at the same time. So the end result is that at some point I sit there watching the little window, waiting for the next message to arrive ... and I wait ... and I wait ... and I wait ...

Help!

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