STUDIES IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY 9

Letter Writing as a Social Practice

EDITED BY David Barton and Nigel Hall

LETTER WRITING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

STUDIES IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

AIM AND SCOPE

The aim of this series is to advance insight into the multifaceted character of written language, with special emphasis on its uses in different social and cultural settings. It combines interest in sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic accounts of the acquisition and transmission of literacy. The series focusses on descriptive and theoretical reports in areas such as language codification, cognitive models of written language use, written language acquisition in children and adults, the development and implementation of literacy campaigns, and literacy as a social marker relating to gender, ethnicity, and class. The series is intended to be multi-disciplinary, combining insights from linguistics, psychology, sociology, education, anthropology, and philosophy.

Volume 9

David Barton and Nigel Hall (eds)
Letter Writing as a Social Practice

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Edited by

DAVID BARTON
Lancaster University

NIGEL HALL
Manchester Metropolitan University

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

David Barton Nigel Hall

This chapter asserts the importance of letter-writing, demonstrating that letters are a common form of text, that letter writing is one of the most pervasive literate activities in human societies, that letter writing crosses informal and formal contexts, and that a wide variety of forms of letter can be found in most domains of life. More broadly, the importance of letter writing can be seen in that the phenomenon has been widespread historically, being one of earliest forms of writing, and is currently widespread across a range of cultures, communities and continents. The history of letter writing reveals that it is anything but a static process and that from basic letter structures have emerged some of the most powerful forms of text in contemporary society. The chapter then argues that the most revealing way of investigating letter writing is to view it as a social practice, examining the texts, the participants, the activities and the artefacts in their social contexts. The aim is to understand more about the phenomenon of letter writing and, more broadly, about the role of literate activity in society.

The letter as an object of literacy practice is peculiarly versatile and diverse. As a carrier for text, the letter can be used to mediate a huge range of human interactions; through letters one can narrate experiences, dispute points, describe situations, offer explanations, give instructions and so on. Letter writing occurs in many forms, letters, postcards, memos, electronic mail, dialogue journals, fax, etc., and while most people have an intuitive idea of what counts as letter writing, it is in fact a particularly difficult text object to define; after all, almost anything can be put in the form of letter.

The flexibility of this mode of communication has, historically, allowed other genres to emerge from letter writing. In all of this the writing of letters is embedded in particular social situations, and like all other types of literacy objects and events the activity gains its meaning and significance from being situated in cultural beliefs, values, and practices.

Despite its prevalence there has been little study of letters as a genre, compared, for example, with poetry or the novel, and there has been little attention paid to letters as objects, compared, for example, to the contemporary interest in the book as an object.

While the contents of letters have always been examined and libraries are replete with published collections of the letters from famous writers, politicians, explorers etc., far less attention has been paid to the activity of letter writing itself. This volume aims to begin to rectify this. In this chapter we explore some of this diversity in letter-writing as a way of introducing and contextualising the chapters of this book.

Everyday letter writing

One starting-point is to examine contemporary letter writing. In a recent study of everyday literacy practices in one town in England (Barton & Hamilton 1998) a range of letter writing activities were found. Often these were personal letters sent between family and friends. They covered a range of topics including family and local news, and they served a range of functions, including requests for favours and expressions of feelings. Most letters were to people the writers already knew, although some letters were enquiries to unknown people or more general letters to businesses or the local newspaper. Dealing with the correspondence was regarded as a household chore like any other, frequently done by women in the household. Everyone was involved in letter-writing in some ways. There was also a diversity in the activities: one person copied published poetry into her letters; another sent tape-recorded letters; one kept up regular correspondence with popular singers; some people participated in collaborative letter writing; some people kept lists of the letters they received and sent. While letter writing exists alongside other forms of sustained writing, such as diaries, poetry and life history, personal letter writing was probably the most widespread form of sustained writing encountered in the study.

People often had distinctive memories of times in their lives when letter writing had been of great significance to them: one man recalled the wartime experience of writing letters while standing up on watch, of including coded messages in his letters, and waiting three months to receive batches of letters. Someone else traced a missing relative by writing to distant relatives. Often people expressed pleasure in the act of letter writing. Letter writing merges into the activity of sending cards, where personal messages are added to commercial greetings; the act of choosing such cards is a form of letter writing. Various

forms of note writing to organise everyday life, such as notes to people delivering goods to the home or messages to other members of the family, can also be seen as an extension of letter writing.

Official genres

Everyday letter writing also merges into more formal letter writing in the Barton and Hamilton study, where people wrote letters to school, to companies and to politicians. Activities such as paying the bills are extensions of the act of letter writing. Often people identified a distinct divide between two sorts of letters, personal letters and official letters, and this is the most common distinction in typologies of different sub-genres of letters. The two sorts had different purposes and there were different practices surrounding them: for example, they were written on different sorts of paper, they followed different generic conventions and they were often written by different people within the household. The familiar blue envelope with a hand-written name and address in the morning's mail might be welcomed and opened immediately, while the brown envelope with the typed address would be perceived as a threat.

While this study did not particularly focus on official letters, there have been studies of more official letters in everyday life such as Stotsky's study (1987) of people's letters to politicians, viewing them as a powerful form of civic writing. Governments and businesses communicate with people in the outside world through letters. Letter writing has also been a crucial form of communication within organisations, and there have been detailed studies of business correspondence, such as Yates's work (1988) on communication in corporations. In chapter 2 of this book Charles Bazerman examines how a range of business written genres such as forms, invoices and reports have their roots in letter writing.

Across cultures

Within the Barton and Hamilton study of everyday literacy in England there were some cultural differences. In the white working-class community personal letters were usually written individually from one person and to one person: they were composed privately and they were read privately. However, in the Muslim community, in the household we studied, personal letters were often written from family to family; they were composed publicly and collaboratively within the

family and they were received and read publicly within the family. This was also true in a Gujarati study in Leicester (Bhatt et al. 1996) where people maintained regular correspondence with parts of the family around the world. Other studies of community literacy practices also reflect a variety of uses for letter writing and demonstrate the particularly dynamic quality of letter writing and reading in people's lives. Perhaps one of the most interesting things to emerge from these studies is the social richness of letter writing. It might be thought that letter writing and reading are mostly solitary activities where one person write a letter. It then gets sent to one person who reads it and reacts. Clearly this does happen but just as often, if not more frequently, the writing of a letter results from some family or group discussion about what needs to be said, and even more frequently it appears, the reading of a letter is anything but a solitary activity, and may have always been so. The following three quotations reflect social letter reading across two centuries:

> Elizabeth would probably have kept William's letters in any case, because letters were treasured, read to neighbours and handed round to friends. Items of news were passed on, often almost verbatim, in letters to other members of the family, and on one occasion Elizabeth copied out a letter from Robert, in its entirety, to both William and Joanna. (Austin, this volume with ref to the 1790s)

> The letters delivered in the countryside have marvelously multiplied but still the country people do not treat letters offhand. The arrival of a letter or two is still an event; it is read twice or three times, put in the pocket and looked at again. (Jeffries 1884, Life of the fields, p. 201)

> Circulars or letters to individuals regarding the neighbourhood centre and its recreational or medical services are read aloud and their meanings jointly negotiated by those who have experience with such activities. (Heath 1983, p. 196)

Letter writing and letter reading are clearly anything but narrow, autonomous literacy accomplishments. In everyday life, and probably in commerce and industry, they have consequences: they evoke discussion and negotiation of their meanings, and they often result in responses. Other cross-cultural studies have often identified letter writing as a significant practice, pointing to considerable distinctiveness within communities. In Fishman's study of the Amish, a rural religious community in the United States, letters go round a circle of families, each family adding a page to the bottom of the letter and removing their previous page from the beginning of the letter (Fishman 1991). Scribner & Cole (1981) found the subject-matter of Vai letter writing to be restricted to local news. In Besnier's study of Pacific islanders (1995), a wider range of content is

found; in particular, personal letters are used to express forms of affect and emotion which people do not express orally. Adding in the other chapters in this book, including Ahearn's study of Nepali love letters, in each community letter writing has distinctive qualities.

Historical development

Turning to history, letters are reported as amongst the early forms of writing. Examining the earliest cuneiform writing on clay tablets in Mesopotania reveals that although the very first writing which remains was administrative records, by two thousand years BC personal family letters were common, as was official diplomatic correspondence (Trolle-Larsen 1989). Communicating messages to people who were not present was important in the organisation of early societies. Particular practices associated with messengers accompanying the messages developed and the generic conventions of greetings, salutations and endings probably have their roots in these early practices. A sense of mistrust in the written word meant that for a long time diplomatic messengers were sent to deliver messages orally even when a written text was involved. Harris (1989, 78) records how when the Greek commander, Nicias, wrote with news from Sicily in 414BC that:

> when the messengers reached Athens, they delivered their oral message before they handed over the letter; the clerk of the Assembly then read this out to the Assembly.

Written texts could be falsified and in some circumstances there could never be a guarantee that the receiver could read a text (a sense of mistrust in written records which hindered the development of literacy in England even in the days of William the Conqueror (Clanchy 1979)).

Many contemporary genres have their origins in letters. Elements of the letter can be seen in newspaper articles arising out of letters from correspondents; this is also true of scientific journal articles. Many books of the Bible originated as letters. Kenyon (1992) argues that the epistolary letter was an important root of the novel, both historically and in individual writers' development. Official texts such as passports and bank notes have the form of a letter embedded in them. Bazerman pulls these observations together in his chapter in this book to demonstrate the ways in which such genres can develop out of another genre, the letter.

Studies have identified the changing content of letters, such as Kenyon's study of women's letters (1992) and Hamilton & Soames' collection of intimate letters (1994). Historically, further uses of letters have developed, such as Richard Steele's conscious development of the letters pages of the magazines *Tatler* and *The Spectator* at the turn of the eighteenth century. Alongside this has been the development of advice on how to write letters including Steele's advice on writing love letters. More formally, there have been books on letter writing for several hundred years. In this volume Dierks examines how letter writing manuals of the eighteenth century engendered a form of familiar letter writing, Schultz explores the role they played in education, while Austin provides the evidence of their actual use by relatively unschooled writers in the 1790s.

Letter writing as social practice

In analysing letter writing as a social practice it is useful to distinguish the *texts*, the *participants*, the *activities* and the *artefacts*. (For general discussion of the components of literacy practice, see the articles in Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 1999.)

Linguistic analysis of letter writing as a genre has usually concentrated on the form of the *texts*. This work includes an anonymous monk in Bologna in 1135 who in a structuralist way identified the five components of letters, discussing which are essential and their interrelationship. The categories of Salutation, Securing of good-will, Narrative, Petition and Conclusion can be seen in advice to letter writers and books on teaching letter writing since then. More recent discussions of the genre of letters include Violi's attempts to define the genre (1985) and Bex's comparisons with other genres (1995). As a genre, letters have specific forms of deixis, that is ways of referring to the writer and the intended reader and to space and time. The writer is present in the letter, often through the use of the word *I* and in the signing of the letter. There is usually a specific reader, or readers, in mind and they are invoked in the salutation and in the use of *you*. The writer constructs an intended reader in the text. Time and space are important in that spatial distance is often the main reason for the letter's existence and there is a time lag between the writing and the reading. Two worlds are invoked: the here and now of the writer and the here and now of the reader. Shared knowledge is referred to, often explicitly.

As those who have investigated the genre of letters make clear, there is more to a genre than its formal properties. Letters have particular illocutionary force: the existence of the letter itself has meaning in addition to the content and, in a reflexive way, reference is often made within the letter to the existence of

the letter itself. The genre of letters is defined partly by the functions of communication which letters serve. Like most genres, letters may contain element of other genres; letters may include poetry and narrative; they remain as letters and as a distinct genre in terms of the purposes they serve, rather than purely in terms of form. Typologies of letters or sub-genres have been attempted, focusing on particular forms and functions and on specific contents. Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995) identify the culturally specific genre knowledge which letter writers have in a range of different types of letter and in this current book we examine the ways in which genres are embedded in sets of social practices.

An important aspect of literacy practices is the roles and identities which *participants* assume. In letter writing there are distinct roles, beginning with the writer and the reader. In particular, some people see themselves as letter writers while others do not. Most of the chapters in this book identify some form of gendering in literacy practices, and today in the home women are more likely to see themselves as letter writers. Kenyon (1992) argues that historically in Britain, while men were taught formal ways of writing, women had to develop their own forms of letter writing; these have often not been regarded as 'real' writing. Similarly, Dierks identifies how while men were taught formal letters, women were brought into the writing of familiar letters. Certainly, in public representations of men and women writing McMahon et al (1994) have shown how in popular images women are often visually portrayed doing personal letter writing. Such roles are socially structured and letter writing surveys in the UK in the mid 1980s (Letter Writing Bureau 1985) revealed that girls wrote twice as many personal letters as did boys. However, Wilson in this volume demonstrates how in a different social milieu, a youth prison, tough, poorly educated boys can transform themselves into ardent letter writers. People assert their identities in the letters they write and Maybin argues how letter writing between Death Row prisoners in the States and their correspondents in Britain enables both sets of participants to reflect upon and renegotiate their identities.

Many relationships between writer and reader reflect unequal relationships of power and the attention paid to correct social salutations and greetings and other formal aspects of the letter emphasises the importance of the power in letters. Historically, distinct roles around letter-writing have developed, including the idea of someone who writes (and reads) letters for someone else, the scribe, secretary or amanuensis. Another role which has changed throughout history, is the messenger, the person who carries letters, and who is sometimes responsible for reading them, acting upon them and, today in some circumstances obtaining proof that they have been received. Included here should be the knowledge and skills which participants bring to the activity and the ways of learning about the practice.

The *activity* of letter writing has often been portrayed in paintings and photographs as a solitary activity; a person sits down in a particular place in familiar surroundings and takes time over the activity. While this may sometimes be true, the variety of practices we have identified above attests to the many ways in which the activity can take place. The *artefacts* of literacy include the traditional pen and paper, with paper marketed for the express purpose of letter writing. There are also broader cultural artefacts associated with letter-writing, including furniture such as bureau expressly for writing. This materiality of letter writing is often not taken account of, and is explored in the chapters by Hall, Wilson, Schultz and others. Letters are touched, held, smelled; they are stored away, hidden and destroyed. Letter writing is also dependent on systems of communication, such as a postal service and is strongly influenced by the other modes of communication available. Modes of letter communication also clearly change over time and it is a brave commentator who predicts the future. Kandaouroff writing not so long ago in 1973 (p. 11) said:

> But the story of the post is not concerned only with past events. It is a continuing saga of man's attempts to shrink the world by improving the communication of the written word. Post-codes and electronic sorting are already with us, and have left their mark on covers and cards.; and tomorrow we may even witness intercontinental rocket posts.

Who in 1973 could have envisaged the rise of the computer and electronic communication? Yates documents some of the ways in which letter writing is changing in contemporary society as a result of these broader changes in communication technologies. It is probably at such points of change, which both Hall and Yates deal with, that people begin to reflect on literacy practices.

A study of letter writing inevitably reveals much about other forms of literate activity. As well as the manuals which have been mentioned already, there is a range of other texts which have developed in association with letter writing, from death row magazines to business forms. Letters appear in other texts and, for instance, magazines, newspapers, journals and web-sites have letter columns.

Formal education and the recontextualisation of letters

Everyday letter-writing is often self-taught (see Austin's chapter) and indeed, some understanding of letter writing may even appear instinctive given the ability of new, young letter writers to make use of dialogic conventions (see the chapter by Hall, Robinson and Crawford). Books on how to write letters abound and are

(and have been for centuries) available for children and for adults within formal education as well as in business and in everyday life. The role of such books at points in US history is explored by Dierks and Schultz who demonstrate that even the familiar letter is a cultural object which has been consciously promoted. However, as Fairman, and Hall, Robinson and Crawford demonstrate in their chapters, the formal promotion of precise letter writing conventions, accompanied by a social cry for neatness and accuracy, can obscure how even unschooled or little-schooled writers can function effectively, and indeed sometimes very movingly, as letter writers. Despite centuries of political claims, complete command of reading and writing skills is not necessary for the effective assertion of agency through the use of literacy. Seemingly natural and invented forms of letter-writing are often subject to outside influences. The influence of missionaries or other outsiders is clear for instance in Besnier's example of Pacific islanders writing (Besnier 1995), in Scribner and Cole's study of Vai letter writing (1981), and in this volume by Ahearn's study of Nepali writers.

Within education letters have been a way of teaching writing, as Schultz demonstrates. Often these were unreal tasks with inappropriate, exercise-based content. This is particularly true at the school level, which Schultz deals with, and also in adult education, as Kell shows. However, even in the distorted world of autonomous school literacy practices it is possible for letters to be the source of real meaningful writing activities for even the very youngest children, and this is explored by Hall, Robinson and Crawford in their chapter.

Shifting a letter from its location in social practices into a text book or other educational materials is an example of the recontextualisation of a text. In Schultz's data and Kell's data, letters have been recontextualised as educational material, and they explore the effects of this transition to a different genre. Kell shows how in the South African adult education class the imagined social processes of letter writing are recontextualised into another social context, the classroom, which has its own ideological purposes, of modernising South Africa, and in which people's existing letter writing practices are not taken account of. There are parallels in Schultz's examination of nineteenth century school classrooms. In both cases teaching has changed the practices.

Recontextualisation takes place when letters are moved into other arenas and used for different purposes. Letters have commonly been recontextualised as data for historical and other research. Collections of letters have been published as biography, as literature and as entertainment. The range of people whose collections of letters have been published is very broad, covering the spectrum of cultural concerns, and including Oliver Cromwell, Freud, Queen Victoria, Beethoven, Lenin, Virginia Woolf, Cezanne and William Burroughs.

The chapters of this book

While there have been many studies which have been based upon letters, or have made extensive use of letters, these have virtually all been literary or biographical studies. The chapters of this book examine letter writing as a social practice in its own right; the work inevitably crosses disciplines and methodological approaches. In the last few years a number of scholars involved in studying literacy as social practice have in the course of such work mentioned letter writing but have not concentrated upon it. Here we bring together work which explores the social practice of letter writing from a number of different perspectives. Anthropologists, historians, educators and other social scientists each provide a detailed case study. There are various ways in which they have extended thinking about letter writing as a social practice. Each chapter takes a specific case; its conclusions can then be used to say something more general about letter writing as a social practice.

In Chapter two, *Letter writing and the social grounding of differentiated genres*, Charles Bazerman explores the history of different forms of writing, demonstrating in detail the ways in which letters are the root of many written genres: the scientific article has its origins in correspondence between scientists; many business forms and record keeping can be traced back to letters; and legal and administrative documents often began as letters from rulers to the ruled. The origin of other written forms as diverse as money, newspapers, holy books and novels can also be linked to letter writing. With their pervasive influences letters can be seen to have had a special role in genre formation. Bazerman argues that letters are tied to particular social relationships between writer and reader. As these relationships change people have developed new practices and distinctive forms of writing.

In Chapter three, *Letter writing and social refinement in America, 1750–1800*, Konstantin Dierks examines a particular point in letter writing history when the nature of letter writing was changing to what he calls 'the familiar letter' — the expression of affection and duty among family and friends. This shift, which was marked by the emergence of a new range of letter writing manuals, enabled the 'middling' families to pursue their claims to social refinement and upward mobility. The author examines a number of these new manuals and explores how they concentrated on emotion and sincerity rather than reason or wit, and addressed a more complex world than had their predecessors, one which included the visible emergence of a new social group.

In Chapter four, *The Clift family correspondence: Letter writing in a Cornish community in the 1790s*, Frances Austin demonstrates the actual role of such

manuals in one family's letter writing. She explores a rare survival, the letters written in the 1790s by a working class family which included mostly relatively unschooled letter writers. Contrary to the views of some writers on literacy history, this family were enthusiastic and fairly frequent letter writers, using them to hold together a family whose members spread across the world.

In Chapter five, *English pauper letters 1800–34, and the English language*, Tony Fairman takes a linguistic perspective on the letters written by or for people in the early 1800s when applying for Poor Law relief. He uses these letters to reveal just how much historians of the English language have relied for their accounts on fully-schooled English and have ignored the language spoken and written by the majority of the population who were either unschooled or minimally-schooled. Tony Fairman allows rare access to the literacy of ordinary people and demonstrates, like several other chapters in this book, that limitations with literacy skills did not mean that people were cut off from using literacy in powerful and moving ways.

In Chapter six, *The materiality of letter writing: a nineteenth-century perspective*, Nigel Hall argues that if letter writing is intimately tied to culture, then so are the products of a culture designed to facilitate letter writing. As a consequence while these products may have an apparent aim in aiding communication they also serve, and sometimes may principally serve, to express and reflect the values, beliefs and practices of letter writers. This chapter explores the social history of artifacts associated with letter writing in the nineteenth century, a time of considerable technological, demographic, transportational, and social change, each of which impacted upon letter writing and the materials through which it was effected.

Chapter seven by Lucille M. Schultz, *"What does the fellow mean by sending me his own spittle!": Letter writing instruction in 19th century schools in the United States*, examines a number of 19th century manuals offering instruction for school children in the art of letter writing. She situates this examination in a wider consideration of the development of North American 19th century schools and the ideological nature of their instruction, in particular the values of social order, Christian morality, and character. Letter writing instruction for children was a particularly enabling site for instruction in the culture's dominant moral values, and the author considers letter writing instruction as a form of cultural capital, and one which was effectively denied many children through the lack of representation within the manuals.

In Chapter eight, *Young children's explorations of letter writing*, Nigel Hall, Anne Robinson and Leslie Crawford take a contemporary look at children's letter writing. They examine what happened when a class of five-year-old children were

invited to engage in a correspondence with two adults they hardly knew. The authors provide a consideration of young children's experience of letter writing, describe the circumstances in which the correspondence began, and then offer a detailed examination of the strategies used by the children in their first letters. The authors explore the extent to which the children's responses indicated their ability to construe the letter writing as a genuinely social practice rather than as a decontextualised school exercise. Their conclusion is that despite inexperience and a young age, these very young letter writers were able to adopt genuinely communicative strategies from the beginning of their letter writing activities.

In Chapter nine, first of two chapters concerned with prisons, *Death row pen-friends: letter writing, friendship and identity*, Janet Maybin explores a particular form of correspondence, that between prisoners on death row, mainly in the United States, and people in Britain who correspond with them as pen-friends. Drawing upon detailed questionnaires and correspondence with prisoners and pen-friends, Maybin, a letter writer herself, documents these developing letter-based friendships and explores the phenomenon as an intellectual and emotional experience of great significance for the participants on both sides. She argues that the dramatic contrast in people's lives, in terms of experience, education, culture and current lives, enables them to explore and renegotiate their own identities.

In Chapter ten, *"Absolutely truly brill to see from you again": social practices and visual significances of letters within the prison community*, Anita Wilson explores the distinctive letter writing practices within prisons. Drawing upon her detailed ethnographic work she identifies the many different sorts of letters which are sent; these are divided into letters between prisoners, letters to authorities, both within and outside the prison, and correspondence between prisoners and their social worlds outside the prison. In each of these situations she identifies the rich social practices associated with letter writing. As well as illuminating prison life, this study draws attention to the importance of visual and material aspects of letters in any investigation of the social practices around letter writing.

In Chapter eleven, *"I'm offering you an invitation to love": Love letters, literacy and social transformation in Nepal*, Laura Ahearn writes about an ethnographic and linguistic study of how love letter writing, as a new practice in a Nepalese community, is situated within the social contexts in which villagers read and write. Love letters, previously virtually non-existent in this community, have in a very short space of time become an intrinsic feature of the practices of courtship and marriage. As such they provide a rare opportunity to examine extensively how a major effect of providing literacy education for women has been the adoption of literacy into customs in ways which have both sustained and modified them.

In Chapter twelve, *Teaching letters: the recontextualisation of letter-writing practices in literacy classes for unschooled adults in South Africa*, Catherine Kell contrasts the way letter writing is taught to adult migrant workers attending literacy classes with their actual practices of letter writing. There are several ways in which what is taught in the classroom is actually contrary to what these workers are already doing in their lives in terms of letter writing. Kell uses the concept of recontextualisation to make sense of what is going on in the classroom. Imagined social processes are recontextualised into another social context, the classroom, which has its own ideological purposes, of modernising South Africa.

Finally, in Chapter thirteen, *Computer-mediated communication — the future of the letter?*, Simeon Yates addresses critical questions about the relationship between computer-mediated communication and the conventional letter writing process. He examines whether computer-mediated communication represents a new distinct form of communication or whether it is simply a development of an old technology. He demonstrates how such communication is related to conventional letter writing and how the social practice is changing in an era of new technology. The author situates his examination of these questions in a wider social context arguing that computer-mediated communication and conventional letter writing are related through a complex meshing of cultural and technological features.

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CHAPTER 2

Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres

Charles Bazerman
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Several times in my research over the years, I have noticed letters playing a role in the emergence of distinctive genres: the early scientific article emerging from the correspondence of Henry Oldenburg, the first editor of the Philosophic Transactions of the Royal Society; the patent, originally known as letters patent; stockholders' reports evolving from letters to stockholders; and internal corporate reporting and record forms regularising internal corporate correspondence.

I was not the first to notice any of these; however, in putting the four cases together, it struck me that these may be part of a more general pattern. As I pursued the thought that letters might have a special role in genre formation, many other examples of genres with strong connections to correspondence came to my attention, including newspapers and other periodicals, financial instruments such as bills of exchange and letters of credit, books of the New Testament, papal encyclicals, and novels. The letter, in its directness of communication between two parties within a specific relationship in specific circumstances (all of which could be commented on directly), seemed to provide a flexible medium out of which many functions, relationships, and institutional practices might develop — making new uses socially intelligible at the same time as allowing the form of the communication to develop in new directions.

This essay is a preliminary attempt to develop this speculation; however, it is little more than a speculation inviting further research into a wide-ranging subject that presents several difficulties. While the histories of various domains of literate practice have each been the subject of scholarship, only a few have undergone formal genre analysis, and few have been carefully examined with respect to the relationship to letters. Further, the story of each domain is complex and extensive, involving many countries, influences, and events. Finally, the

earliest documents that might show the strongest influence of letters are not extant or readily available. Nonetheless, the sketchy and scattered evidence I have found in the secondary literature suggests that letters may have a pervasive and important influence in the formation of genres.

The current panoply of genres in modern life rely on writers and readers having complex social and institutional knowledge of the activities that genres mediate. Interpreting even the most ordinary junk mail solicitation for a credit card requires an understanding among other things of the postal system, folded paper envelopes, advertising and direct mailing, promised inducements, the modern bank and credit card system, modern application forms, store credit card transactions, monthly statements, internal record keeping, check payments, and competition among various credit providers. Genres help us navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity, because in recognising a text type we recognise many things about the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology, and expected content of the document, and where this all might fit in our life (Bazerman 1997; Freedman and Medway 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin 1994).

But how did we even begin to imagine these genres that seem so removed from the immediacy of face to face talk? How did we get to this point where our daily activities are embedded in complex communicative systems that we must to some degree be familiar with in order to purchase the basics of life? How did we create these spaces of social interaction and communication so far removed from immediate face-to-face meeting?

Certainly in the early periods of literacy we had nothing like the proliferation of genres we have now. Who, sitting in the city of Uruk in the fertile crescent, could imagine a referee's report on a submission to a scientific journal? Where did the first genres of the written world come from and how did they elaborate into the profusion we must make sense of in our lives?

Some early written genres arose directly from highly visible and well-known genres of spoken public performance, such as the epic, the communal history recited on ritual occasions, the myth, the ode, the choral performance and the drama, the speech, and lesser genres such as folk-tale, riddle, or joke. Transcriptions can serve as memorials for witnessed events or imaginative recreations for those who have seen similar events. The text then evokes the entire social trappings that encased the oral performance — whether the holiday gathering of citizens at the Athenian amphitheatre for a poetic/dramatic competition, the sacramental gatherings at the temple in Jerusalem, or the evening story-telling to beguile children. The written text can also script reenactment of the original

performance or new performances modelled on originals.[1] As new texts become created solely for private reading, they modify the social arrangements of the transmission but still draw on an established sense of the textual transaction. Much of what we now count as literature has its roots in such transformations of oral performances.

Similar, but a bit more exclusive and complex are the transcriptions of oral discussion about knowledge and belief — as represented in the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues. Such documents carry to some extent the representation of the social interaction that generated or inspired them and are often reprised within local circumstances that reenact and extend the interaction they transcribe — as Talmud is studied within study groups, where the central text and written commentary trigger new discussions (see Boyarin 1989), or as Platonic dialogues continue to serve as the matter for undergraduate classroom discussion. Even reading such texts in private can draw one imaginatively into the represented dialectic, unless the reader is reading from some well defined alternative perspective.

Some genres rise out of more ordinary, daily speech acts, such as counting and recalling (which, according to Schmandt-Besserat, provided the very origins of writing, as memorial tokens came to be transformed into clay impressions of those tokens, and then simply inscriptions in clay). This may be a personal recounting or within a small group to fix the terms of ownership or transfer. Presumably the individuals using memory tokens would also remember the specific local occasion, circumstances, purposes, and transactions of the recording. Some of our modern difficulty in interpreting early markings is that we do not have direct evidence of the circumstances and use of the marks within the circumstances.

The spoken commands of those in authority also were early transformed into recognisable written genres of orders, laws, codes, and proclamations, extending rule over wide-spread domains and periods of time, with consequences for increased accountability to abstract principles. However, even though everyone might recognise the commanding words of authority, it is difficult to know whether any particular set of commands had current legitimate authority and whether that authority, particularly at a great distance, had sufficient power and means to monitor and enforce the commands.

For such reasons in the ancient Near East (White 1982) and Greece, early written commands along with other military, administrative, or political business of the state were cast in the form of letters. Letters provided identification of author and audience, and in the earliest period were delivered by personal messenger of the authoritative person, who was said to carry the very presence

or projection ("parousia") of the sender. The apparent social drama was further enhanced as the written message was read aloud by the messenger, who might also have a second spoken message which could not be entrusted to writing. Thus the procedures of delivery of these early letters visibly enacted the social relationships that were carried out at a distance through the medium of the letter (Stirewalt 1993, p. 5). Even when letters were no longer recited by the messenger the goal of projecting one's presence through the writing remained (Doty 1973, p. 12).

From these formal and official beginnings, letters came to include expressions of personal concern and then personal messages (Stowers 1986). Such maintaining and extending of social bonds moved the relationships enacted in letters beyond the formal and official to the personal. Personal familiar letters soon became common among all classes in the Hellenic and Roman worlds. What little attention classical rhetorical theorists did give to letters were to these personal letters, with emphasis on how letters, to be written in the style of speaking, extended the personal bond between friends and associates (Malherbe 1988). While theorists attended only to the bonds of friendship, personal letters became a flexible means of carrying out many kinds of business and other transactions (for examples see White 1986). Among the range of business and administrative letters were letters of petition (White 1972) and recommendation (Kim 1972). Fictional letters served as amusing exercises in schools and as adult entertainment; the subjects of these letters ranged from moral romances to erotica. Letters to the gods, letters to the dead, and letter prayers suggest the flexibility of the letter form to establish and elaborate communicative situations (Stirewalt 1993, pp. 20–25; Doty 1973).

Two kinds of letters came to be treated as scholarly documents in schools and personal libraries. First were letters on technical or professional themes, including philosophy, rhetoric, divination, mathematics and medicine. The letters of Aristotle, for example, were collected. Second were more extended letter-essays which served in the place of complete treatises — perhaps serving as a sketch or substitute for never-completed works. The letter format gave local social context and meaning to these forays into extended abstraction (Stirewalt 1993, pp. 15–19).

In the wide ranging uses of letters in the classical world we can see how the letter, once invented to mediate the distance between two parties, provides an open-ended transactional space that can be specified, defined, and regularized in many different ways. The ongoing relationships and transactions are directly brought to mind to writer and reader through the salutation, signature and content of the letter. Moreover, letters can and often do explicitly describe and comment on the relationship between the parties and the nature of the current transaction.

As more subjects and transactions find their recognisable way into the letter, the genre itself expands and specialises, so that distinctive kinds of letters become recognisable and treated differently. People recognise increasing varieties of transactions can be accomplished at a distance through letters and will have models to follow for that kind of transactions. As the historical scholarship has revealed, these varieties of letters became strongly typified in organisation and in formulaic phrasing. In turn, transactions and organisation can be extended over greater distances and the social bonds between individuals can be reinforced and even created through indirect relations with third parties (as through letters of reference).

The richness and multiplicity of ancient letter writing practices made letters a powerful communicative force within the early Christian church. Almost all of the books of the New Testament outside the gospels are in the form of letters, originally between specific parties or small groups and then made available for all who share in the community of the messages. These letters pursue many activities — including narrative of remarkable events, proselytising, prayer, consolation, moral teachings, praise of the faithful and warning against deceivers, philosophic thought, prophesy, and church organisation. These letters are regularly framed in forms of fellowship that reaffirm bonds of communality and faith, giving a personal cast of fellowship to the wide range of activities carried out in the New Testament.

In the early church letters seemed an important vehicle in maintaining the fellowship of the church over distances. Early travellers would carry letters from their bishops, introducing and making them welcome as communicants, but also reaffirming the bonds of communion among bishops. Encyclical letters also circulated information about schisms and lists of which clergy remained "in communion." As the church organisation developed in the late Roman and Medieval periods these apostolic and pastoral letters would circulate doctrinal rulings, decisions of episcopal synods, temporal, and political matters. As the hierarchy of the church became established, Papal letters on both general and specific matters became of increasing importance, and became distinguished into specific kinds still in use today, including papal constitutions, bulls, briefs, encyclicals, rescripts, decrees, and personal autographs (Fremantle 1956, pp. 23–25).

As the church expanded across distance, uniting many people, letters became important in holding the bureaucracy together and maintaining the bonds of communality (Constable 1976). To train clerics in what was now becoming the major medium of doctrine and administration, a specialised branch of rhetoric developed known as the *ars dictaminis* (Camargo 1991). This art of letter writing emphasised the salutation, identifying and giving respect to the social roles and statuses of the sender and receiver, placing both within institutionalised social

relations. Further, letter writers were advised to build the bond of good will with the recipient by invoking sentiment and obligation, and to explicitly narrate the situation which presented the need for the letter and the recipient's hoped for cooperation (Murphy 1971).

The *ars dictaminis* provided the basis for expanding commercial and governmental correspondence during the early renaissance. Bologna, the centre of *ars dictaminis* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was simultaneously the centre of the new *ars notaria*, which in the fourteenth century was to displace the *ars dictaminis* in importance. The *ars notaria*, concerned with proper form of legal and commercial documents, was closely tied to the professions of notary and secretary and deeply involved in law and commerce (Murphy 1974, pp. 263–265).

The link between letters and legal documents can be seen in some of the functions letters served. Among the letters of the medieval church bureaucracy were grants from monasteries, contractual arrangements, deeds of transfer, grants of immunities and privileges, gifts, mutual obligations, and other documents establishing some enduring administrative arrangement. Such letters would be kept to establish one's legal right when needed, so in a sense these letters were written as much for the unknown third party "to whom it may concern" as for the original recipients (Murphy 1974, pp. 200–202; Perelman 1991, p. 99).

I have not examined such early legal documents to determine the extent to which they had the full trappings of letters and how they might have differed from various genres of correspondence,[2] but it is worth pointing out that even such a document of general legal meaning as the Magna Charta (1215) follows the principles of letter writing by beginning with a salutation that defines social positions and seeks good will: "John, by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, count of Anjou, to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciars, foresters, sheriffs, reeves, servants, and all bailiffs and his faithful people greeting." (Cheyney, 1896, p. 6). Then the document narratively begins by recounting what he has granted, before switching into normative claims of "shall have" and "shall not."

A later royal document I have at hand is the Letters Patent granted by King Kenry VII to John Cabot license to explore and colonise new lands, dated March 5th in the eleventh year of his reign (1495), reprinted in *Hakluyt's Voyages*. Not only is it called a letter, but it has an address and salutation: "Henry by the Grace of God, king of England and France, and lord of Ireland, to all whom these presents shall come, Greeting." The body, containing the specifics of the royal license is framed as a direct message: "be it known that we have given and granted…" The document ends with his witness (or signature). To this day some

contracts, grants, and other legal documents in Britain and America may still contain such residual epistolary formulae.

Even when patents were restricted from all grants of royal privilege to limited protection for inventions, the process was still transacted by letters and letter-like documents. The first extant application for a patent in the United States is a 1790 personal letter from William Pollard to Secretaries Jefferson and Howe and Attorney General Randolph requesting a patent for a spinning machine. The first extant grant, from 1791 is an official looking diploma cast in the form of a letter addressed "To all to whom to these Presents shall come, Greeting" and signed by both the President and the Attorney General.

Until the middle of this century in the United States the chief patent documents maintained the format of a letter. The letter of specification within the application gradually came to stand for the patent, again maintaining the format of a letter to whom it may concern, signed by the applicant and witnesses, but further endorsed by the patent office and granted a patent number. Only in recent years have the trappings of letter form been removed from the specification, though the patent is still legally surrounded by extensive correspondence, known as the file wrapper.

The letter of petition as a means for the individual to express personal interests to authorities extends back to the classical world (Kim 1972) and was a regular instrument for the expression of discontent and protest in the Middle Ages and after. King George's unresponsiveness to petitions is one of the core complaints of the American Declaration of Independence.

As discontents increased, letters regularly were used to spread the rebellious attitude and perspective, to share information about outrages, and to organise acts of rebellion. Such was the case in the peasant rebellions in England in 1381 (Justice 1994). Again in the period leading up to the American Revolution, letters travelling between Committees of Correspondence provided the vehicle for increasing rebellious sentiment and organisation. In both these examples, letters preceded the appearance of more overt public documents such as broadsides, manifestos, and seditious pamphlets.

Letters not only provided the medium for development of major genres of law, government, and politics, but also the various instruments of money and credit that mediate the modern system of banking and finance. Beginning in the twelfth century in the city-states of northern Italy, including Bologna, financial instruments developed to serve the needs of growing commercial trade. The most important of documents invented at this time, generally seen as the source of all other monetary instruments, was the bill of exchange. In these bills one party acknowledged to another the receipt of a sum to be repaid at a fixed date,

usually at another city. By the middle of the thirteenth century bills of exchange had to be certified by a notary (Groseclose 1976, p. 93). Although I have not seen the documents themselves, they seem to be a form of business correspondence. One history of Venetian banking called the system of bill of exchanges a "network of regional and international debits and credits, held together with constant letter writing" (Lane & Mueller 1985, p. 73).

Monetary and credit instruments, for their credibility and credit-ability, depended upon people believing in increasingly abstracted symbolic markers of value, removed from objects of concrete value and from personal trust of known individuals who act as guarantors of value. Personal letter and letter-like communications among individuals can serve as tokens of reliability during the transition to abstract value. Further, trusted institutions such as banks and governments can issue and guarantee written and printed instruments of value for general circulation.

Giro banking, again established in Northern Italy during this period, was based on the direct transfer of funds from a bank account of one client to the account of another, upon instruction of the first client. It is hard to imagine that letters authorising such transfers would not be a regular part of the process, and it is easy to imagine such letters of transfer being implicated in the rise of checking. Documents drawn against giro accounts apparently served as an early form of paper money. In England the first paper money established as legal tender in 1665 was in the form of "an order to the Teller of the Receipt of the Exchequer to pay such and such a person so much money out of the fund arising from this or that Parliamentary supply" (Groseclose 1976, p. 117). The name alone of the letter of credit itself suggests the closeness of the link to correspondence, although I have not been able to find substantial historical information about its history.

The greatest experiment in paper money, or notes, developed in the North American colonies due to a lack of gold and silver coin. Massachusetts was the first to issue notes in 1690 and other colonies followed suit in following decades (Groseclose 1976, p. 119; Hickcox 1969, pp. 5–6; Phillips 1969). The typical form of such notes has some of trappings of the letter; for example, the first notes issued by the Colony of New York in 1709 are dated at the top and are signed at the bottom by one or several government officials. The text reads

> This indented bill of… Shillings due from the colony of New York to the Possessor thereof, shall be, in Value equal to Money; and shall be accordingly accepted by the treasurer of this Colony, for the time being in all publick Payment; and for any Fund at any Time, in the Treasury… [dated, by order of] (Hickcox 1969, pp. 5–6)

The direct order to the treasurer has been transformed into a normative description that "the treasurer will accept", thereby allowing the document to be addressed

to the unidentified users rather than the government official. This transformation may explain some of the loss of trappings of the direct letter. To this day the U.S. Dollar contains some residual and transformed elements of the letter in the signature and the normative description "This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private" which serves as promise to the user and order to the recipient. British notes are also signed and "promise to pay the bearer the sum of …"

The introduction of printing multiplied copies of texts for extended and ultimately unknown audiences. The letter in several instances appears to have served as a transitional form to allow genres to emerge with some sense of defined communicative task with some moorings of social relationship. At least three major types of writing that flourished in print culture seem to have some connection with letter correspondence: Newspapers, scientific journals, and the novel.

The oral and written sources of the newspaper seem multiple, including word of mouth and ballads, Roman and Italian daily reports, and Renaissance broadsides and occasional pamphlets. Even as early as the latter half of the fifteenth century professional correspondents gathered around the Inns of Court to write newsletters for the gentry in the provinces (Raymond 1996, p. 5; Andrews 1968; Bourne 1887). The Fugger family in Europe also had a chain of correspondents to provide commercial news (Sommerville 1996, p. 19). Inspired by some earlier continental examples, in England by the 1620s Corantos appeared regularly. The reports regularly referred to correspondence as a source of the information "We understand by Letters… "They write from" (Sommerville 1996, p. 25). The editors, most notoriously Gainsford, adopted a personal style directly addressing the readers (Sommerville 1996, pp. 25–6).

In January 1643 with England in full rebellion, the need for news was great. Two additional forms of news periodicals appeared — the Mercuries, drawing on the reputation of the first continental periodical, and Intelligencers, drawing the title from private newsletters of the sort prepared at the Inns of Court, suggesting confidential and secret information. Some of these newsletters themselves were gathered and printed in newsbooks, such as Samuel Pecke's *The Heads of Severall Proceedings in this Present Parliament*, which ran for three months (Sommerville 1996, pp. 35–36).

While I cannot here begin to trace out the complex history of the forms of journalistic writing, I want to point out that trappings of letters still remain in the journalism industry as reporters posted in distant cities and countries are still referred to correspondents, even on television news. Further the by-line remains to identify noteworthy acts of correspondence. Remnants of personal correspondence style remain particularly in those publications that affect antiquarian elegance such as the New Yorker which still publishes lengthy reports with titles

such as “Letter from …” and maintains an informal letter style for the talk of the town column.

Non-news periodical publication is generally traced back to the earliest scientific journals, the short-lived *Journal des Scavans* and the enduring *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, both first appearing in 1665. In the mid-seventeenth century an active correspondence developed among natural philosophers to share their investigations. The Philosophical Transactions grew out of this letter correspondence. German born Henry Oldenburg in the latter part of the 1650’s, after having taken up residence in Britain, began correspondence with prominent men of learning, ranging from Massah ben Israel and John Milton to Robert Boyle and John Hartlib. The correspondence with natural philosophers soon overtook Oldenburg’s other interests. Although he himself had little background in natural philosophy and did not add new findings or theories, he passed about information between others. As a result of this active correspondence in 1662 he became the secretary of the recently formed Royal Society. In this role his correspondence increased further and in 1665 he used his correspondence as the material for a new journal, the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society (Hall 1965; Oldenburg 1965).

The earliest issues of this journal were largely in the form of a summary of his correspondence along with the meetings of the Royal Society, as though Oldenburg were corresponding with the readers, passing on all he has found from a variety of sources. Soon, however, he started to quote at length from his correspondents, and the articles appear directly in the form of letters to the Royal Society. Thus Newton’s famous 1672 article on “A New Theory of Light and Colours” appears in letter form, which letter had been previously read to a meeting of the Royal Society. A controversy broke out over this theory, generating letters among numerous correspondents, whom Newton regularly answered. Much of this correspondence, written for the journal audience, was published over the next five years in the Philosophical transactions (Bazerman 1988).

Letters in the *Philosophical Transactions* increasingly oriented towards the readership of the journal as its primary audience, rather than the nominal recipients of the letters. In this process of reorientation, a tension developed between the assertiveness, didactiveness, and disputatiousness of public argument and the gentility, politeness, and good-will of personal correspondence among gentleman (Shapin 1994; Atkinson, 1999). It took well over a century for the articles to drop vestiges of the letter format and adopt the abstract argumentative tone and focus of scientific articles. Letters still retain several important roles in scientific publication both for direct response and as a forum for less formal, more rapid publication of important results. Indeed, the need for brief and rapid

sharing of new results has led to letter journals, like *Physical Review Letters* (Blakeslee 1994).

In addition to many scientific journals proliferating from the early model of the *Philosophical Transactions*, a variety of literary and intellectual journals were born in the eighteenth century (Graham 1972), and from them proliferated the popular journals of the nineteenth.

The origins of the novel are complex and under continuing critical scrutiny (see for examples McKeon 1987; Hunter 1990). It is clear, however, that the epistolary novel was one of the first forms of extended prose fiction written for print. It is further clear that the epistolary novel grew immediately out of several traditions of letter writing and letter writing manuals. The tradition of literary letters went back to the Roman exemplars of Pliny and Cicero and continued most notably by the eighth century monk Alcuin and the fourteenth century poet Petrarch; such letters had been collected and widely disseminated long before Gutenberg. In England, some families chronicled their lives and times in letters that projected the particulars and personality of the correspondents; two extensive collections are those of the Stonor family (1290–1483) and the Paston family (1424–1526). Additionally, fictional letters in the classical world, including some by Ovid, served for both education and amusement. Finally, letter writing manuals and love letter collections began being published in the 16th century, often presenting fictional exemplary letters, ranging from the amusing to the didactic. Nicholas Breton's *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1603) gained particular popularity (Singer 1963).

While there are no doubt many more genres in which letters had a formative role, I will jump ahead to two examples of late nineteenth century commerce where the growth of corporate enterprises was calling forth the need for new forms of extended communication between people who may have been personal strangers but were in some structured relation to each other. First is the Letter to Stockholders. At least in the United States the latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of large corporations, triggered by transportation and communication technologies that created national markets and themselves formed some of the first large companies. These endeavours needed capital which they obtained through the sale of equities. With such dispersed ownership, unable to witness the daily operations of the company or to inspect the books, the management needed means to report to and reassure the investors about the value of their investment. While I have not examined a wide range of early stock reports, nor have I do I have any detailed picture of their development as a form, the examples I have seen from the early 1880's for the Edison Electric Light Company, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of New York, and the

Edison Company for Isolated Lighting are all in the form of letters from the Board of Trustees to the stockholders, signed by the President of the respective company. After the first couple of years, a short financial statement was added. To this day, although the annual stock report of major companies is now likely to be a thick, glossy book with figures, tables, photographs, and many sections, a letter to the stockholders from the company president and/or the the Chairman of the Board usually appears near the beginning to convey the overall condition of the company to the stockholders.

Similarly, within the daily operations of the rapidly expanding companies there were increasing needs for internal and external communication at a distance. At first the business letter carried out the necessary communications. The increased need for efficiency in keeping records and files generated by the expanding correspondence led to the development of printed forms, memos, reports, circulars, and other genres. This went hand in hand with the development of office technology such as typewriters, stencil duplicating machines, carbon paper, and the filing cabinet (Yates 1988). That is, the business letter proliferated into new genres which became part of daily operations and part of permanent company records. The regularisation of the documents and paper flows also served to regulate the work of new classes of white collar workers (see also Zunz 1990).

In examining the Edison papers several times I came across this process in action suggesting how the flexibility, personal, judgment, and bonds of trust were weakened as paper work became increasingly organised around restricted genres controlled by pre-printed forms (Bazerman 1999). One example stands out in its clarity. In 1884 Alfred O. Tate went on a canvassing trip to Michigan and Canada, searching for central power station sites. He regularly reported back to Charles Batchelor, one of Edison's closest and most trusted partners, concerning information about the agents contracted and the towns they were to attempt to develop central stations in. For the first ten days he wrote personal letters often of two pages that mixed legal and business reports with personal judgments and other personal matters. He typically used the stationery of the hotel he was staying at. However, about two weeks into the process he began using pre-printed forms (identified as form 6) that had Edison company information, specific places for the contractual legal information and background information on the locally contracted agent, and a residual space for "Remarks." By being regularized in a form, these letters became more of legal and business documents directed towards a company file. Immediately upon adopting these forms Tate's comments became more limited in scope and length and his reporting task narrowed. On the other hand, the company was assured uniformity of information and regularity of filing procedures.

Because the sociality of texts is often a matter of implicit social understanding embedded in our recognition of genres that shape communicative activity, reading and writing have regularly been mistaken as autonomous processes of pure form and meaning, separate from social circumstances, relationships, and actions. Letters, compared to other genres, may appear humble, because they are so overtly tied to particular social relations of particular writers and readers, but that only means they reveal to us so clearly and explicitly the sociality that is part of all writing — they give the game away so easily. But that may be the very reason that letters have been so instrumental in the formation of more specialised and less self-interpreting genres. Letters have helped us find the addresses of many obscure and remarkable places for literate meetings and have helped us figure out what we would do and say once we got there.

Notes

1. For a study of how oral performatives are transcribed in constitutive texts see Danet 1997.
2. For a catalogue of the genres of government documents and records of medieval England and their relation to letters see Clanchy (1979).

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CHAPTER 3

The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800

Konstantin Dierks
Department of History, Brown University

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, the reading public in England and America began to embrace new cultural ideals of letter writing. These new ideals revolved around what was called the "familiar letter", a mode of letter writing devoted to the expression of affection and duty among kin, family and friends. The emergence of the "familiar letter" into the Anglo-American cultural imagination can be seen in the dynamism of the transatlantic book trade for letter manuals, books meant to guide people in how to write proper letters.[1] These books tended to proliferate whenever letter writing blossomed as a kind of transgression — as a tentative new social practice for an amorphous new social group struggling to sharpen an identity and to stake out a respectable position in society.[2] In the eighteenth century, one leading edge of such transgression and struggle was represented by the "middling sort." While the "middling sort" was becoming increasingly socially active and culturally visible in England and America, its group identity and place in the social order were much less sharply defined than that of the "better sort" or the "lower sort."[3] By demystifying the rules and conventions of letter writing, a social practice traditionally symbolic of power, authors of familiar letter manuals helped middling families pursue their claims to social refinement and upward mobility.

Of course, the rules and conventions of letter writing had been formulated for social groups more entrenched in power than middling families. Several modes of letter writing were current in Anglo-American culture in the mid eighteenth century, although some were fading traditions, some prevailed in popularity, and some were emerging innovations. Fading were ideals of letter writing for an intellectual community of men involved in the "republic of letters", and ideals for a polite community of aristocrats and gentry beholden to

the royal court. While these modes of letter writing endured into the eighteenth century, they no longer attracted the creative energy of authors, the entrepreneurial energy of publishers, or the marketing energy of booksellers. Ascendant since the late seventeenth century were ideals of letter writing for the flourishing business community, which captured the most attention in the form of fresh titles, frequent editions, and widespread printings. Emergent in the 1740s, however, were new books that focused on the "familiar letter", which rapidly became the dominant mode of letter writing for the remainder of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. On a superficial level, the notion of the "familiar letter" was not new. Authors of business letter manuals, for instance, treated familiar letters as a preliminary exercise for men to practice their writing style before embarking on serious business letters. Yet familiar letters would be propelled into the foreground of a new breed of letter manuals that trumpeted their social novelty as well as their cultural significance.

The ascendancy of the familiar letter was sparked by the influence of a book published in 1741 by Samuel Richardson, *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions*.[4] Richardson's innovation was to depict the familiar letter as a mode of letter writing suitable for all occasions in life and for all people in society. Once the exclusive province of elite white men, letter writing was now urged upon anyone aspiring to social refinement. In the ensuing decades, the seemingly boundless social world in Richardson's book was echoed by many imitators, so that the reading public in England and America could choose among a burgeoning number of familiar letter manuals.[5] Most popular in America among Richardson's many imitators was W. H. Dilworth, whose *The Complete Letter-Writer* was liberally imported for sale by American booksellers, reprinted by American publishers, and plagiarised by American authors. Equally vital to the expansion of writing skills in general and epistolary skills in particular were related genres of pedagogical literature: penmanship manuals, spelling books, grammar books, and dictionaries. Between 1750 and 1800, nearly 400 such imprints were produced in America, a dazzling increase from the 32 comparable imprints produced in the first half of the century.[6] Linguistic refinement had clearly become faddish as an instrument and symbol of upward mobility.

In championing the familiar letter, Richardson, Dilworth and other authors threw open the social boundaries around letter writing in terms of class, gender, and life cycle. These authors depicted the social practice of letter writing as becoming ubiquitous, and they anticipated growing popular demand for guidance. "Nothing is so common as writing of letters", one author declared, "The necessity of conversing one with another so long as we live, causes every one to

meddle with it. For ignorant men as well as literate, have frequent occasion to communicate by letters with their absent friends."[7] The expansion of letter writing reflected an unprecedented unleashing of aspiration for upward mobility in the eighteenth century, and it also reflected the attendant need for measures of social respectability that might be readily legible to others as well as affirming for oneself. Dilworth purloined John Locke's injunction about the importance of letter writing for the social reputation of gentlemen, the men who stood near the top of the social hierarchy in the seventeenth century. "'The writing letters (says this great genius) enters so much into all the occasions of life, that no gentleman can avoid showing himself in compositions of this kind. Occurrences will daily force him to make this use of his pen, which lays open his breeding, his sense, and his abilities, to a severer examination than any oral discourse.'" Yet Dilworth and other new authors applied this injunction to a rather different social world. Deeming the eighteenth century a "more refined age" than the seventeenth century, they addressed a much broader swath of the social spectrum. Mastering epistolary skills now became a "just reflection upon any man", whether affluent or not.[8] Authors of familiar letter manuals strove most concertedly to rouse the middling sort — the vanguard of social refinement in the eighteenth century.

Yet these authors sought to extend their audience to include not only men but also women. Traditionally, men were encouraged to write as a supposedly natural facet of their masculinity, while women were discouraged from writing as a supposedly natural outcome of their femininity. Yet this particular gender division would be overthrown in the eighteenth century. Once categorically ignored, women were now routinely addressed in the new breed of familiar letter manuals as well as in penmanship manuals, grammar books, and other pedagogical literature. Some authors acknowledged the novelty of their female audience by producing books solely for women, such as *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer*, first published in London in 1763 and imported by American booksellers.[9] By century's end, other authors had not only come to assume that epistolary skills were necessary for women to master, but they even insisted that women brought a special sensibility to the writing of letters. "Your sex", one male author declared to his female audience, "much excels our own, in the ease and graces of epistolary correspondence."[10] Once a social practice that reinforced traditional gender boundaries between male and female, letter writing was redefined to fortify emerging class boundaries between the middling sort — those who aspired to refinement — and the lower sort — those who were deemed vulgar.

Equally momentous was the welcoming of adolescents and children into the social practice of letter writing. Authors of familiar letter manuals endorsed letter

writing as a new way to inculcate the younger generation in the values, skills, and habits that would determine both personal character and social status upon adulthood.[11] Adolescents and children became a special category of cultural concern, and authors began to address younger audiences in their letter manuals.[12] The 1790 Boston edition of *The Complete Letter-Writer*, for instance, was intended to satisfy the learning needs "almost of every individual, from the boy at school to the secretary of state."[13] Recognising that the social practice of letter writing was especially new for youngsters, some authors devoted their entire books to such novices. Addressed to "the youth of both sexes", *The New Universal Letter-Writer* urged secondary school teachers to give their pupils "an early taste for epistolary correspondence."[14] By century's end, some authors began to produce letter manuals for children of primary school age. First published in London in 1783, and reprinted in Connecticut in 1791, *Juvenile Correspondence* contained letters "suited to children from four to above ten years of age."[15] For all the novelty of children writing letters, the author of *Juvenile Correspondence* curtly assumed that what was so recently unimaginable had swiftly become self-evident. "The utility of a book of forms, to encourage children in their first attempts in this pleasing and important art, must be obvious to all", the author insisted.[16] By the end of the eighteenth century, every member of the middling family — female and male, youngster and adult — was being admitted into the responsibilities and pleasures of letter writing.

In keeping with this family atmosphere, the authors of familiar letter manuals licensed the expression of affection as the leading purpose of letter writing. Central to polite and business letter manuals had been devotion to such formalities as proper titles for social superiors and inferiors, demonstrating a precise awareness of the writer's and reader's relative positions within the social hierarchy. One typical author, for instance, provided his readers with an elaborate code of "Distances, Familiarities, Condescensions or Humiliations, according as the Letters refer to Superiors, Equals, or Inferiors."[17] Paramount in familiar letter manuals, however, was not strict formality, but heartfelt sincerity. "When you write to a friend", Dilworth directed, "your letter should be a true picture of your heart."[18] Familiar letters were supposed to be written with conversational warmth rather than oratorical elegance. "When you sit down to write a letter", another author proclaimed, "remember that this sort of writing should be like conversation." Authors of familiar letter manuals staked out a set of cultural priorities far different from older epistolary traditions. Whereas intellectual, polite and business letter manuals had focused on the display of reason or wit, familiar letter manuals concentrated instead on the display of emotion and sincerity. Hence, the subject matter of familiar letters could be infinitely more open ended.

"As to subject, you are allowed in writing letters the utmost liberty", one author proclaimed, "every thing about you, stands ready for a subject."[19] Every aspect of quotidian life stood available to build an emotional connection between letter writer and letter reader, as long as it served to affirm the depth of personal attachment between the two.

While the authors of familiar letter manuals licensed people to write in an emotional and conversational style, at the same time they warned against desultory incoherence. Familiar letters were meant to be spontaneous but certainly not disjointed. The exact threshold between artlessness and due care was often imprecise and sometimes contradictory, especially as authors tended to trumpet the importance of artlessness first, and only afterward interjected caveats about due care. The heart came first, yet the head remained crucial to a familiar letter. "Be sure to think closely on the subject of your letter before you sit down to write", Dilworth cautioned.[20] Faults of haste could be seen as faults of understanding, and hence could reflect poorly on the personal character and social grace of the letter writer. "Whoever neglects, must have many inaccuracies", another author warned, "and these are not only a reflection on the writer, but a rudeness to the person to whom they are written." To write a familiar letter properly involved navigating an elusive middle ground between poles of ornamentation and vulgarity. Having jettisoned rhetorical elegance in favour of conversational sincerity, authors of familiar letter manuals worried most about crossing below the lower threshold of proper writing, where one might seem disrespectful and appear vulgar. "Though lofty phrases are here improper", one author insisted, "the style should not be low and mean."[21] "In all letters there must be some elegance and grace", another author proclaimed, "only so far as you may avoid rusticity, or barbarous and improper words or phrases."[22] Given the persistent belief that one's writing style reflected one's social position, a danger lurked of drifting beyond conversational sincerity toward arrant vulgarity, and so of being mistaken for someone of lower status. How to avoid false elegance as well as embarrassing vulgarity, both at the same time, required an ability to straddle the conversational and the correct, the artless and the disciplined. A hint of elegance was permissible, but only if it was intended to be complaisant rather than ostentatious. Familiar letters may "be dressed in wit", one author conceded, "provided it fits easy and natural, and seems rather expressive of the thoughts, than placed there for any beauty of its own." The ideal style for a familiar letter was an appearance of spontaneous ease, even where tremendous care was taken. "Your language should be so natural", Dilworth declared, "that the thoughts may seem to have been conceived in the very words they are expressed in, and your sentiments to have sprung up

naturally like the lillies of the field."[23] Writing familiar letters may have seemed deceptively simple on the surface, but to do so properly was depicted as an exceedingly difficult task, one fraught with so many social blunders and requiring so much discipline and care that it would justify the purchase of a letter manual.

Savvy authors proclaimed that their middling readers would swiftly be able to master the elusive art of letter writing. Mastery could supposedly be accomplished after "constant attention … for a few months." Fashioning oneself into a proper letter writer, and propelling oneself toward higher social status, were simply matters of will and determination. "An assiduous attention to the study of any art, even the most difficult, will enable the reader to surmount every difficulty", an author declared with optimistic flair. Mastery seemed accessibly within reach, yet it soon began to involve not only stylistic ease but also grammatical correctness. Authors of letter manuals began to foist grammar and spelling rules upon their readers. "A careful attention to the plain and simple rules laid down in the preceding grammar, will enable him to write the language of the present times", one author promised, "and, if he carefully avoids affectation, his thoughts will be clear, his sentiments judicious, and his language plain, easy, sensible, elegant, and suited to the subject."[24] Perfecting conversational sincerity and grammatical correctness would enable a letter writer to bridge ideals of artless ease and disciplined care. The ultimate goal was to internalise certain letter writing habits so that a skill acquired via discipline would become a trait that appeared natural. Artifice would become nature, and aspiration to social status would become entitlement.

Although authors of familiar letter manuals were most concerned with affectionate letters exchanged by middling families, they also gave brief attention to letters "of the politer sort."[25] They recognised clear differences between familiar letters related to social equals, and polite letters concerned with social superiors. In familiar letters, superscriptions and subscriptions were expected simply to express "the degree of kindred" between writer and recipient.[26] For letters to strangers, however, attention to status was critical. "In writing to a stranger, the first thing necessary to be observed is your correspondents station in life, and the ceremonies proper to be observed."[27] Polite letters to social superiors required a different kind of social complaisance than familiar letters to social equals. If the most important feature of familiar letters was to fulfil a set of stylistic conventions displaying sincerity, the most important feature of polite letters was to fulfil a set of formal rules displaying deference. For both kinds of letter, the basic goal was identical, to meet social expectations — for polite letters in a prevailing context of hierarchy, and for familiar letters

in a prevailing context of equality. The aim of familiar letter manuals was not to erase social distinctions, but to carve out a distinct cultural space for the middling sort sandwiched between the polite community above them and the lower sort below them.

While the middling outlook of English familiar letter manuals resonated in America, American publishers nevertheless revised these books to reflect a significantly greater degree of social aspiration in the different material and cultural circumstances of America compared to England. Earlier in the eighteenth century, business letter manuals had aided aspiring young men by providing elaborate lists of titles appropriate to persons "of Honour" perched at the top of the social hierarchy.[28] Later in the century, however, many American familiar letter manuals dispensed with these elaborate lists of social titles, except for a tiny handful of federal government officials.[29] Since these American letter manuals remained largely derivative of English books, the substitution of one long list with another shorter list reflected a conscious adjustment to the unique circumstances of America, and a conscious rejection of the English version of social hierarchy. The author of *The New Complete Letter Writer* dramatised this American outlook by featuring two lists, one short list of federal government titles in America, and a vastly longer list of "all Ranks in Great Britain." The second list was provided purely for American merchants who did business with England, detached from the different social conditions in America.[30] While familiar letter manuals in both England and America focused on the middling sort, in America that middling strata was encased in a less rigid social hierarchy.

Ultimately, these letter manuals open a window into the cultural ideals but not the social practices of letter writing. We can glimpse abstract visions of audience, easier than any pragmatic writing of letters by actual families and individuals — a project that entails another kind of investigation, one into family manuscripts rather than printed books. Nevertheless, the explosive growth of letter manuals and other pedagogical literature, and the spectacle of so many publishers and authors vying for readers, suggests that the familiar letter caught hold with the middling sort in America as in England. Authors of familiar letter manuals may have emulated some of the imagined elegance of books intended for the affluent elite, but the cultural purpose and social constituency of letter writing still seemed radically different. These authors addressed a much more comprehensive social world than their predecessors had, and they envisioned a much more universal utility for letter writing. They staked the identity of the middling sort in a private and sentimental world of kin, family and friends, and they came to favour a skewed vision of social equality that discounted the better sort and demeaned the lower sort. The extension of letter writing to women and

youngsters meant that every member of the middling family was assigned a role in cultivating a writing style less unique to their gender or age, and more appropriate to what we understand today as "class." And the emergence of the familiar letter as the dominant mode of letter writing in the eighteenth century meant that every single letter, no matter how seemingly trivial, would serve to construct and symbolise a person's social status.

Notes

1. On English letter manuals, see Robertson 1942, and Hornbeak 1934. French lettter manuals have been studied more extensively; see Chartier et al. 1997; Gurkin Altman 1988, 1992a and 1992b.
2. On letter writing as an instrument of aspiration for rising social groups, see Whigham 1981; and Patt 1978.
3. On the middling sort in eighteenth-century America, see Hemphill 1996. The middling sort in eighteenth-century England has been studied more extensively, see Hunt 1996; Wahrman 1995; Barry and Brooks 1994; Smail 1994; Earle 1989; Armstrong 1987; and Davidoff and Hall 1987.
4. On Richardson's contribution to epistolary theory, see Hornbeak 1934 and 1937–38.
5. On Richardson's imitators, see Hornbeak 1934. For American letter manuals, see Weiss 1944/1945.
6. Statistical information is derived from systematic computerised searches of eighteenth-century American imprints catalogued in the American Antiquarian Society's Online Catalogues, and cross-referenced to its microfilm edition of Early American Imprints, First Series, 1639–1800. In fact, the increase was far more dramatic, as this tally omits a great number of titles for which no copies survive, but whose existence can be deducted from newspaper advertisements, sequential numbering of editions, and other evidence.
7. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 27.
8. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 7,3,4.
9. See *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer* (London: T. Lownds, 1763). For advertisements by Philadelphia booksellers, for example, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 7, 1763, June 28, 1764, August 30, 1764, May 9, 1765, August 7, 1766.
10. John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on Useful and Interesting Subjects*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1791; Evans 23176), 1:99–100.
11. On the escalating emphasis placed upon childhood and adolescence in the eighteenth century, see Hemphill 1994–95.
12. On the expansion of books and other consumer goods for children in the eighteenth century, see Pickering 1981 and 1993; Demers 1993; Calvert 1992; Jackson 1989; Murray 1988; Kramnick 1983; and Plumb 1975.
13. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 4.

14. *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), iii-iv.
15. For the first English edition, see *Juvenile Correspondence; or, Letters Suited to Children from Four to Above Ten Years of Age* (London: John Marshall, 1783). For the first American printing, see *Juvenile Correspondence; or, Letters Suited to Children from Four to Above Ten Years of Age* (New Haven: Abel Morse, 1791; Evans 23479).
16. Caleb Bingham, *Juvenile Letters: Being a Correspondence between Children from Eight to Fifteen Years of Age* (Boston: David Carlisle, 1803; Shaw 3830), n.p.
17. J[ohn] Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: Or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 24th ed. (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1750; Evans 6517), 6–8.
18. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3–4.
19. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 8–9.
20. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 4–5.
21. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 10–11, 8–9.
22. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 33–34.
23. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3–4, 4–5.
24. *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), 21, 22.
25. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 11.
26. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 32.
27. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3–4.
28. See, for example, J[ohn] Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: Or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 24th ed. (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1750; Evans 6517), 68–69.
29. See, for example, *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), 22–23.
30. See, for example, *The New Complete Letter Writer; Or, The Art of Correspondence* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1791; Evans 23327), 254–258.

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CHAPTER 4

Letter Writing in a Cornish Community in the 1790s

Frances Austin
University of Liverpool

Introduction

The Clift Family Correspondence (henceforth in this chapter denoted by CFC) is remarkable in that it contains evidence of a community of ordinary working people writing letters to family and friends in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Although the letters are almost exclusively written by the six Clift brothers and sisters, they show that their immediate circle also took the writing of letters as a matter of course. It is now generally recognised that literacy among the labouring poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was more widespread than was at one time thought, but the use to which it was put is less clear. David Vincent, for instance, assumes that, although the introduction of compulsory marriage registers by the Act of 1754, shows that a large number of people could then at least sign their names, little use was made of the ability to write once children left school before the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 (Vincent 1993, p. 33). He quotes J. Henniker Heaton's article on the Post Office of 1897: "It need not be hastily inferred that our grandfathers were barbarians. But certainly the masses were almost as much restricted to oral communication and local commerce as their native ancestors were under the Stuarts".[1] Vincent repudiates this as a 'sweeping generalisation' and comments that in the 1820s and 1830s: "Correspondence was not unknown in the working class community" but he suggests that the cost of postage before 1840 "severely curtailed letter writing" (p. 34–35). He adds later: "A separate problem was the initial unfamiliarity with the practice of letter writing. Whilst correspondence had taken place before 1840, it would take a major domestic crisis to force a labourer to engage directly or by proxy in this form of communication." (p. 42). The Clift letters

show that in the 1790s the working people of Bodmin in Cornwall, both men and women, wrote letters to absent friends and family on a more or less regular basis and expected letters in return. Not only were these people literate but they made good use of their ability to communicate in writing. Literate is a relative term and a word of caution is necessary. Many of the letters written by these people, especially the women, would today be classed as illiterate if correctness in punctuation, grammar and spelling are taken as the criteria of literacy. But if to be literate is to be able to read and write well enough to understand and be understood, that they certainly were.

The survival of these letters is due solely to the advancement of William Clift, who is at the centre of the correspondence. Born at Burcombe Mill, near Bodmin, in 1775, William was the youngest of six surviving children, four brothers and two sisters, of a Cornish miller and his wife. Bodmin, a busy market town, was then the County and Assize Town of Cornwall. It lies on the main road from London to the south west, some 230 miles from the capital. Further west still are Truro and Penzance. The Cornish peninsula narrows as it stretches into the Atlantic and it is narrow enough at Bodmin for there to be easy access to the sea, both to the north west at Padstow and to the south at Fowey. Bodmin was therefore a junction in the most westerly part of mainland Britain.

At the time William was born, Robert Clift Senior was running his own mill just outside the town, but for various reasons the venture failed and he slipped back into the status of journeyman, eking out a living for the family by cutting walking sticks and fishing rods, and setting hedges. He died when William was nine. By then, all the older brothers and sisters were of working age — Robert Junior, the nearest in age to William, was six years older, having been born in 1768/9. The occupation of the older brothers at this time is not known, but the mother and sisters scraped a living in winter by carding and spinning wool, with which young Clift had to help after school, and in the summer they worked in the fields.

Just before William's twelfth birthday his mother also died. He left school and was apprenticed to a nursery gardener. Dismissed after two years or so for drawing a mischievous and unflattering caricature of his master, he then became a general factotum, running errands and looking after the horses, for one of Bodmin's foremost tradesmen, Joseph Eyre. He was friendly with many of the young people in the town, including the servants at Priory, the home of the Squire, Walter Raleigh Gilbert, and his wife, Nancy. He seems to have had the freedom of the Priory kitchen and used to draw pictures on the hearth to amuse his friends there. This talent was noticed by Nancy Gilbert, who had been at school with Ann Hunter, wife of the eminent eighteenth-century surgeon, John

Hunter. When Hunter found himself in want of a new assistant, Nancy Gilbert wrote to Ann Hunter recommending William Clift. Hunter agreed to apprentice him without a fee, indentures were drawn up and William set sail from Fowey for London on a coastal trading vessel, a common means of transport to the capital for west country people in those days. Clift arrived in London on 14 February 1792, his seventeenth birthday. Unfortunately, Hunter died eighteen months later and, after a period of uncertainty, Clift found himself in sole charge of Hunter's Collection of biological specimens. Six years later, the Collection was bought for the nation for the sum of £15,000 pounds, and Clift was appointed the first Conservator. The rise to fame, if not fortune, had begun. The Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln's Inn Fields was built to house Hunter's Collection and it became Clift's home for nearly forty years. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1823.

William Clift's departure for London accounts for the letters in the Correspondence (CFC). By 1792, however, other members of the family had also left home: Thomas was in Bristol, where he plied the trade of shoemaker, and Robert had joined the Royal Navy. Although the family relied partly on word of mouth from passing friends and workmates to keep the various members of the family in touch, letter-writing had already begun. Elizabeth, the eldest, who had kept the home together after their mother's death and who had virtually been a second mother to William, was the most constant writer. Later, Joanna, who had gone into service with Mr Eyre in Bodmin, also left the town, working in various places in Cornwall, and she, too, had to be kept informed about the rest of the family. John, the eldest brother, worked on the Molesworth estate at Pencarrow and eventually became steward. He was the one member of the family who remained close to home all his life. With a few exceptions, it is the letters to and from William in London that have survived. The reason for this is twofold. In one of his first letters home, William writes: "Please to save … all the Letters I send till I come home again, and I will save all yours" (CFC, p. 38). Elizabeth, devoted to this youngest brother, did as he asked, and very many, probably the majority, of his letters to her, were kept and, presumably, found their way back to him on her death. William himself was an inveterate hoarder of documents although, for some unexplained reason, he transcribed the early letters of his brothers and sisters into a letter book in a simple code and apparently destroyed the originals.

Elizabeth would probably have kept William's letters in any case, because letters were treasured, read to neighbours and handed round to friends. Items of news were passed on, often almost verbatim, in letters to other members of the family, and on one occasion Elizabeth copied out a letter from Robert, in its entirety, to both William and Joanna. For the first year that William was in

London, nine of his letters survive, and sixteen survive from various members of the family written to him. Some of these are very substantial. As the months and years go by, the numbers gradually diminish.

The correspondence

Many letters were carried by friends, travelling up to London or down to Cornwall. Often they were the servants of Priory, who accompanied their employers to their London house. Not infrequently, Nancy Gilbert herself undertook to deliver a letter. There was a surprising amount of traffic between London and Cornwall at the time. Nevertheless, the majority of the letters were sent through the post office, and the cost from Cornwall was sixpence for each letter. The sisters earned about five pounds a year and their keep — Elizabeth had followed Joanna into service after William left home — and one letter would have represented a quarter of their weekly income. If letters were not 'post paid', the recipient had to pay on receipt. William was fortunate at first in that he could have his letters franked by Mrs Hunter, although he didn't always like to trouble her. He, of course, had no regular wages for some years. It is not surprising, then, that when he was overcharged for a letter, he returned it to the Post Office. Elizabeth usually 'post paid' her letters but on this occasion something had gone wrong:

> Dear Sister I was in a sad hurry about your last letter which you sent by the post for they charged it double and when I found it was single I was forced to let it go back to the General Post office in the City where they had to look in it to see it was not double and then they sent it back with the overcharged Sixpence with J Wilson Upon it, and so I had my poor letter again[2] (CFC, p. 77)

Several times William mentions the matter of 'post paying' letters. Once he owns that he has not written because he has been buying weekly numbers of novels at sixpence each and has not had enough left for postage. On another occasion he apologises for Elizabeth having to pay for his letter on receipt:

> The Letter you rec[d] last was a mistake in putting into the Office I gave the house keeper the money to put it in for me and She forgot to pay for it — (CFC, p. 63)

To John he wrote:

> our Butler Mr Duell told me that when I did write again, to tell you not to Post-pay the letters you send … he would pay for them, for in so many letters as he takes in for Mr Hunter, they could not find out so few as mine … (CFC, p. 47)

As soon as Hunter died, however, Elizabeth told William not to pay for his letters to her:

> I hope you will write to me again, as soon as possible & I desire you will not straiten yourself to post pay my letters for if I had but that in all, I would gladly pay it, to have a letter from you. (CFC, p. 80)

So important was letter writing to the Clifts and their friends that they made rude remarks when some one or other did not trouble to write. Joanna, for instance, was a less punctual letter writer than young William thought she should be, and he complained of her tardiness more than once:

> Please to tell her [Joanna] from me that If she do not write in a Short time I shall give her up and strike her off my lists for I am sure if she does not write oftener than she writes to me she will soon forget to write at all. (CFC, p. 101)

Elizabeth writes:

> I believe pens ink & paper are very scarce in Bristol for I have had but 3 letters from Brother Thomas these 18 months. (CFC, p. 59)

This tart remark aptly expresses her disgust with Thomas for not writing. On another occasion, when a long awaited letter is received from the sailor brother, Robert, John comments to William:

> he says he hath sent many letters, but never rec^{d} any answer which I cannot believe, as I think if he ever put a letter in the Post Office it must certainly come safe … (CFC, p. 55)

He continues:

> his letter was not wrote by himself it was wrote by a very masterly hand but very illiterate spelling. (CFC, p. 55)

The importance of writing oneself rather than have someone else to do it for one is clear from a letter written much later, in 1837 by Joanna, then in her seventies:

> my Dear Brother I hope you will please to forgive my Bad writting as I Can scarsly Hold my pen haveing almost Lost the use of my right hand by the reumatic and my sight is Just as Bad But rather then suffer another to write for me I have bin several days writing this miserable scrole (CFC, p. 232)

John, also in a later letter of 1812, while suffering an attack of gout, excuses himself for not having written,

> which I Certainly shou'd if please God I had the use of my hands or cou'd prevail on my wife to write but she always makes this Excuse that she cannot spell well enough to write to you, which I know you wou'd Readily Excuse if I cou'd get her to write. (CFC, pp. 201–2)

There is no indication that John's wife, Nancy, could not write — only that she could not spell. It was permissible for wives to write for husbands, but in an earlier letter Elizabeth hints that William had no business to be writing a letter for a fellow Bodmin boy who had gone up to London, another William, who died shortly after from typhoid fever:

> She [Mrs Hocking] desired you would let her know when you write to me if Billy ever received that letter she sent to him, because he never answer'd that letter & how it was that he did not write that letter himself that he sent to her, for she told me it was your writing. (CFC, p. 71–72)

William defends himself against the reproach in his next letter:

> The reason why I wrote the Letter for him was because he desired me and said he did not know how to do it himself and then he would not have said half as much if I had not forced him to it. (CFC, p. 76)

This incident shows that it was not only the Clifts who expected letters from absent members of the family. Indeed, there are references scattered throughout the correspondence to letters being received, or awaited and not received, from various families in Bodmin with whom the Clifts were acquainted. An instance involving more than one family comes in a letter from Elizabeth of December 1795 and is expressed in her typically convoluted way:

> Polly Levears Gives her Cind Love to him [Robert Clift] an to Let him know that her son Richard is on boord the Corageux[3] now at Leaghorn [Leghorn] and if he should have the Chance of Ever seeing him he would desire him to writ to her she has receved but one Letter from him since he hath Been to sea an that was in July 94 an then he wrot from Fransey[4] the way she know he is at Leaghorn Mrs hussey at Blesland had a Letter from her soon who is on boord the same ship an he said richard was very well the young housey [Hussey] has sent his mother many Letters wich she has receved and Carefully answerd Every one of them an he has never recevd one (CFC, p. 121–2)[5]

Many of the young men were at sea for several years at a stretch, and their families were naturally anxious about them as Britain was in the midst of war with France. The fact that the women wrote letters as much as the men is clearly taken as a matter of course. There are, in the correspondence, two lengthy letters to Elizabeth from women friends, one a fellow servant and one a Bodmin acquaintance, written after Elizabeth herself had gone into service and moved away. John, too, received letters from other servants on the Pencarrow estate. In one letter he mentions hearing from Mrs Molesworth's Footman and on another occasion from a Coachman, who had apparently left Pencarrow:

> we hav Just rec[d] a letter from the Coachman in which he says he left his place last Saturday but (I suppose throug haste) forgot to mention where to direct to him. (CFC, p. 172)

Letters were both taken for granted and greatly prized, anxiously looked for and treated with respect. John records what must have been a typical scene as William Tabb, one of Mrs Gilbert's servants, returned from London:

> I hapend to be at Bodmin when William return'd at Mrs Tabbs I were Just got in to the house speaking to Mrs Tab/ when the coach stop'd at the door …on entring the house he [William] was soon Surrounded there was Mr T Pearce desirous to hear from his son Tho[s] who I find is in London myself in great hopes of haveing a Letter from you, Mrs Tabb & Daughters to Enquere after Sally & Mrs Williams (formerly Arthur) to enquire about her husband … (CFC, p. 179)

How did the Clifts learn to write (and read) the letters that circulated so freely and widely? What sort of education did they have? William Clift's attendance at school has been referred to already. He is the only member of the family whose education is known about with any certainty. Absence of an overall system of education in the late eighteenth century makes it difficult to ascertain the amount of schooling available to poorer children in any one place. Yet most villages and small towns had some kind of school and Bodmin was no exception.[6] It had had a free grammar school since before 1548.[7] However, we know from William's writings that his schoolmaster was Mr Salter, the Parish Clerk. John Salter is not named as one of the masters of the grammar school at that time[8] although he may have had charge of junior forms of the grammar school. More likely, he ran some kind of elementary school of his own. William tells us that his mother "contrived to starve herself to afford me three-pence a week for schooling" (CFC, p. 20). He certainly seems to have had a basic training in the 3Rs: reading, writing and "casting accounts". He was an apt pupil and later in life, writing of Mr Salter and his family, he says:

> They were all excellent kind-hearted people but I beat them all at print hand by their own unanimous confession. (Unpub. letter, 21–22 August 1841)

He was not quite so adept at arithmetic and remembers:

> failing in Boxing the Compass of the Multiplication Table backwards, and Zigzag after I had it so perfect straight forwards. Mr Salter I believe was almost as sorry as I was myself. (CFC, p. 245)

Writing, however, and spelling were the gateway to advancement in days when all records and documents were written by hand, and William Clift was not the

only young man to rise in the world by his skill in penmanship. He was a fanatic about writing and often copied out his letters several times before finally sending them. “I am almost tired”, he writes at the end of one letter, “writing this twice over as it did not please me the first time”, (CFC, p. 64) and again:

> This is the fourth letter I have wrote since New Years day and have sent neither of them, but I am resolved this shall go. (CFC, p. 88)

As noted, William left school at the age of eleven when his mother died. What schooling his older brothers had is not known but it is probable that they all had some formal instruction. John and Thomas could both write reasonable letters, although Thomas in particular lacks the lively style of his youngest brother. The sailor brother, Robert, seems to have been the black sheep of the family. When his first letter arrives from sea, John, having noted that it was written by another hand, comments:

> I should think he might improve very much if he was inclined to learn in the place he is now but I suppose he never will now. (CFC, p. 55)

The two sisters may have had a year or so at a dame school or they may simply have learnt to read and write at home. William tells us that his father “could read well, and write very tolerably, which was much more than many of his compeers could boast of at that period.” (CFC, p. 19) It could be that Nancy Gilbert had taught the sisters the rudiments of reading and writing. Before her marriage she was Nancy Hosken, the daughter of Bodmin’s Vicar, and this was a task not unknown among clergymen’s daughters. However they learned, the sisters could certainly read and write after a fashion. We may assume with some safety perhaps that the literacy acquired in whatever manner by the Clifts was not so very different from that of their acquaintance who figure in the correspondence.

Elizabeth’s handwriting appears unformed beside that of the brothers and her spelling certainly leaves much to be desired in the opinion of her young brother. It called forth a scornful remark at a time when they were having an argument (a “paper war”, William called it) over some cousins who were going to the South Seas as missionaries. He wrote:

> I shall never be convinced to the contrary of what I now think, by you, unless you learn to mend your Orthography or spell better … you surely do not understand the true definition and derivation of the words Lutheran, Calvinist, Methodist &c, otherwise you could not spell them wrong … (CFC, p. 169)

William at this time had been in London nearly six years and was at his most uppity, having adopted the airs of a young man about town and not allowing for his sister’s lack of educational opportunities. Sensitive no doubt to possible

ragging by his fellow servants in London, he also berated her for addressing his letters wrongly:

> When you write to me I will be glad if you will write your Direction as I place it underneath because you put the Cart before the Horse and makes it look foolish, and endeavour to put each line in its place.

William Clift
Late John Hunter's Esqr[e]
N[o] 13 Castle Street
Leicester Square
London

> You always put Castle Street N[o] 13 instead of 13 Castle Street. (CFC, p. 135)[9]

He also explained several times to the family how to fold the paper, envelopes not being in general use at that time:

> When you write, please to fold it [the paper] as thin as you can and write Single Sheet at the bottom and use thin paper. (CFC, p. 77)

As late as 1814 he wrote to John:

> I have sent you some Writing paper folded properly that you may see how they are done; the thick edge being always to be put under the thin edge where you seal it. (CFC, p. 204)

Lack of skill in spelling and punctuation (her letters are practically void of punctuation) did not deter Elizabeth from writing frequently and at length. Joanna, too, could write when she chose, and was rather more literate than her elder sister, having a somewhat flamboyant style.

Schooling and education apart, how did the Clifts learn to write letters as distinct from other forms of writing? One indication emerges from a letter of Elizabeth. She tells William to expect a letter from Thomas, then working at his trade of shoemaking in Bristol:

> I have heard from Brother Thomas & he is very well, He sent home for me to send the Young Mans Best Companion to him & desired to know where to direct to you. (CFC, p. 35)

Volumes entitled *The Young Man's Companion* exist in many versions and go back to the 1680s when William Mather published the first of them.[10] They are compendiums of useful information, intended for self improvement. They concentrate on English, arithmetic, including mensuration for elementary building

and carpentry, and geography. There is much miscellaneous information, about such oddities as how to do 'secret writing' and instructions for 'splitting a swarm of bees'. Over nearly two hundred years of circulation the contents varied considerably in detail, but instruction in the three main areas remained constant. The version that the Clifts apparently owned was probably that compiled by George Fisher: *The Instructor; or Young Man's Best Companion*, which was readily available in the late eighteenth century. Elizabeth specifically states *Best* and none of Mather's editions include this word in the title, although they continued to be reprinted at least up to 1775. Mather's edition of 1710 contained a series of model letters, and these were followed in all later compilations, including that of Fisher. Although Thomas wrote to William soon after he must have received the book, assuming that Elizabeth found a means of sending it, there is no evidence that he made use of any of the model letters. John, however, in his second letter to his brother, written almost as soon as William arrived in London, does seem to have been influenced by model letters of the type: 'A Letter from an elder brother to a younger, exhorting him to good Behaviour and seemly Carriage' or 'A Letter from an elder brother in the Country, to his younger Brother, an Apprentice in London', both of which appear in Mather's edition of 1755. Letters of this very specific kind, however, are not found in Fisher, who has many fewer model letters than Mather. John may, of course, have had access to some other letter writing manual. Certainly, his advice to William has a formulaic sound, although his wording is not that of either of Mather's two relevant letters. John's version reads:

> be sober & discreet in all you do, be kind & courteous to every one you have to do with, & let the remembrance of your God still have the first place in whatever you do, for that is the way to attain the truest wisdom, never absent yourself from your masters house by any means without his leave and always be attentive to his commands. (CFC, p. 29)

Wherever John got his wording — it may have been simple convention or tradition but note the accurate spelling — it seems that the Clifts did have recourse to model letters, and it is possible that these were used quite widely by people of their class.[11] Certainly, if the number of editions are anything to go by, the *Young Man's Companion* series was extremely popular. Fisher was still being published as late as 1862.

The formulaic phrasing that all of the Clifts resort to, especially in the openings and endings of their letters, has its origins in letter writing manuals that can be traced back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[12] Some go back even earlier to Anglo-Norman formularies of the eleventh century.[13] By the second

decade of the eighteenth century formulas had largely disappeared from the letters of literate and literary persons. Typically formulaic is the opening used by William on a number of occasions:

> I have taken this opportunity of sending you these few lines hoping they will find you in good health as it leaves me at present I bless god for it. (CFC, p. 63)

This is the most common form but there are a number of variations on it, especially from the more literate members of the family, who often dispense with the formula altogether, as did William soon after he was settled in London. The two most frequent adherents to this and other formulas are Elizabeth and Robert, the least literate of the family. Robert's rendering of the formula shows the difference of degree in literacy between him and his youngest brother:

> I know take the oppertunity of Wrighting these few lines to you hoping the will Find You in good health as i am at Present thanks be to god for it. (CFC, p. 113)

The first letter of Fisher's 1763 edition, published in Edinburgh,[14] contains the following variation on the opening formula although it does not immediately follow the greeting:

> As I have not had a letter from you, since your favour of the 8th of October last, which I answered by the next post, I take this opportunity of inquiring after your health. (Fisher, 1763, p. 47)

This is not, however, identical with the wording used almost consistently by the Clifts, which indicates other sources. Vestiges of other formulas also occur in Fisher's model letters although not enough to account for the extensive use of them by the Clifts. Their usual formulaic ending was:

> This being all at present/ from your affectionate sister till Death/ Elizth Clift (CFC, p. 92)

Variations were 'so no more at present' and 'I must conclude'. The inclusion of the phrase 'till death' is used again by Elizabeth and Robert. Joanna has it only once, in her first letter to William, and John and Thomas never use it. William sometimes includes 'till Death' in his early letters, the last occasion being in 1796, by which time he had dropped most of the formulas. The ending sometimes incorporates a more or less lengthy formulaic prayer for the recipient's welfare:

> time will permit me to say no more / but Conclude with My prayers to god/ for your health and welfare and/ our hapy meeting and beleive me/ to be your afectionate Sist^{r}/ Joanna Clift (CFC, p. 190)

Another example comes in a letter from Thomas:

> this being all at presant/ I Conclude with my prayers to god/ for your health and prosperity/ and remain your Ever Affectonate/ Brother Thomas Clift (CFC, p. 116)

Other formulaic phrases occur in the body of the letters but the opening and closing formulas are the fullest and most striking.

How was it that these formulas survived? Letter writing does not seem to have been taught in schools, certainly not in elementary schools, until the late nineteenth century,[15] so the explanation is probably that they were passed down by family tradition. Other incidental letters in The Clift Family Correspondence show that the use was not confined to this one family and it is probable that they were widespread in the letters of ordinary working people and those of the servant class.[16] Much later, in 1845, William makes a joke of the formulaic opening in a letter to his daughter:

> As you say; you have seldom occasion to write to me, and therefore it behoves me the more "to avail myself of this opportunity of writing to you, hoping this will find you in good health as this leaves us at present, I bless God for it." This was the universal beginning of many a Letter I have written in my young days for poor un-literary friends, and many blessings and thanks have I had in return … When I had written so far I used to ask, What am I to say next? and then we fairly got in media res, to business. (Unpub. letter, 14 July 1845)

This letter he finishes by sending his remembrances to 'all inquiring friends', another conventional phrase that came near the end of a letter.

'What am I to say next?' young William asked himself after the formalities had been gone through. In fact, this did not seem to be much of a problem to most of the family. The formulas merely served as pegs on which to hang the main part of the letters and even these were not always slavishly followed by the more lively members of the family, although they could turn them to account. The dilatory Joanna seeks to disarm her young brother and turn away his wrath with an elaborate and extended version of the opening formula:

> Dear Brother
> Since you have taken the trouble to write to me I,ve taken the Pleasure of writing you an answer and First you should Like to know Where I woud go to Buy an Excuse for not writing before In which I with shame and Confusion i Confess tis not In my Power to get an Excuse that would be worthy your Exceptance after Shuch an ill treatment from a sister But since you,ve Condesended to humble yourself to write to Me I Must hope that when you write to Me again that you,l send me an Excuse and Pardon My Neglect and In so doing you,l obledge your Ever Affectionate Sister. (CFC, p. 112)

The main body of the letter follows. This is no unlettered servant girl laboriously setting unfamiliar pen to daunting paper, but a lively and humorous mind well aware of her recipient and the effect she hopes to have on him.

Once the opening formula had been written, the Clifts have no difficulty in getting down to news of the family, general gossip and items of particular interest. The variety of close observation of events is remarkably refreshing. William writes from London of the sights he sees: the funeral of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the monuments in Westminster Abbey or St Bartholomew's Fair. He describes scenes of London life in graphic detail for the admiration of his brothers and sisters. Typical is his early account of King George III returning from Parliament:

> I was taken to the Park at St James's yesterday to see his majesty return from the Parliament house. It was a most noble sight, he had a dozen footmen to walk before the State coach and a Company of Dragoons before them; and so behind and about a Couple o' Dozen of beef eaters or Yeomen to walk by the Side, He was drawn by Eight Cream coloured Horses (from Hanover) and the harness all Red Moroco Leather and Gilt and ribbons all over and the Coach's top Red Morroco and on the top the tropic of war and a Crown and before and behind in full shape stood the God's and on the Sides were All the Gods Painted and the wheels and all over it was beautifully Carved and Gilted and about 10 or 12 Thousand Spectators running after. (CFC, pp. 32–3)

Robert in his rare letters home tells of the battles in which his ship, the St George had been engaged:

> we had three Engagements with the french fleet since we have Been Up the medetrania But alwase proov^{d} Victories over our Enemys we tooke two sail of the line & sunke one and as for frigates is Unaccountable — (CFC, p. 113)

This type of information is so stereotyped in seamen's letters of the period that it becomes almost formulaic in itself. Joanna writes a more individualistic and colourful tale of life below stairs:

> My dear i desired you in my Last to direct for me at Adm^{l} valiants where i have been only 3 months and this week I think to Leave them again to return to my Last place at Mr Lynes as they g[r]eatly desire me to Come back again nor should I have Left them at first had I Left my M^{rs} know the real cause of my Leaving her which was no,other then thatt of my fellow servant^{s} daily threatning to poison me on account of a young man^{s} paying more atenshion to me then she Cou^{d} wish … (CFC, p. 184)

Meanwhile, Elizabeth retails the latest gossip of Bodmin, who has got which girl into trouble or who has been committed for trial at the Assizes. One typically involved account concerns a petty theft and a magistrate's court:

> Scantlebury was taken up again & put him before Sr Wm[17] again & he would have been committed if they could have had the least hitch upon him for they was very much against him & told him that he was certainly the rogue but he strongly denied it & his father swore that he was in bed the Sunday night by 11 oclock & did not get up till seven the next morning … Mr Cock & Cromwell saw him in the Fore Street by five & they told Mr Jole so, but just as they came home from Sir Williams, an accident happened which gave the people liberty to say that they had been swearing false — they were but just in when the room they lived in fell in, the beams broke off & the floor fell all down the beds cradle people & all together, the young infant was almost stifled when they found it. (CFC, p. 44)

Life in Bodmin as recorded by Elizabeth Clift is apt to sound like a novel by Fielding or Smollett. John, too, has some dramatic incidents to relate:

> A few days since the tinners rose and met at Padstow to prevent the shipping off barley, at which the corn factors sent for a party of Welsh Millitia that was in the west, at their approach the tinners set off immediately the farmers were busily employ'd in carrying the corn to the vessels again, but a woman of Padstow got a drum & alarmed the town, at which, all the women in the place were soon assembled, knife in hand & cut every sack they got in reach of insomuch that the soldiers were drawn up & the Riot Act read to no purpose, at last the soldiers were orderd to fire on them (unknowing to them without ball) at such an alarm all the men were soon in action & every thing soon quiet, as the soldiers were but few. (CFC, p. 88)

Life, domestic and public, was full of incident and the Clifts only rarely found themselves with nothing much to report. Their letters, however the writers came to understand the genre, are more than mere conventional exchanges and, in spite of erratic spelling and punctuation, the sheer zest for living shines through the fluency of the writing.

Conclusion

This selection of quotations and comments from The Clift Family Correspondence, showing how one family set about keeping in touch, indicates some of the attitudes to letter writing in a Cornish town in the late eighteenth century. One instance, however, which is what these letters provide, is a narrow ground on

which to build generalisations. But the social context needs to be taken into account. That the writing of letters was not confined to one exceptional family is clear from the way in which neighbours and fellow workers were drawn into the correspondence. The letters survive because one member of the family had a passion for collecting and attained a position from which his personal memorabilia were ultimately handed on to public institutions. The possibility must be allowed therefore that other exchanges of letters, lacking anyone who rose to eminence, were destroyed and have not survived. It is clear that ordinary workpeople were not limited to 'oral communication and local commerce'. Writing was a passion with William Clift all his life but because he climbed a long way up the social ladder does not mean that without him the letters would not have been written. The other members of the family and friends in Bodmin did not write because they had social aspirations but simply because they were held together by family ties or other bonds of affection.

The question of whether the Clifts were literate or not can now be looked at in the light of the extracts from their letters. By the level of attainments expected in today's school system they would probably, with the exception of William, who became wholly emancipated,[18] be condemned as *il*literate, especially the two sisters, Elizabeth and Joanna. The letters themselves show much incorrectness of construction, spelling and punctuation, all of which would damn them at a glance were adherence to such matters the overriding consideration. The term 'functional literacy', used by David Livingstone (Livingstone 1993, p. 16) is a useful criterion for assessing the literacy of such a family as the Clifts. The skills in reading and writing that they had acquired were quite sufficient for them to keep in touch with each other. Apart from Robert, the sailor brother, who eventually disappeared,[19] the brothers and sisters kept in contact throughout their lives. In 1796 Thomas, the shoemaker, journeyed to London from Bristol and settled there, and for some years after 1800, the sisters joined the brothers in the capital. The only letters that survive for this period are those from John at Pencarrow. Later, when first Joanna and then Elizabeth returned to the west country, letter writing was taken up again and ended only with Joanna's death in 1846. Had the rest of the family moved upwards in occupation and society their letters might, like William's, have reached a higher standard of mechanical literacy. As things were, they attained an effective level of skill in communication without a corresponding level of correctness. Their use of *The Young Man's Best Companion* shows that they understood that there was a correct formal procedure for correspondence and John, in particular, aspired to a standard English. He not only wrote a good legible hand but exhorted his youngest brother to mind his spelling, as William recalled later in life in a letter to his son in law, Richard Owen:

> In my youngest days when I was almost teaching myself to read and write, my dear eldest brother John gave me this advice: 'My dear Billy, Don't think or care so much about Fine Writing as attention to your Spelling; The finest Writing will be little valued if the spelling be defective.' (Unpub. letter, c.1845)

Clift's own letters show how much he had taken this advice to heart.

The Clifts possessed rather more than merely 'functional literacy', if by that is meant writing merely to ascertain the health and welfare of family members and to assure them that they were not forgotten. These basic functions are covered by the opening and closing formulas, which admit of little individual or personal touch. Had this been the limit of their aspirations, the correspondence would quickly have petered out. Apart from relating items of personal and local news, or describing things which might be of interest, such as William's accounts of life in London, the writers range over many subjects and emotions: they gossip; they complain of one another's behaviour; they confide their worries and occasionally ask for advice; they commission each other to do things; and they discuss various matters, including religion, with great fervour. The quarrel engendered by the 'paper war' resulted in an almost complete break down of letters between Cornwall and London in 1798 and 1799.

A further factor is worth mentioning. William remembered going to Church in Bodmin with affection. It is clear from her letters that Elizabeth had memorised much of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer and had assimilated their rhythms. Time and again these appear in her prose and lift the otherwise rather plodding style. Whatever one makes of her basic literacy, therefore, she cannot be denied a level of culture. Joanna was probably more influenced by romances and chap book literature than by the Bible, but she, too, is not without a measure of cultivation. A livelier writer would be hard to find.

At the beginning especially, the correspondence is kept going mainly by Elizabeth, and the position of women in the social life of their community is worth considering in some detail. Elizabeth is much more than the family's chief letter writer. When their parents died, she, as the oldest, assumed the position of head of the household without hesitation. Her maternalism expressed itself particularly in her solicitude for the youngest child, William, to whom, as Joanna reminded him more than once, she became a second mother. Her supremacy was unchallenged, even by the eldest brother, John, who was only two years younger, and whom she upbraided forcibly when she thought his behaviour warranted it. The brothers could be amused by 'sister's ways' — she is 'quite in a huff' (CFC, p. 163) was William's warning to the others to watch their step — but they all acknowledged her position as head of the family. It is clear that neither she nor Joanna considered themselves inferior to their brothers in the matter of

writing, in spite of their lack of formal education and poor spelling. They assumed that they were their brothers' equals and, indeed, were accepted as such. William gave Elizabeth no quarter for her ignorance of orthography or how to address a letter. He expected her to match his level and was apologetic rather than patronising: "Come now dont be afronted for putting you right", he wrote once (CFC, p. 135). Elizabeth, for her part, was in no way abashed by his criticisms. Indeed, both sisters joined in putting their upstart young brother in his place. At this level of society the women clearly did not feel that they needed to defer to their menfolk. Elizabeth did ask William's advice about giving up the family home some two years after he had been in London but he evaded the issue and she was forced to act on her own initiative. Her independence as well as her concern for the family (which was often more than theirs for her) is evident from the way she holds her own in the correspondence.

How far the Clifts were usual or unusual in their persistence in writing letters cannot be certain, although, as we have seen, other families too, women especially, were writing to friends and family away from home. Evidence for the amount of letter writing from Post Office figures, which has sometimes been used for calculating how much working people wrote letters to each other, is not reliable since there were other ways of delivering letters, even over great distances. What is remarkable is how much the people of a small country town travelled from place to place by the end of the eighteenth century. Every opportunity was taken of sending letters by personal carrier. However, if all else failed, the Clifts and others used the postal service in spite of the cost of postage. Many of the covers bear the post office frank, which shows how determined they were to keep in touch. Who today would pay a quarter of their weekly income to send one letter to a brother or sister? Statistics for letter writing among the greater part of the population may never become available, unlike official documents that show the extent to which people could sign their names.[20] But notice must surely be taken of such material as, by some chance or other, has survived, and it seems reasonable to suppose that what was considered normal practice in one community might have existed more or less in other parts of the country.

Notes

1. J. Henniker Heaton, 'Postal and Telegraphic Progress under Queen Victoria', *The Fortnightly Review*, CCCLXXVI (June 1897), 839–49. Quoted in Vincent (1993), p. 34.
2. A letter of a single sheet, folded to include the address of the recipient, cost 6d but because of the way Elizabeth's letter was folded, the Post Office thought it contained a double sheet. *J Wilson* could be the name of the Post Office official who opened the letter but no one of that

name, working in the London Post Office at that date (c.1795), has been traced. Opening of mail was much abused, especially in the early days of the Post Office. By an Act of 1711, official opening of mail was made legal for certain specified reasons, one being the refusal of the addressee to pay the postage due, as was the case here.

3. *Corageux*: the ship's name was *Courageux*, a French ship that had been captured and transferred to the British fleet. For further details see Austin (1983i), p. 17.
4. Fransey: S. Fiorenzo in Corsica.
5. The spelling here is Elizabeth's own. In the transcriptions into code William always corrected misspellings. The postage at this time for men serving in the armed forces was set at 1d.
6. Margaret Spufford (1997), 47–62 demonstrates the widespread existence of schools for teaching basic reading and, sometimes, writing, even before the establishment of Charity schools by the S.P.C.K. in 1698. There is no record of a Charity school in Bodmin.
7. See A.F. Leach, *Educational Charters and Documents* 589–1909 (Cambridge, 1911), 476–77.
8. John Maclean, *Parochial Family History of the Parish of and Borough of Bodmin in the County of Cornwall* (London, 1870), 102. See CFC, Introduction, p. 9–11 for fuller details of William Clift's schooling.
9. Vincent says that letters were often addressed simply with the recipient's name and the post town in the 1840s: 'On one sample day in July 1843, 3,557 letters were sorted bearing only a name and 'London'.' (Vincent 1993, p. 44).
10. The first edition of Mather was published in 1681.
11. John Hill's *The Young Secretary's Guide* (1687, repr. 1754) and Thomas Cooke's *The Universal Letter Writer* (?1771) were two manuals available at the time that contain basic model letters and some of the formulas used by the Clifts.
12. For a fuller account of these formulas and their origins see Frances Austin: 'Epistolary Conventions in the Clift Family Correspondence', *English Studies*, 54, (1973), 9–22, 129–140; reprinted in *A Reader in Early Modern English*, eds. Mats Rydén, Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Merja Kytö (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), 319–47.
13. See Norman Davis, 'The Litera Troili', *Review of English Studies*, New Series, XVI (1965), 233–44.
14. George Fisher, *The Instructor: or, Young Man's Best Companion*, c.1735, continued to be printed up to 1862. The edition used here is that of 1763, published in Edinburgh, but most editions up to 1799 have the same series of model letters.
15. See Vincent (1993), p. 89. The 1871 adjustment to the Revised Code (1862) stated that pupils reaching Standard VI should be taught to write 'a short theme or letter or an easy paraphrase'.
16. Smollett parodies the opening formula in a letter of Win Jenkins in *Humphry Clinker*, and Fielding also makes some use of the formulas in *Joseph Andrews*.
17. Sr Wm: Sir William Molesworth of Pencarrow was a local magistrate and John Clift's employer.
18. See Frances Austin, 'The effect of exposure to standard English: the language of William Clift', in *Towards a Standard English 1600–1800*, eds. Dieter Stein and Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994).
19. For details of the last days of Robert Clift's life see Austin (1983i).
20. Victor Neuburg (1971), pp. 96–7, has questioned the reliability of signatures of this sort for ascertaining the numbers of literate persons at a given time.

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CHAPTER 5

English Pauper Letters 1800–34, and the English Language

Tony Fairman

Historical background

Of the many British[1] Poor Laws the law of 1601 (43 Eliz I, c2) is generally considered the first, as it placed upon the state the duty to relieve the poor previously borne by churches and monasteries. In England and Wales the state passed its duty down to the smallest units of civil administration — the c.15,000 parishes. The principal executors of this parish duty were annually elected Overseers of the Poor, supervised by local magistrates. Among other tasks, the Overseers had to collect a Poor Rate from the holders of property in the parish and then give out money and other assistance to needy parishioners.

In those days everyone who didn't own property had to have a settlement in (belong to) a parish. Men, single women and children had a settlement in their native parish, but married women took their husband's parish. If anyone worked in another parish for more than a year, they could apply for a new settlement there, though few did because it cost too much. Consequently, some people lived in a parish where they had no settlement. If they became unable to support themselves there and were unable or unwilling to return to their home parish, they had two courses of action:

(1) they could apply for relief to the strange parish, whose Overseer had three options: he could
   - do nothing;
   - remove them to their home parish, which would bear all costs and probably house them in its workhouse;
   - pay them 'outdoor relief', which, after Gilbert's Act in 1782 (23 Geo III, c83), he could reclaim from their home parish.

(2) they could apply by letter directly to their home parish. It's some of these applications I want to look at in this chapter.

Sources and purpose

All British Record Offices hold letters on many subjects by writers of all levels of literacy. Among these letters, and in England and Wales usually catalogued in the Parish Overseers' files as 'Correspondence', there are paupers' applications for relief, mostly written on the lowest and middle levels of literacy between 1800 and 1834. For this chapter I've chosen two such applications from England, backed up by extracts from similar material from English Record Offices and one letter from a printed source. By examining their language, I aim to shed new light on the recent history of the English language and ask a few questions, which this material seems to suggest.

To date I've visited Record Offices in about half the English counties, mostly in southern England, but also in the Midlands and in the geographic corners of the country. My corpus now has almost 800 letters, which is probably about ten percent of those I've seen. Without visiting all Record Offices, I can only guess how many applications they hold. Few Overseers kept any correspondence at all, and of these few most kept only occasional letters. Very very rarely every letter seems to have been kept: in the records of the parish of Kirkby Lonsdale in Cumbria (North-west[2]), for example, there are over 1200 — more than in the whole of Lancashire, the large county to the south. So, a rough estimate of the total number of paupers' letters in English Record Offices is 16,000, plus/minus 2000. Much of my evidence comes from Kent (South-east), where I live. But nothing I've found in other archives disproves my general conclusions, though variations in detail, which form part of ongoing research, are emerging.

We can't always be sure whether the people whose names appear at the ends of these letters were the actual writers, since many applicants were orate[3] and those they asked to write for them usually signed the applicant's name, not their own. When wives wrote, they usually signed their husband's name, if he lived at home. Where several letters have been signed with 'the same name', we can see that some paupers asked different people to write for them, but one hand may, and sometimes clearly does, belong to the name-holder him/herself.

Though paupers applied for outdoor relief as early as 1730, the number didn't grow till the early 1800s, some twenty years after Gilbert's Act. Overseers began to pay more outdoor relief then probably because the government, wishing

to prevent trouble from a population starved by rising prices in the Napoleonic wars, advised them to, and more payment led to more applications. Paupers went on applying till the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (4&5 Will IV, c76), when they stopped abruptly.

Terminology

Two points became clear to me while examining this material:

– the terms 'Standard' and 'dialect' are misleading if applied to nearly 200-year-old text, because their current meanings don't fit well with the ways in which English was used and thought about then;
– the paupers' language raises questions that go beyond pure linguistics. So, I use different terms in a sociolinguistic framework.

For centuries English has been passed on in socially or economically recognised situations, for example from master to apprentice in a scriptorium or printing workshop, or from teacher to pupil in a school or drawing room, using books as authority for what might be called 'best practice', whether in orthography, punctuation, pronunciation, lexis, meaning, grammar or discourse. By 'Schooled', therefore, I mean any English passed on at any time by such Schooling. Schooled English is typically written, but speech can be Schooled too and has been influenced by Schooled writing. 'Open'[4] refers to English which is free of Schooling but Open to other influences. The whole scale can be seen as 'Open', but Schooling gradually overrides the other influences towards one end.

To designate realisations of Schooled and Open English at different times, I use terms from those times: 'Refined' for Schooled English of the late seventeen and the eighteen hundreds and 'Standard' for today's Schooled English. For the respective Open Englishes I use 'Vulgar' and 'Nonstandard'.

There is, of course, no clean break between Refined and Standard Englishes because languages change gradually and patchily. In so far, therefore, as these terms are fuzzy-edged, they're unsatisfactory. But this disadvantage is, I think, outweighed by the new perspective that comes from separating the general concepts of Schooled and Open Englishes from their realisations at different times, and placing them all in a sociolinguistic process — Schooling. For example, much Standard English Schooling has been about spelling and grammar, which have hardly changed for two hundred years. So, if one sieves historical data for spelling and grammar, Schooled English looks static — as a Standard perhaps should look. But Refined Schooling was also concerned with

discourse structure and lexis, which aren't schooled now as they were then. Sieved for discourse and lexis, Schooled English looks as dynamic and pluralistic as Open English, with which it interacts.

Letters from opposite ends of the scale

We'll look first at a fully-Schooled letter by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). His letter shouldn't be taken as the yardstick for the Vulgar ones we'll look at later, but rather as one half of a bilateral comparison.

On 28 July 1817 Coleridge began a letter to Lord Liverpool thus:[5]

> My Lord
> For the freedom, I take, in thus soliciting your Lordship's acceptance of the accompanying works, as I have no other motive, so have I no other excuse, but the strong feeling of respect, the inward honor, which I have been so long in the habit of connecting with your name — unless indeed I might be permitted to add (tho'
> Things of this nature scarce survive the night
> That gave them birth)
> the disinterested zeal, with which I have concentered my powers — such as they are, on every important occasion, in support of those principles, and (since the Treaty of Amiens) of the measures and means, which have at length secured the gratitude & reverence of the Wise & Good to your Lordship's fellow-combatants in the long agonizing contest.
> In my 'literary life', the publication of which has been delayed two years, there are a few opinions which better information and more reflection would now annul. But … [etc., etc., for more than five pages.]

Coleridge's letters of application to his social superiors differ stylistically from his other letters. In his own terms this letter displays two characteristics:

(1) it displays 'method':[6]

> What is that which first strikes us, and strikes us at once, in a man of education? … Not the weight or novelty of his remarks; not any unusual interest of facts communicated by him; … Still less will it arise from any peculiarity in his words and phrases … It is the unpremeditated and evidently habitual *arrangement* of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he then intends to communicate. However irregular and desultory his talk, there is *method* in the fragments.

He withheld the Subject of his first (128 word) sentence till the seventeenth

word, and co-ordinated it — *as I … so have I*. Notice that he co-ordinated groups too: *the strong feeling of respect, the inward honor* and *measures and means*. Elsewhere he somewhat proudly copied a 243-word sentence, in which his Subject is the 213th word.[7]

(2) his English is (un)*friable*.

A *friable* language, according to Coleridge, is one with prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs, which with other short Anglo-Saxon words[8]

> cannot fail to give [it] a more *friable* and fragmentary character [than Latin] & to cumber it, as in English, with monosyllabic and unemphatic words.

Coleridge's text has almost as few monosyllables as English allows.

Coleridge wasn't the only person who thought monosyllables cumbered English; Gerry Knowles[9] reports that "'clog' [was] repeatedly used [between 1620 and 1720] with respect to monosyllables".

John Clare, the Northamptonshire (East Midlands) 'dialect' poet, also knew that monosyllables made a bad impression. In his satirical poem, *The Parish*, he mocked an 'orator … at the hustings' for using 'bad english':[10]

> No hungry magpie round a rotten sheep
> A longer song of nonsence up can keep
> Were small words all their utmost powers engage [where]
> And monnysyllables swell mad with rage

Refined writers went on avoiding monosyllables throughout the eighteen hundreds. A striking example of this appears in a textbook published in 1875, which does use phrasal verbs, but hyphenates almost every one, and a few predicate groups too: 'pointing-out, cut away, bear-out, taking-place, give-rise to, laid-hold-of, drawn-in'.[11] Standard writers also choose polysyllables: in this paragraph, for example, only 16 out of 44 content words (excluding Names and quotes) are monosyllables.

Coleridge and his contemporaries didn't distinguish writing from speech, which they thought was degenerate writing. For example, in his glossary of 'Provincial Dialect and Pronunciation' (See Fig. 1), Thomas Batchelor[12] listed phonetic renderings of Bedfordshire speech (just north of London) and Schooled 'translations', some of which are more typical of writing than of speech: for example, 'attend' and (lower down the same page) 'Pocket the affront' for 'Put up with it'. Batchelor's phonetic alphabet alienates readers, as do the quotation marks in which Refined writers often quarantined Vulgar lexis. The glossary looks like a bilingual phrasebook, but the foreign language here is English.

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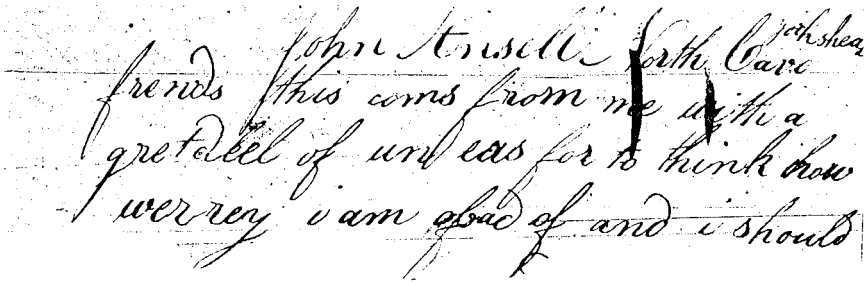
Provincial Dialect and Pronunciation.	*English Phrases of equivalent Signification.*
Wot ɥr yŭw ătɥr?	What are you doing?
Gŭw ɥn sɪy fɥr hɪ syɪp.	Go and seek—look—for the sheep.
Sɪy tŭw ɪt—ătɥr ɪt.	Attend to it.

Fig. 1. Phonetic rendering of Bedfordshire speech by Thomas Batchelor.

We'll now look at a minimally-Schooled letter from John Ansell. Writing near Hull (North-east) to his home parish, New Romney, Kent, Ansell started thus (my italics):[13] (see Fig. 2)



John Ansell North Cave yorkshear
frends this coms from me with a
gret *deel* of un eas for to think *how*
werrey i am *bad* of …[14]

Fig. 2. Part of the letter of John Ansell, with transliteration.

Close examination shows that

– Ansell's basic written units were often single graphemes, except for his own names — two well-formed units, which he must have practised many times in school;
– he made many mistakes: for example, he starts graphemes wrongly (e.g. <a> in *eas*), and he often erased. Sometimes we can read his first attempt, as in the three italicised words:

ORIGINALLY	FINALLY
dll	deel
i	how
of	bad

Besides these mistakes, he misplaced *werrey*;[15] he should have gone on 'how werrey bad of i am'. Another sign that he was Schooled only just enough to write functionally is that he didn't know even a partly-Schooled beginning or ending for his letter: he signed his name at the head, put *frends* as salutation (both very rare indeed) and ended with a unique valediction: 'Weten Weten' (= Waiting).

So, since Ansell was scarcely able to foresee a discourse beyond his graphemes, we'll look at a complete letter by a better, but still not fully Schooled writer.

A Vulgar letter

Augustine Morgan lived for most of his life in Beaminster, Dorset (South-west)[16] with his wife and five children. But his home parish was Blandford Forum, some 25 miles east. He was literate, 52 years old and in distress when he wrote the following letter — one of nine which have survived in his own hand:[17] (see Fig. 3)

M^{r} Skendell this is to a quaint you
that the parish of Bimmster ont
pay me som of 3^{s} p wick Tell thay have
a ~~w~~freff order from Oveasers and [<W> erased]
and the pay as been stop 10 wicks
and S^{r} I ham in Great want for
I Cant worke in no shop for my
Breath is so verey Short that I
Cant worke in Bott verey Littel at my
Tread and I Cant Gett nott a bove four
Shilens a wick and if you wont pay
the full som that is Back I most
Com home to Blandford and my wyeff
and Famley and ad nott Been for Esq
Bastard[18] I most Com B four now
and I hope that you will Let me
wat I ham to dou By nex Sondey
I Cant Bide year no Longer
and S^{r} no mour

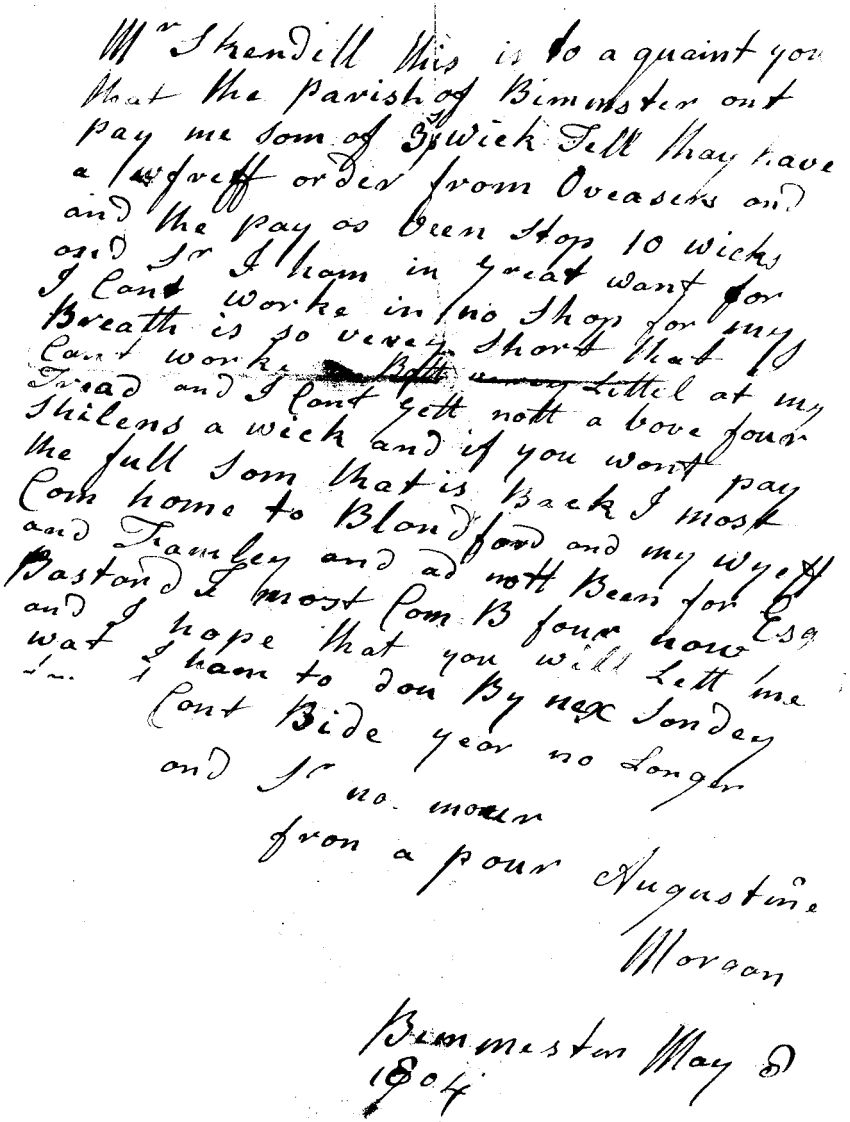


Fig. 3. The letter of Augustine Morgan.

20 fron a pour Augustine
Morgan
Bimmester May 8
1804

This letter displays five key characteristics of Vulgar writing:

(1) no Schooled punctuation;
(2) Anglo-Saxon lexis;
(3) clause and tone group, not sentence, are the major discourse units;
(4) syntactic Elements don't 'suspend' but follow each other;
(5) Morgan must have spoken 'dialect', but his letter isn't in 'dialect' as we understand that term now.

(1) Punctuation:

Partly-Schooled writers never punctuated by Schooled means (capitals and marks), but some did by other means, as Morgan did in line 6, where, like a new line in Schooled text, *S^r^* marks a new paragraph.

In 1821 Stephen Wiles was a 19-year-old apprentice in Sussex (South-east). In his eight surviving letters he started many statements with a Vocative — as if buttonholing his Overseer — and then 'spoke' with a desperation that grew as the months passed. Here's part of a later letter:[19]

> Sir/ i have never been so bad off
> for shoes Sir/ the shoes that i have
> got now or not worth picking [up]
> in the Street Sir/ I am a bleidge
> to borrow Shoes of peopel Sir/ my
> Master says …

In Shropshire (North-west Midlands) 'Elisebeth Downes' also marked a paragraph with a Vocative:[20]

> I do not know who the Overseers
> ar at this time, Sir I should take it as a great
> Favour if you will pleas to Intercead with
> the parrish for som further Releife for mee

John Clare[21] actually refused to use

> that awkard squad of pointings called commas colons semicolons &c

(2) Lexis:

Like Ansell's, most of Morgan's lexis is monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon; only three of his c.150 words have three syllables and they're all names — *oveasers*,

Augustine, Bimmester.[22] Morgan, Wiles and other partly-Schooled writers lived in an orate culture; so, when they heard unfamiliar Latinate English, they remembered it by Anglo-Saxon word patterns, not by orthography. For example, sometimes:

– they shortened a long or Latinate word to the typical one/two syllable pattern of Anglo-Saxon words: e.g. *Bimmster* and *Famley*, and I don't know what Morgan meant by *freff order*; or
– they divided it (and even Anglo-Saxon words) so that stress didn't fall on the second syllable: e.g. *un eas* (Ansell): *a quaint, B fore* (Morgan); *a bleidge* (Wiles), and more examples from various sources:

> in form (*passim*); stifket (Hampshire, [South Central]); nockalashun, in denter (Kent); straining (= distraining, East Riding [North-east])

– some minimally-Schooled writers couldn't make sense of 'take it into consideration'. For example, in Kent the minimally-Schooled writer for John Argar's wife wrote:[23]

> … I am quite baire again and ham
> be hind with my rent I hope gentleman you will
> taket in Considarchen and send me somthing …

Minimally-Schooled writers had, as Batchelor noted, a monosyllabic lexis, not the Refined one we know so well, for example:

REFINED	VULGAR (in wide distribution)
remove	pass down/home
depression in trade	trade/bisnes is dull
expansion of trade	trade turns in [i.e. to the shop]
apply for relief to	throw oneself on, come troublesome to
pay by instalments	pay by littles
pay what is due	pay what is back/be hind
inform, acquaint	let know, tell
because	for

The following two examples show that Refined writers were aware of this dichotomy and tried to stay on the Schooled side:

(a) on 28 May 1824 Henry Walker ('Plumber Glasier hous Painter Paper henger Sign righter Grainer and oramentel Painter') wrote from London to the Overseer of Charing, Kent, about his younger brother's indenture to a new master:[24]

> … If you Would find him in
> Cloas and be the expence af his indenters being [clothes, bear]
> turn^{d} over …

The Overseer drafted his reply in pencil on the back of Walker's letter:

> … The expense of
> transferring the indentures will be paid by
> Charing Parish.

(b) letters by John Caister, (Assistant) Overseer of Dymchurch, Kent, exist in the records of two parishes — final copies in New Romney and drafts in his own parish, all in careful copperplate. This was a man who cared about literary form. Here's one of several examples of Caister redrafting to avoid Vulgar language:[25]

> In reply to yours of the 2nd inst have
> to observe the conditions therein stated are —
> age &
> considerably too high for a boy of his size, and
> ~~for so long a time~~ for that period of time …

(3 & 4) Units and chaining:

If one analyses Morgan's discourse by Schooled criteria, his first sentence goes on for 130 words (Coleridge might have approved of this length). It has an initial main clause — *this is to a quaint you* — followed (by one analysis) by several subordinate clauses, some containing more subordinations. His second sentence starts with his first paratactic clause, *I Cant Bide* on line 18.

But Coleridge wouldn't have seen *method* in it. Morgan's text is certainly *unpremeditated* and *habitual*. But he didn't lack premeditation because he was thoroughly Schooled, as Coleridge meant, but because that's how he must have spoken. Each clause follows the completion of another and there's very little 'suspension', as David Brazil called it.[26]

Brazil developed a grammar to analyse speech, which he understood as an ongoing process, unlike text, which is a product, finished and available for analysis. He posited a Telling Increment as the basic speech unit. Each Increment starts with a Noun Element, which predicts a Verb Element, which may predict either completion of the Increment (e.g. *Coleridge approved*), or another Noun Element before completion (e.g. *Brazil posited a Telling Increment*). But we can suspend the predicted start and/or completion of units by pushing in other Elements, initially, medially and/or finally.

Refined writers were schooled to suspend at all the many grammatically possible opportunities at clause and group levels. Coleridge (above), for example, suspended

– the initial (Subject) Element in the first Increment;
– the predicted Object of *add* for a long time by cleverly implanting verse in an embedded clause;
– the completion of many Elements (e.g. *the strong feeling of respect, the inward honor, which…*) and of his Increment/sentence for almost 100 words by different syntactic methods.[27]

But Morgan had a narrow range of suspension:

– he rarely suspended the initial Element, except by conditional clauses which, like other partly-Schooled writers, he put first;
– he rarely suspended Elements (groups) more than once at one place: for example, he wrote *the full som that is Back*, not 'the full som of mony that is back', and later, after putting in a minimal initial Noun Element as Subject (*I most Com home to Blandford*), he tagged on more Subject at the end *(and my wyeff and Famley*), thus avoiding a double suspension;
– but he did suspend the completion of the Telling Increment by repeated chaining — the whole forming one 17-line Increment by Brazil's scheme. In fact, one needs to divide this into tone groups, which are, therefore, the unit that determines Vulgar writing.

In East Riding one of 'Dorathy Styren's' many writers — this one was middling Schooled, using some Schooled punctuation and a biblical phrase 'repay an hundred fold' — avoided a Subject with embedding by another means but got into a syntactic and semantic tangle with a Schooled phrase — *on account of which*[28]

> … the person I got to Write for
> me last i was Affraid Afterwards that
> they did not write to you in a proper
> Manner which I thought it was on
> Account of you not sending it …

In sum, Vulgar discourse was nearer speech than Refined discourse was, and so, Coleridge thought, gave less sign of intelligence:[29]

> the objects and events recur in the narration in the same order, and with the same accompaniments, however accidental or impertinent, as they had first occurred to the narrator.

(5) Dialect:

Though paupers must have spoken 'dialect', they wouldn't have thought of writing it. They aimed at Schooled English[30], but hadn't had enough Schooling to succeed. In the first half of the eighteen hundreds most 'dialect' was written by Schooled writers to amuse Schooled readers, neither group speaking 'dialect' themselves. Though fully Schooled readers of Morgan's time would have judged his letter Vulgar 'dialect', it isn't 'dialect' as we understand the term now, despite the ubiquitous double negative and line 18, which is recognised by West-country speakers today.

Two routes to full competence

If one ignores Schooling and other influences, one can imagine two directions in which partly-Schooled writers could become competent communicators: Open (orate) and Schooled competence.

Since, of course, Open competence wasn't schooled or prized, good examples are very rare. But I've found three letters, written by Rachel Clark in London to the Overseer of her home parish. Her last, very exasperated letter (5 September 1826) is too long to quote in full, but, writing about her husband, this is how she perorated[31]

> … he says he will be damnd if
> he work to maintain my damd
> Bodey with out i work for my
> self i can hardley do for my
> Children i am so weeck
> jentlemen if you do not send
> me my money you may
> expect to see mee down in
> a few days and if i am
> forsed to cum i will sooner
> lay in god save the king [give birth]
> rather then cum back to London
> a gain
> i am your humbel
> searvent Rachel Clark

Clark's Vulgar, Open competence includes:

– unSchooled punctuation;
– the East Anglian verb form *he work*;

– Anglo-Saxon lexis (*do for, see mee down, lay in, cum back*);
– clauses chained repeatedly to suspend completion of the Increment (note: *i can hardley do for my Children i am so weeck*).

None of these characteristics, nor, of course, her orthography were part of Refined competence; Clark perverted literacy, and her un*humbel* directness probably offended Refined readers. But she is a competent communicator.

Schooled competence was difficult to achieve for another reason: it was further from speech than now. The writer of the following letter fails and succeeds:[32]

Mr Woollett Hythe 11th Mar 1818
Sir
From the Depression of Trade
and increase of the Parochaial Rates of the Town
and Port of Hythe Reduces me to the disagreeable
and painfull necessity of troubling you with
these few Lines having a Wife and five
al home with me
Children ^ and I now live under Mr Tritton
who inform'd me the other Day that he
wished me to leave his house as he is
in Wants of it for Some of their own Poor
and that in Case the Rent is not paid
at Ladytide that he will Seize on my
[NEXT PAGE]
On my Goods and Sell to the Amount that
is Due to him — which I think is a very
hard Case — that I have to request the favor
of you to lay my Case before the Gentlemen
of your Parish and do what you can for me
to alleviate me in my present Distress
the Amount Due to Mr Tritton for Rent will
be above three Pounds—
Your reply as Early as possible will
very much oblige Sir Your most Obedient Servant
Mr Woollett William Dowle
Overseer
Parish of
New Romney

This writer (probably male), knowing that Refinement needed a long sentence, produced one which apparently doesn't end till line 19 (159 words), but he couldn't keep Coleridge's *method* up. He started with a complex prepositional

group, which we expect to suspend the Subject, but he turned it (ungrammatically) into the Subject itself. After his main clause, he simply chained the rest without *method*, some with weak connectors (*that* in line 14, for example), much as Morgan did. In fact, the discourse starts off looking like a sentence but turns into a chain of speech units.

But he was Schooled at group level and below, using:

– much suspending co-ordination (*the disagreeable and painfull necessity; the Depression of Trade and increase of the Parochaial Rates*);
– Refined grammar (*Parochaial* — not 'Parish', which would be a Noun where an Adjective should be), and
– Refined lexis, except for a few lapses: e.g. *the other Day; in Wants of; do for me*.

Schooling

I've already suggested that speech influenced partly-Schooled writers. Another likely influence is the Schooling they received. The first step was to teach the names of the letters of the alphabet — A-B-C-D, etc. The second was to drill the pupils to pronounce each vowel letter in all viable combinations with single consonant letters. Thus, Lesson One in Charles Vyse's *The New London Spelling Book* (first published in 1776, with many editions by 1843) is:

ba	be	bi	bo	bu
ca	ce	ci	co	cu
da	de	di	do	du
fa	fe	fi	fo	fu

Lesson Two goes on with <g, h, j, l> and vowels. The reverse process starts in Lesson Five:

ab eb ib ob ub (and so on)

Since the children of poor families rarely got more than elementary Schooling, the idea that one grapheme stood for one phoneme and vice versa was drilled into them, as John Clare put it:[33]

> the boy … gets his horn book by heart & then can say his lesson with his eyes as well shut as open

After by-hearting all viable combinations of single vowel letters with single consonant letters (most textbooks also listed combinations with two and three

consonant letters), the children read short, one-syllable worded sentences of moral and religious but no practical use. Here's Thomas Dilworth's first reading lesson (*A New Guide to the English Tongue*, p. 5 — first edition 1740, over 100 more by 1800):

> No Man may put off the Law of God.
> The way of God is no ill Way.
> My joy is in God all the Day.
> A bad Man is a Foe to God.

His first lesson in bisyllables starts (p. 28):

> It is God that girdeth us with the Strength of War; and maketh my way perfect.

And his first lesson in trisyllables starts (p. 46):

> Rejoice in the Lord, O ye Righteous: For it doth become well the Just to be thankful.

Three aspects in these elementary stages of Schooling prepare pupils for Vulgar writing:

– the spellings of words like *Lord, law, war; O, foe* must have looked random to (and confused) a child who didn't go to school long enough to learn that English has many phoneme/grapheme systems. Similarly, Vulgar spelling seems random too;
– the sentences and word groups are simply structured and don't need punctuating;
– the lexis is Anglo-Saxon not Latinate. Note the Vulgar *put off*.

So, the first stages of Schooling carried Vulgar lexis and syntax into writing, and teachers, many of whom were not Refined users, probably carried still more.

Matters arising

First, in the past two hundred years Schooled users have modelled their English on different principles, and as the principles have changed so has what counts as 'best practice' English. Those who codified English in the 1700s were embedded in their society and took Latin as their model. The Earl of Chesterfield's (1714–86) views on language, for example, were models in his time and for long afterwards. In his letters to his son, which were printed soon after his death, he wrote:[34]

> When you come into Parliament, your reputation as a speaker will depend much more upon your words, and your periods, than upon the subject.

The mature Coleridge also chose form before content (and function). Living in the early Industrial Revolution, when gentlemen and artisans discussed matters of *novelty* and *unusual interest*, each in their own English,[35] at first he chose 'the language really used by men', as William Wordsworth put it in the 'Preface' (1800) to his *Lyrical Ballads*. But though Coleridge admitted the 'Preface' had been 'half a child of my own Brain',[36] by 1818 he had, as we saw above, turned away from 'real language' in prose and developed his *method* — a variety of English which only *a man of education* could attain. In 1865 Marcus Davis made the same choice in a pamphlet on Refined English:[37]

> 'He is a common man — quite uneducated. He scarcely speaks a sentence correctly.' These are the terms applied to men who may perhaps be possessed of a fund of information: yet being deficient in the knowledge of the modes and rules of speaking grammatically, are pronounced, especially by ladies, as not presentable in society.

In other words, Schooled English was a uniform; Refined speakers/writers signalled who they were (gentlemen and ladies) by behaving uniformly and, equally importantly, by *not* doing certain things others did — dropping /h/, for example.

But nowadays Schooled English isn't modelled on Latin and is taught as a tool. Richard Hudson, for example, sums the situation up thus:[38]

> [The National Curriculum] asks all pupils to learn Standard English so that eventually they can use it in school and later in other areas of life such as work.

Ladies and gentlemen did not work; the English they fashioned for themselves, therefore, didn't have to be fit for use in work

Secondly, it follows from the above point that, if we focus on Schooled English, we'll miss the significance of the ways in which users of Schooled and Open Englishes borrow and reject each other's language, and evaluate their interactions and all their usages with bias. For example:

(1) rejection: we saw John Caister cross out Vulgarity. But, given that Refined users avoided monosyllabic content words as far as they could (Caister could have crossed out more Vulgarity), just how far could/did they go to avoid them? What did Jane Austen, for example, mean when she made her characters use monosyllables? And what should we think of her own monosyllables, and those of other Refined writers? It's striking how many of them used monosyllables, sometimes in quotation marks, though they must have known Latinate alternatives.

On the other hand, how much of an avoider of 'dialect' should we consider John Clare? John Barrell, for example, assumes Clare was trying to write a

sentence in his sonnet, 'The Lane'.[39] But if one reads it aloud with a local accent, as Clare himself no doubt did, it becomes an internal monologue with clauses chained one after the other — and it has no punctuation: *awkard* for Clare because it had been developed for Refined writing (for sentences), and as such cumbered any ill-defined budding ideas of elaborating — becoming more competent in — Vulgar English.[40]

(2) borrowing: Schooling has brought Schooled and Open Englishes closer bilaterally, helped by the media and growing mobility. For example:

– multiple embedding and much Latinate lexis still occur in late twentieth-century Standard (see my text *passim*), but aren't schooled to the same extremes now;
– Latinate and Anglo-Saxon lexes are less polarised now; Latinate lexis turns up more often in Open English, and Schooled has taken much Anglo-Saxon in, including phrasal verbs;
– Schooled English uses Anglo-Saxon word-coinage methods: e.g. the noun 'teach-in', and nouns appear as adjectives (*word-coinage methods*, for example).

Finally, Knowles states what's taken for granted about the history of English:[41]

> Inkhorn terms became a permanent feature of the language.

Though this is certainly true in that we find Latinate terms in the first English dictionaries, I've set out evidence that it's inaccurate if we consider **the whole** language in use, not just the fraction that fully-Schooled observers used and recorded. Since it was the orate and partly-Schooled majority who day after day produced the most English, a more accurate statement would be: English lexis was mostly Anglo-Saxon, except in the writing (and, to an unknown lesser extent, speech) of one small group, and this unequal division by class, Schooling and use probably lasted till the end of the eighteen hundreds. Most users were just not Schooled enough to know any Latinate terms, and if they did, they sometimes altered them.[42]

English pauper letters of the early eighteen hundreds tell us much about their world and, where several letters in the same name have survived, about them as individuals too.[43] But I've looked at their language and its differences from the English that all educated (fully-Schooled) readers are familiar with. I've tried to show that these letters open a new window on the recent history of English and raise new questions, relevant to teaching English to children who will be adults when Schooled and Open Englishes may be still closer than they've become in the past two hundred years.[44]

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. 'British' includes English, Scottish and Welsh. I'm not researching Scotland or Wales because of possible second language interference there.
2. When first mentioning a place name, I indicate in brackets roughly where it is.
3. These people are usually called 'illiterate'. But this negative term focuses on what they could not do, not on what they could. Language users are orate if language exists for them only as sound and not also as visible marks.
4. I choose a positive term for the same reason as for 'orate'.
5. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 Vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956. *Vol 4*, 1959, p. 757.
6. *The Friend I*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, Routledge & Kegan Paul, & Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 448ff (dated 1818). Schooled writers in the later 1800s, like John Ruskin and J. S. Mill, admired *The Friend*. See *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, Richard Holmes, HarperCollins, 1998, p. 484.
7. *The Friend I*, pp. 32–33, with a note: 'This Sentence particularly pleased Wordsworth, for its *architecture*'.
8. Griggs, Vol VI, p. 639, 24 October 1826.
9. *A Cultural History of the English Language*, Arnold, 1997, p. 79.
10. *The Parish*, ed. Eric Robinson, Viking, 1985, 11. 807–10. Written 1820–4.
11. William B. Carpenter, *The Microscope and its Revelations*, London. Still later (4 August 1894) Alfred Moore shows that phrasals weren't Refined then either: 'and when the rain (which had "held off" till now, as we Kentish people say) began to come down…' (*Odds and Ends*, 5 Vols; CKS (M): KG, Moore, *Vol. 1*, p. 39).
12. *An Orthoëpical Analysis of the English Language*, 1809, reprinted by Gleerup, Lund, 1974, ed. Arne Zettersten.
13. CKS(M): **New Romney**, P309/18/17. franked 5 Dec. 1821.
14. The Overseer noted 'Answ^{d} by Writing to the War Office', and Ansell's name appears in parish records again a few months later. So, lack of Schooling didn't set the parish against doing something.
15. Partly-Schooled writers sometimes reveal their local pronunciation: in Kent, for example, by writing <w> for the schooled <v>: e.g. 'westery' for 'vestry.'
16. Then pronounced /ˈbimstə/ or /ˈbiməstə/, but now, influenced by schooling, /ˈbɛminstə/.
17. Dorset Record Office, Dorchester: **Blandford Forum**, PE/BF/OV/13/1.
18. [sic]! There was a family of Bastards in Beaminster.
19. CKS(M): **New Romney**, P309/18/16; Oct. 19, 1821.

20. Shropshire Record Office, Shrewsbury: **Bromfield**, P43/L/28/47; 1814.
21. *The Letters of John Clare*: ed. Mark Storey, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 491; 21 December 1829.
22. The Coleridge extract has 19 three-syllable words out of 146, excluding the poem.
23. CKS(M): **New Romney**, P309/12/63; 16 December 1818. Note the position of *gentleman* as paragraph marker.
24. CKS(M): **Charing**, P78/18/127.
25. CKS(M): **Dymchurch**, P125/18/3; 6 August 1822.
26. *A Grammar of Speech*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 61–8.
27. Six groups have at least one embedded clause. Only one of Morgan's does.
28. Humberside County Archive, Beverley: **Beverley, St. Mary's**: PE1/702; 23 April 1832.
29. *The Friend I*, p. 448.
30. Except for *cant*, partly-Schooled writers avoided abbreviations like 'I'll, didn't', which they must have said. Morgan's *(w)ont* is unusual and shows how little Schooled he was.
31. Essex Record Office, Colchester, (East): **Colchester, St. Botolph's**, D/P/203/18/1.
32. CKS(M): **New Romney**, P309/18/12.
33. Storey, *op. cit*. p. 70; 20 May 1820.
34. *Letters to his Son by the Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Oliver H. G. Leigh, Navarre Society, 1926, 2 Vols, *Vol. 1*, p. 256; 9 December 1749.
35. The minimally-Schooled George Stephenson built his first locomotive in 1814. The lexis that partly-Schooled engineers invented for their Applied Sciences was mostly Anglo-Saxon, unlike their Schooled gentlemen partners, who used Latinate lexis and Latin itself for their Pure Sciences (e.g. botany and geology).
36. Griggs, *Vol. II*, p. 830, letter to Robert Southey, 29 July 1802.
37. *Everybody's Business*, London, p. 22.
38. *Teaching Grammar: a Guide for the National Curriculum*. Blackwell, 1992, p. 42.
39. *Poetry, Language and Politics*, Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 120ff.
40. Clare wrote: 'Letter writing is … just set down as things come to my "tongues end"' and 'grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government — confound the bitch Ill never be her slave'. Storey, *op. cit.* pp. 63 ff; 6 May 1820 and 21 February 1822. Clare had been schooled that his English had no *grammer*. Readers might like to test for themselves whether or not the punctuation system suits unSchooled texts by punctuating the three partly-Schooled letters in this Chapter.
41. *Op. cit*. p. 76.
42. Examples already given, but here are two more: (1) Schooled writers of 'dialect' recorded that Vulgar speakers swore with Anglo-saxonised Latinate words: e.g. 'nable rigs' (damnable tricks), 'tarnel clout' (eternal blow) in the Kentish poem *Dick and Sal; Or, Jack and Joanses Fair*, J. W. Masters, Faversham, c. 1820. (2) Malaprops: e.g. 'pear amam' for 'per annum': Wiltshire Record Office (West), **Bradford on Avon**, 77/128; 1834.
43. Most paupers' letters are applications for relief. But a few came from anonymous informers, and a few others were addressed to friends and relatives.
44. See my 'Schooled and Open Englishes', *English Today*, 15. 1, pp. 24–30, Jan. 1999.

CHAPTER 6

The Materiality of Letter Writing

A nineteenth century perspective

Nigel Hall
Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University

Writing and materiality

In the study of writing, particularly its history and development, the materials and objects people use to write (apart from those used by printers) have been studied much less than the meanings and products of the writing process, or their economic, political or pedagogic relationships. On the whole, little has been written about the materiality of writing and it is probably the very everydayness of such artifacts, and the fact that the mind of the user is mostly focussed upon what is being created by their usage, that makes for them being so taken for granted they become virtually transparent to the user. There are certainly areas within this general claim which are less true. Exceptions would include studies on the illuminated manuscript and its production (for an example see De Hamel 1992), and older calligraphic history, which has at least paid some attention to the artifacts and their usage (for example, Gaur 1994). Perhaps the most significant exception is the very early history on writing where the material on which marks were made (clay, bark, papyrus etc.) and the consequences of this material for the development of writing have almost always been intrinsic in its study (Gaur 1992). Such historical interest in the materials associated with writing seems to have mostly stopped with the dispersal to the West of paper technology. It is mostly forensic scientists and paper scientists, or collectors of writing equipment who now study the materials with which, and on which, marks are and were made (see Nickell 1990).

Recently the materiality of writing has emerged as an important topic. A prime influence on this has been the emergence of the computer and electronic communication. The sheer scale of the revolution represented by this innovation

and its implications for the radical reorganisation of human communication (and maybe thinking) has led many authors to consider, at all levels, the nature, impact and consequences of the technology (Haas 1996; Snyder 1998; Taylor & Ward 1998; Tyner 1998; and Yates in this volume). Despite this focus on looking forward, it has also led to more questions being asked about the materiality of earlier writing-related objects.

A second influence on the emergence of the topic has been the development of a more general interest in the history of writing and writing-related equipment. However, when writers on this topic have examined writing-related equipment it has mostly been as collectors more interested in describing and labelling artifacts and their physical functions than as people interested in their usage, social origins, and consequences (for instance, Whalley 1975; Finlay 1990; and Schneider & Fischler 1994). The development in recent years of a number of societies related to writing equipment (such *The Writing Equipment Society*, UK and the *Pencil Collecting Society*, USA) seems mainly a response to a human need to count and collect objects rather than a wider need to understand them within cultural history. An exception to this has been the ground-breaking work of Petroski (1989) whose revelatory book on the engineering history of the pencil has demonstrated extensively and vividly the complex technological history of such an apparently simple artifact.

While the academic world may have paid less attention to the materiality of writing, the artifacts of writing have often revealed themselves to their users. If the metaphor of transparency is adopted too strongly then in itself it can render invisible points at which materiality does become part of the consciousness of a writer, for it is clear that the materiality of literacy frequently does become visible and important to writers of all ages, abilities and cultures. There are many ways, times and places when materiality does make itself manifest.

The first is when materiality intrudes of its own accord as Rudyard Kipling reports in his autobiography (Kipling 1977)

> In Lahore for my *Plain Tales* I used a slim, octagonal-sided agate pen holder with a Waverley nib. It was a gift, and when in an evil hour it snapped I was much disturbed.

More recently President Clinton experienced the intrusion of the materiality of writing:

> At the moment of the signing, Clinton flourished the pen, embossed with the words "The President — the White House" and declared: "Three decades ago, this pen you see here was used to honour our values when President Johnson used it to sign Medicare into law." He then put pen to paper. Nothing but dry scratches.

> Aides stepped forward to shake the pen, while Clinton sat, waved and asked for more ink. A desperate search ensued while Clinton sat chewing his lower lip before the cameras. A bottle of ink, however, was quickly found and brought to the table to complete the signing. "It's a dipping pen", said a White House aide. "We tested it this morning and it was tested before the President vetoed the bill. But it dries out, so you have to keep dipping it." (Daily Telegraph, 9th December 1995)

Indeed, materiality is at its most visible when the technology doesn't work or does not work well: the quill that blunts or breaks, the paper that tears or is pierced, the ink that has dried up, the fountain pen that splatters, the ball point pen that leaves blobs of waxy ink, the ruler whose edges have become chipped, the pencil lead that keeps breaking, the sharpener that will not sharpen cleanly, the propelling pencil that fails to propel, or the envelope that simply will not stick. Petroski (1989) has suggested that the rationale for the technical development of such an apparently simple piece of writing equipment as the pencil, was the drive to make it work better, to last longer, write more smoothly, break less often, and be made more cheaply. Indeed, many introductions of new lines of writing equipment are accompanied by claims about that technical efficiency. The pencil making father of the American philosopher Henry Thoreau advertised his pencils in 1844 as:

> Expressly for artists and connoisseurs, possessing in an unusual degree the qualities of pure lead, superior blackness, and firmness of point, as well as the freedom of mark, and warranted not to be affected by changes of temperature. (cit in Petroski, p. 120).

More unusual intrusions include this oddity reported in the Daily Telegraph for 27.7.97:

> Hector Cueves, 33, was Chilean police officer who became a national celebrity in November 1995 when a bank robber's bullet was stopped by a pen inside his pocket and he suffered only an ink stain.

More recently I experienced the shock of intrusion as I sat in a secondary school classroom and thought I saw a child playing with a syringe. It turned out to be a pretty exact replica but which functioned as a ball-point pen rather than a syringe!

A second way that materiality manifests itself is at the point of acquisition of a writing-related object, or at the selection of an object for a particular task. It is at such moments that individuals make deliberate choices, choices which reflect life styles, images of self, and comfort, as this incident in Australia illustrates:

> Australia tipped its bush hat to the Prince of Wales yesterday. The verdict on the first half of his tour is: "Good on yer". From Tasmania the Prince of

> Wales flew to Perth, Western Australia. In nearby Freemantle he boarded a replica of the Endeavour, in which Captain James Cook sailed to the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia between 1768–71. As he was leaving he was asked to sign the visitor's book and was offered a ball point pen. He reached into his pocket for his fountain pen. "Do you mind if I use mine?" he said. "The thing is, I don't like biros." (The Daily Telegraph, 31st January, 1994)

For some, moments of acquisition are significant events in their lives.

> Our eyes were opened when we came to see in the big local stores and jewellers the many beautiful new pens which were available, admittedly with some at high prices, but these being offered and spoken about enthusiastically by the various retailers. All this happened quite a few years ago and we became smitten by the 'pens that really work' syndrome of today's manufacturers vying with each other to make beautiful and just-about-affordable pens of distinction. (Morris 1993, p. 9)

A third way in which materiality becomes explicit is when the nature of the writing-related object aspires to an art form. It may perhaps more appropriately be termed a craft form, but there is no doubt that throughout history some items have been designed and made in the most remarkable materials and to the very highest possible quality. Clearly no-one actually physically needs to use anything other than a serviceable cheap fountain pen to write a letter (and indeed, some evidence exists that very expensive pens do not always work as well as some cheaper ones — Rowe 1992). So why would anyone pay £23,000 for one 1930s Dunhill Namiki 'Giant' fountain pen as happened in 1998 at Bonhams the auctioneers in London? Why do people each year pay vast sums of money for a Mount Blanc special edition fountain pen, and a new special edition is produced each year (usually in a limited edition of 4810 pens, one for each metre of the height of the real Mount Blanc)? The answer is supplied in a report in the Daily Telegraph about the writer's Mont Blanc pen:

> A fountain pen in Paris fulfils the same sort of emblematic function as a car and may cost almost as much; all kinds of social and identity messages are tied up with it. To write with a bic might be *practique*, but not chic. (Daily Telegraph, 10.4.1992)

Such buyers beware:

> She is clearly in thrall to this essential fashion accessory, so I wish to convey these words of warning. I too was a recipient of one of these pens as a gift, and mine too latterly ended up en panne. As a power accessory it was splendid, but as a pen — a disaster. (Letter in Daily Telegraph, 11. 4.1992)

In earlier periods the great goldsmiths, silversmiths and other craftsmen created exquisitely tooled standishes, inkwells, penners, pen cases, quill cutters, etc. whose

fate was probably to be little used by their owners, and whose purchase or commission was probably more an expression of social position than need. Such items exist these days mostly in museum displays and collectors' cabinets which celebrate their craft rather than their functionality. The fate of the £23,000 fountain pen is undoubtedly to be hidden away carefully, probably in a bank vault, rather than be used, for to use it would probably seriously affect its future value.

There is probably no accounting for what makes an individual a collector of writing-related phenomena, but for the everyday user what is often transparent is not the equipment but the extent to which a writer's choices are not neutral but are socially constrained. Even a cursory perspective on such items reveals the extent to which, across history, styles, shapes, materials, decorations, and sizes have changed. While some of these changes might reflect technological development, in the main they illustrate how these artifacts are socially positioned, and how the adoption of new materials or styles is inevitably a social practice. Linnerz (1996, p. 2) pointed out:

> Writing equipment is not just for writing. It has been used and is still being used for all kinds of purposes, for representation or investment, as a souvenir or for some kind of modern relic cult. Some people may admire its beauty and variety and others its technical refinement; others again may be interested in the 'everyday story' that almost every object is able to tell.

Letter writing and materiality in nineteenth-century Britain

It might be thought that to engage in the practice of letter writing all one really needs to do is grasp the nearest mark-making instrument, any old bit of pencil or a cheap ball point pen, tear a page from a cheap exercise book, write the letter, put it into a cheap buff-coloured manila envelope, stick on a stamp and post it. This is exactly what some people do, as can be attested by anyone who has worked for an organisation which receives large numbers of letters from the general public. On the other hand, many people behave rather differently and at each stage of the process either engage in decision making about the materiality of the act, or base their behaviour on previously made decisions.

Such people do choose letter writing equipment carefully. As much as any other items that people own and use in their lives, it can represent who one is, what one believes one is, where one belongs, and how one wants to be perceived by others. The choice has the potential to express something about the chooser. To illustrate this, I want to examine some of the objects necessary to letter writing but do so in the context of nineteenth-century Britain.

At the end of the eighteenth century in Britain, the materiality of writing and hence, inevitably, that of letter writing was about to undergo some radical changes. The industrial revolution, the development of mass education, the evolution of an efficient, effective, speedy railway system, accompanied by the introduction in 1840 of a national penny post system, all contributed to letter writing becoming more widespread.

Perhaps the major cause of this change was the introduction of the penny post (a reduction from six pence, a sum which was around one fifth to one tenth of many people's weekly wage), an act largely, but not completely, attributable to the endeavours of Rowland Hill. This introduction was a highly political act; Hill was primarily interested in the economic benefits that cheap post would bring and he held the belief that commercial advantages would be accompanied by moral and social advantages, 'particularly acceptable to the poorer classes' (Briggs 1985). It was timely; Vincent (1989) reports that it was believed at the time that letter writing home from soldiers in the Napoleonic wars had greatly contributed to maintaining public moral, that increasing mobility of labour was splitting up families, and that "the working class community possessed a sufficient level of skill to make possible correspondence with distant relatives" (p. 36). The growth in letter writing that followed the introduction of the penny post can be seen in the following figures (from Daunton 1985) showing the number of letters (in millions) posted:

1839 ———— 75.9
1840 ———— 168.8
1845 ———— 271.4
1850 ———— 347.1
1853 ———— 410.8

While the penny post made letter writing financially accessible to a much wider population, these statistics have to be considered carefully. It is much more difficult to define within them the extent to which personal letter writing increased and, within that, whether it increased across the entire community. Clearly the penny post made a huge difference to commercial activity in which it suddenly became considerably cheaper for companies to send mail, and a considerable portion of the increase must be attributable to this. Clearly, the greatest financial benefit from the reduction in cost was commerce. It is also likely that those who were educated and familiar with letter writing may have used the service more frequently, especially women, for whom letter writing was perceived as a safe and appropriate activity and who were often featured in paintings and illustrations as letter writers (see Example 1). Charles Booth, the author of *the*

Fig. 1. The letter writing woman in an advertisement of 1892.

Life and Labour of the People of London commented in a paper he wrote in 1887 (see Ryder & Silver 1985, p. 92) that one third of the population of one London borough had been found living at all times more or less in want; clearly, they are much less likely to have contributed to any increase in letter writing although, as the chapters in this volume by Austin and Fairman show, poorer groups (wittingly or unwittingly) certainly did get involved in some letter writing. Mitch (1992) extrapolates from a variety of anecdotal accounts and suggests that a typical hamlet at the end of the nineteen hundreds received about 25 letters per household a year, considerably less than in many areas of the country.

During the nineteenth century the population of Great Britain increased by roughly 20 million (Ryder & Silver 1985) Within this was a major growth in what can be termed the merchant and middle classes:

> The merchant and the middle class were not created by industrial Britain, but the nature of the nineteenth century economy meant a sharply widening catchment area of population involved in the middle-class economic activities; the expansion of joint-stock enterprises, the increase of industrial (and public administration), and the growth of industrial invention and production skills, meant a considerable expansion in the number of managers, shop keepers and industrial entrepreneurs (Ryder & Silver 1985, p. 167).

This represented the dawning and development of the consumer society (and the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' while prevalent to today was actually coined in the nineteenth century). The economic growth during this period:

> Made possible that unprecedented degree and diffusion of wealth which allowed its citizens, as consumers, to reveal their characters in the choices they actually made out of such an unparalleled variety of goods (Best 1971, p. 2).

This change was, inevitably, situated in a class-based society, and to a large degree the acquisition of these consumer goods was intimately tied in with establishing the nature of relationships between the classes. As Ryder and Silver (p. 70) put it:

> Those of the middle class who were not involved in a direct relationship with the working class through the process of production were engaged in a constant comparative relationship in terms of housing and style of life, consumer consumption and educational and cultural values.

It was believed that 'Keeping up' or more likely, 'keeping in front' could be achieved by the display of consumer goods. For some such display became a life's work, something neatly satirised by Dickens in his creation in *Our Mutual Friend* of the Veneerings, and by Trollope in *Last Chronicles of Barset* when Mrs Van Siever comments, "Capital isn't dead as long as people know you've got it."

This demand from the new consumer society included letter writing-related equipment, and this was fuelled by the onward rolling development of mass production, more efficient materials, efficient distribution and marketing, which generated changes in the nature of letter writing equipment, utilised a greater diversity of materials, and resulted in a much wider range of equipment being available for the letter-writing public.

The letter writing process

To examine some of the material aspects of letter writing during this time, I want to work through an imagined process of actually writing a letter. The Victorian period covers a large amount of time and I certainly do not want to suggest that the process would have been identical for all people at all times during this period. The following merely serves as a general illustration to illuminate some aspects of the materiality of letter writing.

A space to write the letter

While many Victorian letter writers made do with the kitchen table or their knees, at a certain class level a letter writer used a writing slope or writing case or, if richer, had a study within which was a desk or bureau. A gentleman ("anyone was a gentleman who had been to public school or who had successfully concealed that he hadn't". Best 1971, p. 254) would probably have a study. Ryder and Silver (1985) claim that:

> Leisure and evidence of wealth became means of gaining the respect of others. Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure.

and conspicuous consumption could certainly be reflected in the writing-related items sitting on a Victorian gentleman's desk or in their bureaus, something possibly reflected by one of Tolstoy's characters in *Anna Karenin* (Part 2, chapter 13):

> Having folded the letter, smoothed it with a massive ivory paper-knife, and put it in an envelope with the money, he rang the bell with the gratification the use of his well-arranged writing materials always aroused in him.

The typical pose of a photographed male Victorian writer was sitting at his desk and the desk has long been a symbol of status and power (see Example 2).

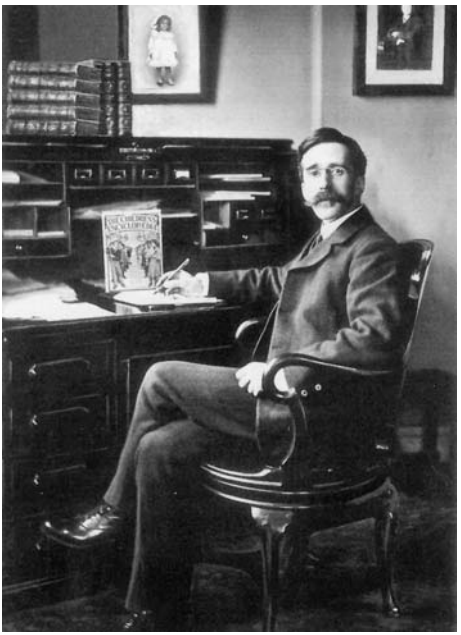

Fig. 2. The children's writer, Arthur Mee, posing comfortably while sitting at his desk.

The more common writing slope was usually a box which when opened had a baize-covered, angled face, thus creating the slope. Cheaper ones simply contained a couple of ink bottles and a space for pens. More complex ones contained a whole panoply of writing related equipment. The compact size of these slopes made them well-suited to being carried around and thus letter writing in comfort was possible wherever one was.

Choosing a pen

The predominant writing instrument of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was the quill pen. According to Finlay (1990) in 1828 over twenty-two million quills were imported into London. During the nineteenth century the number of quill pen merchants and manufacturers in London dropped from thirty-four in 1832 down to six in 1899. Quill pens could be awkward objects. They broke easily, needed constant recutting, often failed because of some intrinsic deficiency in a particular feather, and were not amenable to mass production; a lot of hand effort was required to finally produce a workable quill

pen. These limitations mean that most early writing manuals had comprehensive sections, often chapters, on cutting and shaping quills; indeed they seemed to only just stop short of telling people how to catch a goose. The typical schoolmaster's day was spent as much recutting pupil's quills as it was teaching. These problems may well have been a contributing factor in the dominance of reading over writing in the education of children, specially younger children.

While steel pens had been known since 1548, it was not until 1803 that steel pens were first manufactured on a commercial scale. (It is important to note that the word 'pen' here refers not to the whole object held in the hand as today, but to what most people would, more commonly, call the nib.) The pen holder could be made out of almost any material. These steel pens were very expensive, about eighteen shillings a dozen and could hardly threaten the much cheaper quill pen. However, in a short time mass production made such prices look ridiculous. By 1838 steel pens could be bought for four pence a gross (in those days twelve pence made a shilling, and there were twenty shillings in a pound) and, again according to Finlay, in 1838 over two hundred and twenty million steel pens were produced, mostly in Birmingham (although not all for the domestic market). Steel pens broke easily but were so cheap that replacement was easy. For much of the nineteenth century quill pens and steel pens existed alongside each other but the cheapness and utility of the steel pen meant that as the century went on the inversity of the relationship grew considerably. The ultimate demise of the quill pen was made certain by the development of the mass produced fountain pen at the end of the nineteenth century.

The story told in the previous two paragraphs appears a simple matter of technological change. However it can also illustrate that even the development and manufacture of some of the tiniest writing objects was anything but *just* technology. One one level a pen nib is a simple object, although technically quite efficient (and in the UK they survived in everyday use, and particularly in schools, until the late 1950s). Many children in British schools still sit every day in desks with spaces for inkwells, although their function seems a complete mystery to some pupils:

> A Maidenhead teacher passes on the comment of one of her 13 year-olds. Spying the inkwell on an old school desk, he asked: "Is that for putting computer wires down?" (*Journal of the Writing Equipment Society* no 34 1992, p. 32)

However, that technology is not a sufficient explanation to account for what happened is revealed by a couple of interesting statistics. In the middle of the nineteenth century the firm of Brandauer and Co kept in stock around twelve

hundred different pen styles, while the firm of Perry and Co once maintained between four and five thousand different styles of pen. How are such large numbers of different styles of pen justified? Certainly not by technological need. While no doubt some would be a consequence of meeting a specific function, mapping, lithographic, music etc, and many pens will have been produced in different degrees of flexibility to satisfy personal requirements, the number of styles produced certainly grossly exceeded any necessary technological distinction. Something other than functional requirements must account for the immense diversity, a diversity exacerbated by the large number of pen producers in operation during the nineteenth century (although almost all were situated in Birmingham which supplied most of the world's pens).

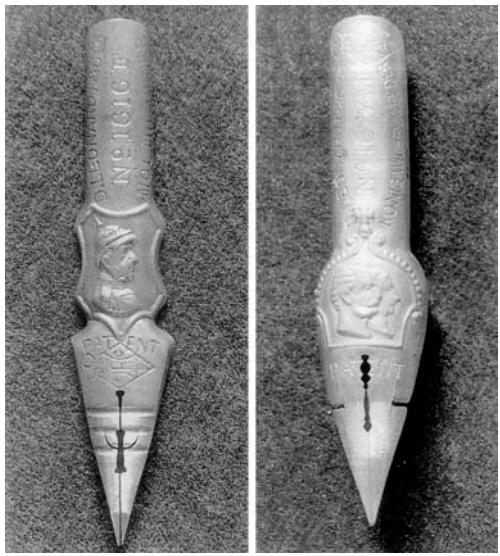

Fig. 3. Two highly decorative pens produced by the Birmingham manufacturer D. Leonard and Co. One features the image of Count Von Molke, a Prussian General, while the other features the embossed profiles of King Wilhelm I and Queen Augusta. Both pens have the design mark for 1870.

Why the need to have so many pens and pen names? The answers seem to be primarily social and economic. It was a marketing device which, accompanied by careful orientation towards particular interests, allowed pen producers to maximise production and hence profits. Some pens were quite astonishingly decorative (see Example 3):

Fig. 4. A leaflet of 1891 advertising MacNiven and Cameron Pens.

> The simple steel pen did not remain untouched by the apparently unquenchable human longing to beautify all its possessions. The pen manufacturers competed, using originality and imagination, to create the most decorative fashion pens. The hole required to hold the ink was changed into slits, crosses, triangles and anchors and half-circles. Additional stamping formed faces, and hands with outstretched index fingers forming the tip. Souvenir pens brought back memories of special events or military victories. Portrait pens portrayed the faces of important personalities from politics (the Bismark pen) and art, or showed emperors and kings. Devotional pens with crucifixes kept alive the memory of successful visits to places of pilgrimage (Geyer 1990, p. 37).

But Geyer went on to suggest that these decorative pens were not used for writing.

> These ornamental pens, complete with fine pierced patterns, seem quite superfluous to us today. They were completely unsuitable for writing. One gave them as presents.

However it seems probable that some people did use them; certainly the evidence of collectors is that the pens when found often need cleaning of ancient, dried ink. Geyer's description begins to suggest that their production and marketing relied on their appeal to particular social interests. This is perhaps easier to see with the relatively non-decorative pens, whose names were simply decorative. Finding names for such a multitude of pens must have been a challenge but one to which the Victorians rose. A small sample will illustrate this (and see Example 4). The names of these MacNiven and Cameron pens appealed to the literary person (the Waverley and Pickwick pen), the traveller (the flying Scotchman pen), and the the imperialist (the Hindoo pen). Another manufacturer, C. Brandauer and Co offered the Lancet pen, the Legal pen, the Law pen, and the Revenue pen amongst its professionally-oriented pens.

Quill pens varied only in the way an individual cut them, and in cost as determined by the species of bird from which the quill came. The metal pen came in thousands of varieties, and thus the choice of a pen was as much representing an aspiration, belief, or value, as it was a desire to buy a serviceable pen. A form of 'becoming' specifically related to letter writing was offered by C. Brandauer and Co. (Example 5). The accompanying commentary appealed to success in love:

> The course of a true love letter runs smooth when it is written with one of Brandauer & Co's circular pointed pens. These pens neither scratch, nor spurt, the points being rounded by a new process. (Advert in Ills. London News September 2nd 1886, p. 37)

However, as Jackson (1981, p. 138) pointed out:

Fig. 5. An advertisement from The Illustrated London News for 1886 advertising C. Brandauer and Cos' Circular pointed pens.

> During this long period, instead of looking for major technical advances the pen makers concentrated on marketing.

As a consequence, when the efficient fountain pen developed in the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Birmingham pen makers were unable to adapt quickly and were left behind.

Selecting the writing paper

The dominance of paper for personal correspondence was the result of centuries of exploration into the relationship between the mark-making implements and the material on which the marks were made. Across the world many different materials have been used to carry the marks of writing, clay, bark, papyrus, parchment but all, while serviceable within particular cultures at particular times (and some for a very long time), gave way to paper. The technology of paper development is a fascinating branch of the material history of writing; the aim to produce paper which was light, strong, cheap, took ink or pencil equally well, was pure white, had a surface that was not too absorbent, and could take marks on both sides had directed the technological drive. Along the way a host of specialist papers were developed, watermarked papers, blotting papers, gilt-edged papers, parchment papers, and bond papers (originally used for bonds and other documents but now tending to be used to denote a fine paper for letter writing). Along with these developments came paper standardisation, in Britain: Royal, Medium, Demy and Foolscap; in the USA: Commercial note, Letter, Flat cap, Crown Cap and Demy.

In Britain, personal letters written before the Victorian age were mostly unadorned by anything except the graceful flourishes of the handwriting. At the beginning of the nineteenth century appeared printed sheets for personal letter writing featuring engraved illustrations at the top. At first these were relatively uncommon but interest grew and by the middle of the century many people were writing on such papers. At the same time commerce and industry began widely using paper with decorative headings (an extension of an older tradition moving from the signs or symbols hung outside shops to the highly decorative trade cards and advertisements of the eighteenth century). The decorative personal letter writing papers most frequently held views of places. This was no accident and did not develop for aesthetic reasons. It is a reflection of railway development and the increased potential for travel. Souvenir shops supplied much of this stationery, but a lot was also available in hotels, a tradition which still continues today. Decorative-headed writing paper was inevitably adopted by an emerging

house-owning middle class, and alongside calling cards was a powerful way of making a public statement about oneself. To be able to employ a local engraver or printer, or, later on with lithographic printing, a photographer or printer, to produce personalised stationery featuring one's own house, was to be able to make a very public statement about rank, wealth, prestige, and class.

One other interesting social facet of letter writing paper was the development of mourning stationery. The origins of black-bordered stationery go back to the funeral cards of the seventeenth century, but the Victorian preoccupation with mourning by the middle of the nineteenth century was reflected in the whole etiquette of stationery usage. In addition to black sealing wax, black leather blotters and jet paper knives, sets of stationery with cards, writing paper and envelopes became common. During the first year of mourning the black borders were wide, moving to narrower ones for the second year.

Finding an envelope

The envelope is not, in principle, a recent invention. Clay envelopes were found in excavations in what is now modern Turkey and which date back several thousand years. While some of these envelopes contained general documents of administration, others were used for letters, and had an address on the outside and the seal of the sender (Kandaouroff 1973). The modern envelope developed towards the end of the eighteenth century but developed most rapidly following the introduction of penny postage. When the penny postage was introduced, three methods of payment were available: postage stamps, pre-paid envelopes, and the option of paying at the post office. Domination by the postage stamp did not take long. The usage of envelopes prior to this had been discouraged by the charging of letters by their weight; thus, a letter was folded rather than put into an envelope.

At the same time as the penny post was being introduced into Britain a competition was being held for the design of the stamps and envelopes. At a time when a new, young queen had ascended the throne and the British Empire was expanding rapidly, the winning entry (by the painter William Mulready) featured a figure of Britannia with a lion at her feet (see Example 6). Britannia was in the centre of the envelope with arms outstretched and had winged messengers spreading out towards the other figures. On the left hand side was a group of oriental traders (one of whom was writing a letter). On the right side a group of Indian chiefs shaking the hands of missionaries (?) were foregrounded by black workers mending casks under the supervision of an overseer. Finally, the second largest image on this envelope was a homely scene of a British

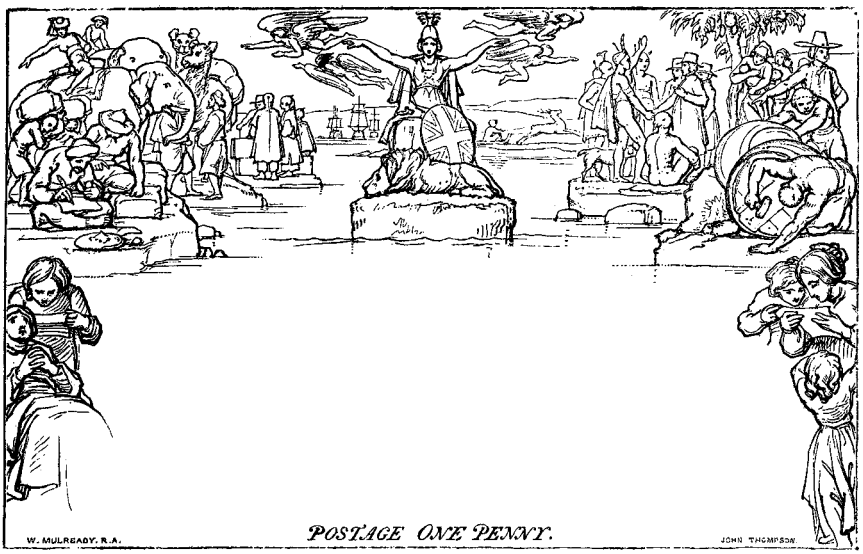

Fig. 6. A Mulready envelope of 1940.

mother reading a letter to her two children. On this envelope was encapsulated precisely the way in which Britain saw its relationship to the rest of the world, a relationship in which it exported civilisation and religion, controlled trade, and dominated native populations. Despite all this, the only comment about this envelope by Daunton in his relatively recent, seminal history of the British Post Office (Daunton 1985) is that its design *symbolised* the benefits of cheap postage! The Mulready envelope was not a success; it inspired so many caricatures and parodies that it was fairly swiftly withdrawn and the remaining stock incinerated.

Nevertheless, the envelope was here to stay and the art of folding letters (see Schultz and Austin, this book) disappeared. Following the Mulready design, pictorial envelopes were produced featuring activities such as courting, making music, dancing, racing, hunting and shooting, and military and civic scenes. Once again, the British letter writer with the right choice of envelopes was able to confirm membership of a refined and elegant society in which all was considered well with itself.

The envelope became a means for formal propaganda. In the UK an American called Elihu Burrit founded the League of International Brotherhood which campaigned to reduce the cost of overseas postage down to a penny. Part of this

campaign used printed envelopes. On one was an inscription, “The world awaits Great Britain’s greatest gift — Ocean Penny Postage”. On another was the sentence, “An Ocean Penny Postage is wanted by the world and will be a boon to England” and, “All ports will open up, friends will greet the happy arrival and there will be no more enemies”. The campaign was unsuccessful; the Ocean Penny Postage was never realised and no doubt if Elihu was alive he would point out the consequential history of enmity between so many parts of the world.

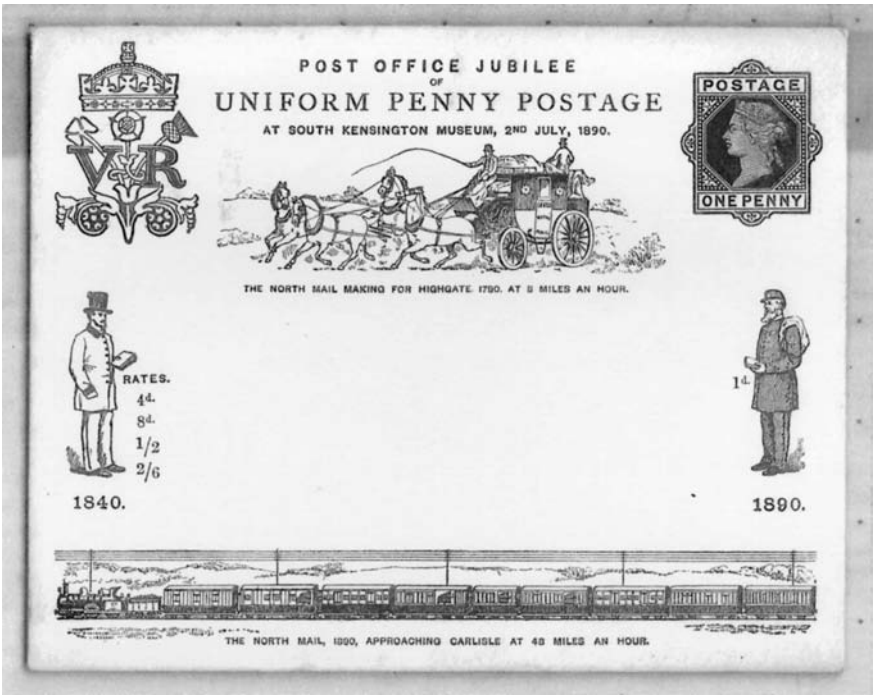

Fig. 7. A Post Office envelope of 1890 celebrating fifty years of the penny post.

The envelope proved a remarkably versatile means for imaging a society’s understanding of itself and for the Victorians the belief in both the virtues of progress, and in being a society which most capably engineered progress, was reflected in envelopes produced by the Post Office. One such pre-stamped cover commemorates the fiftieth jubilee of the Uniform Penny Postage (see Example 7). At the top, the mail stage coach advancing furiously at five miles and hour: at the bottom, the steam engine heading north at forty-eight miles an hour.

On the left, the top-hatted postman clutching a handful of letters: on the right, the becapped postman still with a handful of letters but this time with a sackful of letters on his back. Similar commemorations of progress and achievement are to be found on other writing-related items, especially children's pencil boxes.

One of the ways of sealing letters (apart from simply folding them) was to use sealing wax and a seal or small adhesive wafers. In keeping with so many other Victorian ephemera (including children's writing books) morality intruded and these seals and wafers often had short messages, 'Shall I expect?', 'At your service', 'Can I prevail?', 'Respect the truth' and so on. An example of seals with messages is given by Thomas Hardy in his novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1876)

> "Now light a candle, Liddy. Which seal shall we use? Here's a unicorn's head — there's nothing extraordinary in that. What's this? — two doves — no. It ought to be something extraordinary, ought it not, Lidd? Here's one with a motto — I remember it is some funny one, but I can't read it. We'll try this, and if it doesn't do we'll have another fixed."
> A large red seal was duly affixed. Bathsheba looked closely at the hot wax to discover the words.
> "Capital!" she exclaimed, throwing down the letter frolicsomely. "T'would upset the solemnity of a parson and a clerk too."
> Liddy looked at the words of the seal and read — "Marry Me".

Posting

So far, the process has developed under the relatively free choice of the letter writer. At the point of sticking on a stamp the process changes and the letter writer becomes subject to bureaucracy and law. This is not different in principle to what had happened before. However, the formalisation of the postal system throughout the nineteenth century continued to constrain the letter writer. The stamps featured only the queen's head, were fairly sombre in colour, and were pretty much identically sized although as the penny black, the world's first postage stamp, came in uncut sheets, survivors tend to vary somewhat depending on the care of the scissor user. The pre-stamped envelopes carried neat embossed heads, while the letter cards, and later postcards, carried printed stamp forms direct on the envelope or card. For a long time in Britain the postcard could carry only the address on one side; the advent of the decorated postcard had to wait. Posting times were dictated by the Post Office (although in retrospect are looked upon with envy by current users) and post boxes started to become common, although a character in one of Trollope's novels (*He Knew He Was Right*, p. 58) declares that she,

> had not the faintest belief that any letter put into one of them would ever reach its destination. She could not understand why people should not walk with their letters to a respectable post-office instead of chucking them into an iron stump. (p. 58)

Given Trollope's very senior position in, and detailed knowledge of, the Post Office, this sentiment may be more than mere novelist's fancy.

Such freedom the letter writer had was restricted to the storage of stamps and the possession of items relating to posting. The fully equipped Victorian letter writer could have chosen from many thousands of different kinds of stamp boxes (and in the UK there was until relatively recently a society devoted to collecting only stamp boxes). There could have been a letter balance to ensure correct postage was paid, and for more complex postage a writer may have used one of the postal rulers.

It was not long after the introduction of the penny post that people started to collect stamps. Briggs (1985, p. 350–351 refers to a personal advert of 1842:

> A young lady being desirous of covering her dressing-room with cancelled postage stamps has been so encouraged in her wish by friends as to have succeeded in collecting 16000. These however being insufficient, she will be greatly obliged if any good-natured person who may have these, otherwise useless, little articles at their disposal, will assist her in her whimsical project.

Before too long there was a Philatelic society but it was long way from being open to all. The 'ordinary' members included one prince, two earls, and army and navy officers of the highest rank (Briggs 1985). The first society for the study of an aspect of the materiality of writing had begun.

The accessories

So far I have considered the main elements of the letter writing process. However, the objects which lie at the heart of this process are but a small fraction of the cornucopia of letter writing equipment available to the Victorian public. The "lack of consensus about the design of things, about education and taste, about the evolution of style, or about the values which were associated with consumption or possession" (Briggs 1985, p. 32) meant that the accessories to letter writing abounded in just about every imaginable (and some almost unimaginable) shapes and forms, many of which were heavy with symbolism. Briggs commenting on things at the Great Exhibition of 1851 says:

> An inkstand, instead of being a literal glass bottle, or a fine piece of ormolu or bronze, significant of nothing but its costliness, might be fashioned to represent a fountain with a muse inspiring its flow. (p. 61)

Dickens's Veneerings could be in their element. Catalogues were filled with writing-related equipment to satisfy every whim, every need, and every aspiration. The really dedicated collector could fill their homes with:

– Seals, sealing wax, sealing wax heaters, sealing wax holders, and seal chisels;
– Inks (delible and indelible of all colours), desk inkwells, travelling inkwells, inkstands, and ink erasers;
– Quills, quill pen machines, and parchment prickers; pens, pen holders, pen wipers, pen stands, pen racks, pen rests, pen trays, pen cleaners, pen cases, pocket pen holders, pen knives, and water bottles;
– Stationery racks, cases, and boxes; stamp boxes, stamp and envelope dampeners, and stamp cases; writing pads, writing sets, and address books; paper knives, letter openers, letter clips, calenders, postcard stands, letter racks, letter trays, letter cages, and letter balances; rulers, flat, round, calender and magnifying; writing desks for home, travel, school and even battle; writing slopes, cases, and memo tablets; gums and gum bottles;
– Blotting paper, blotting books, blotters and blotting pads, blotting rollers, staplers, paper piercers, paper clips, and screw paper fasteners;
– Pencils, (wood and propelling in nickel-plate, gold and silver), pencil holders, desk sharpeners and pocket sharpeners, pencil boxes, and erasers,

As the century wore on so numerous varieties of fountains pens, fountain pen pockets, and fountain pen cases could be added to this list. Virtually all the above items were identified within one Army and Navy Stores catalogue from the turn of the century (and see example 8 for just one page in this catalgue and example 9 for a page from another earlier catalogue). All of these items of writing-related equipment were at some time in the nineteenth century produced with advertising, produced as souvenirs, protected by ownership marks, and marketed in a huge variety of forms, sizes and materials.

While this variety was partly fuelled by the need to own and display, it was, perhaps, the swift development of the railways which made a dramatic contribution to the purchase and possible use of much peripheral equipment. Apart from making it easier to convey letters, railways enabled people to travel much more easily, speedily and cheaply. As people travelled so the purchase and collection of souvenirs, either for personal use or as gifts, increased. Manufacturers started to build lines of souvenirs and many of these were related to letter writing. Two manufactories in particular, The Tunbridge Ware manufacturers and those of Mauchline Ware, became a major source of this multitude of souvenirs, The Smith factory, which produced the Mauchline Ware, made blotters, pen wipers, inkstands, letter and postcard racks, pen holders, paper weights, postal rulers,

No. 1169. Roan leather, 4to size 20/0
Morocco „ „ 25/6

No. 9016. Roan leather, 11½ by 9 in. 25/6
Morocco „ „ 30/6

No. 2169. Morocco leather, 4to size 23/6

No. 1873. Roan leather, lined roan, 8vo size 4/9
„ „ 4to „ 5/9
„ „ large „ 6/6

No. 3099. Roan leather, lined sheep, fitted with pen and pencil, and pockets for stationery, post cards, telegrams, stamps, &c., size 9 by 6½ in. 6/6

No. 651. Roan, lined roan, 4to size 9/3
Persian „ „ 11/6
Morocco „ „ 14/0
Russia „ „ 17/3

No. 651.

No. 1532. Solid leather, lined roan, expanding strap, nickel sliding nozzle lock—
4to size, 11 by 8½ in. 19/6
8vo „ 9 „ 6¾ „ 13/9

No. 525. Pigskin, lined basil leather, with 2 gusset pockets for paper, envelopes, pockets for letters, post cards, stamps, &c., loops for paper knife, pen and pencil, fastened with strap and buckle.

Octavo size, 9 by 7 in., unfitted 8/9
Quarto size, 12 by 9½ in., unfitted 13/0
Foolscap size, 14 by 10 „ „ 16/0

No. 1535. Solid leather, lined roan, expanding pockets—
8vo size 12/0
4to „ 17/6

Fig. 8. A page of writing cases from a turn of the century Army and Navy Stores catalogue.

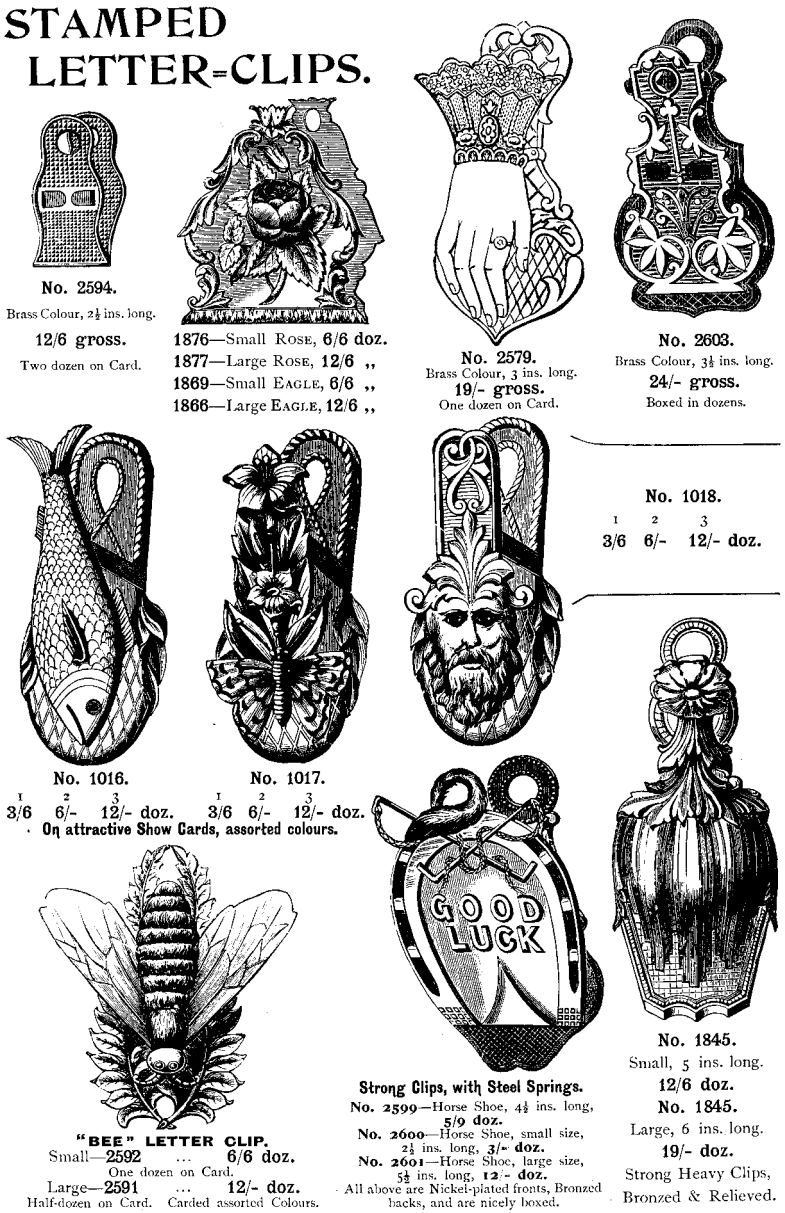

Fig. 9. A page of letter holders from a stationery catalogue of 1891.

paper folders and paper knives. The Tunbridge Ware companies, if anything, made an even wider range of writing equipment using delicate mosaics of exotic woods fashioned into complex designs. Between them they produced millions of small, relatively cheap items of everyday ware. They were cheap enough to buy, small enough to carry, yet decorative enough to have displayed on a desk or somewhere else in the home. The quantity which survives today (and they are no longer cheap to buy) testifies to the success of these companies, as well as to the acquisitiveness of the Victorian letter writer.

Conclusion

This brief piece has only been able to begin examining the representations and meanings of the objects related to nineteenth-century letter-writing, and their positioning within social systems reflecting changing class structures, the advent of mass-consumerism and conspicuous consumption, the development and growth of education, and the emergence of a travelling public. It has, equally, only dealt with a few of the manifestations of the materiality of letter writing; it has left untouched the vast area concerned with greeting cards, especially valentines, birthday and Christmas cards, it has left untouched the postcard, a proud Victorian creation, which together with the telegraph, another Victorian creation (see Standage 1998), represented new ways of handling letters in truncated forms. There is clearly much more to be said about the ways in which these objects draw their significance. Nevertheless, the materiality of letter writing is a little less transparent and it should be clear now that the study of this area has some potential to contribute to understanding letter writing as a social practice.

Acknowledgments

Several anonymous quotations in this article have been taken from collections of such items published regularly in the *Journal of the Writing Equipment Society*, and I would like to thank the Society making these accessible, and to the current editor, Michael Woods, for advice and help. I would also like to thank Larry Hanks for permission to reproduce the photographs in Figure 3.

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CHAPTER 7

Letter-Writing Instruction in 19th Century Schools in the United States

Lucille M. Schultz
University of Cincinnati

> The Boys should be put on Writing Letters to each other on any common Occurrences, and on various Subjects, imaginary Business, &c. containing little Stories, Accounts of their late Reading, what Parts of Authors please them, and why… In these they should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words, or high-flown Phrases.
>
> Benjamin Franklin, in his "Idea of the English School", 1750, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Volume 4.

> Every child feels early the desire for communicating his emotions and thoughts, first by conversation and next by writing. Letters and diaries are his first confidants: the records of life and the stuff of its living literature. With the writing of these let composition begin. A child … soon learns to write epistles to his mates, and loves to do it, as his effort gives him the sense of power and converts his learning early to practical uses. Teach him tasteful ways of folding his letters and of superscribing them correctly. The post-office is his birthright, let us encourage him to find uses for it early as a foretaste of his little state in affairs of State.
>
> A.B. Alcott, "Superintendent's Report, 1860–1861", in *Essays on Education*

Ben Franklin's proposed course of study for his school was not the success he had hoped, and no records of student writing remain from the earliest days of his Philadelphia academy. But evidence that some children in the US were indeed writing letters occurs as early as May of 1833. In an essay in *The American Annals of Education and Instruction*, sample letters between a "little girl and her teacher" are showcased to encourage instruction for children in "epistolary correspondence" (p. 222). In this particular case, the little girl, identified only as "E.W.L.", was corresponding with her teacher Bronson Alcott about the value of keeping

a diary, the value of experience-based learning, and the value of letter-writing.

While instruction in rhetoric had been part of a university education in the United States from the colonial period, 19th century instruction in personal letter-writing (rooted in the branch of medieval rhetoric known as *ars dictaminis*) flourished not in the universities but in the schools. Visible in the earliest part of the century were a few model letters for children in all-purpose letter-writers; at the same time, a few full-length letter-writers prepared exclusively for children also appeared. In a number of composition textbooks, letter-writing appeared as a topic for instruction by the third decade of the century, and by the end of the century, letter-writing instruction was a predictable part of the composition books used in the schools.

From their inception, schools in the US were dedicated to instructing children in knowledge and in virtue. Because the early 19th century educational reformers perceived that families and churches were no longer as committed to moral education as they had been during the colonial era and because there were signs of poverty, violence, and abuses of child labour, the reformers also saw the common schools as an instrument for promoting the social order, the patriotism, and the Christian morality popular during the early decades of the 19th century. Horace Mann argued that not to support free schools was to invite "the certain vengeance of Heaven" (qtd. in Barney, p. 106). In the words of an anonymous writer in the January 1827 issue of the *North American Review*, "the grand lever which is to raise up the mighty mass of this community, is *education*… The *schools* hold, in embryo, the future communities of this land. The *schools* are the pillars of the republic" (qtd. in Mattingly, p. 1).

One result of this goal to educate children both in knowledge and virtue was that 19th century schools became, in Ruth Elson's words, "guardians of tradition." From a neo-Marxist position, Henry Giroux, Joel Spring, and other educational researchers have argued that "school" was, and for the most part is still, organised to reproduce a culture's dominant values and to sustain the divisions of power already in place. Here I argue that while instruction in knowledge and virtue were important goals in the grand scheme of 19th century education, they were reproduced in letter-writing instruction. On the one hand, textbook letter-writing instruction was designed to teach children how to write familiar letters, and, in some cases, how to write business and social correspondence. On the other hand, this same instruction was designed to teach children how to be a letter-writer, and that, I argue, was equated with inculcating children with the manners and morals of polite society in 19th century America. In other words, letter-writing instruction, as it was inscribed in 19th century textbooks for school-age children, was a particularly enabling site for teaching particular and

circumscribed behaviours: instruction for how to write a letter, the one genre that would have an audience outside the classroom, became a trope for instruction in behaving according to the culture's dominant values, and the appearance of the letter became a trope, a metonymy, for the writer's character. For 19th century students and readers, the books taught letter-writing as a way of staying-in-line and succeeding in polite society. While textbook examples of student letters show the student authors following prescribed ways of writing and thinking, an occasional letter found not in a textbook but in a family's correspondence or in another source, shows a student using a letter for resisting dominant social codes. Thus for contemporary readers, 19th century children's letter-writing represents the interanimation of instructional practice and social practice, but it also represents the potential for expressing not just the residual but also the emergent values that Raymond Williams argues are a part of any cultural practice.

Many and complex social and educational forces collaborated, some more directly than others, in this evolution of letter-writing instruction. Because the cost of postage was often prohibitive, few people living in the United States sent or received a letter through the mail prior to the Postage Acts of 1845 and 1851. As Richard John explains in his 1995 study of the US postal system, these were the acts that correlated the cost of mailing a letter not, as had been the practice, with the distance the letter would travel and the number of sheets it contained, but with the letter's weight. These were also the acts that made the postal system accessible to everyday people (pp. 156–61).

Both cause and effect of this increased accessibility was that the need for long-distance communication was increasing. As the Westward expansion continued, and as the Midwest and South became more populated, the personal correspondence of many US residents increased. No longer writing solely to family and friends across the Atlantic ("once a year a letter was written to our relatives in northern England, " Clark, p. 3), families in the East had members who followed the lure of gold to the West, or sought work in the Midwest. And increasingly, families of means had children away at school — at an academy or a university. In addition, the expansion of commerce and urban life in the mid-19th century meant that increasingly, people were called on to write not only personal letters, but also business and social letters.

Another important social force at work in the mid-19th century was the mutually re-enforcing emphasis of the new democracy on a literate citizenry and universal education. As many writers explain, the move toward a universal common school education (that would really be universal only at the turn of the century) gained momentum during the 1820's and 30's. Against the irregularities and costs of the privately run schools, educational reformers such as Horace

Mann, Henry Barnard, and their colleagues gained significant ground in their efforts to establish "common schools", or what in the US would now be known as public elementary schools. The reformers' goals were to provide universal, public, and free education; to reform the harsh, even abusive, manner in which children were sometimes treated in independent schools; to improve the quality of instruction children received; and to regularise the curriculum in some way, that is, to make certain elements of learning "common" to all children. Butts and Cremin (1953) estimate that by 1840, in New England, more students than not had some formal schooling; by 1850, in the Midwest and West, some formal school was the rule rather than the exception for most students. These estimates, however, refer primarily to European-American middle-class students. Not all school-age children fared as well as they did. Poor children were less likely to be in school than families with regular incomes. African-American children, Native American children, Chinese children, Mexican children, children of working-class immigrants, and children with special needs had limited and in some cases no educational opportunities. So while I agree with those who write that by the end of the century, common schools, or what we think of today as elementary schools, were well established and enrollments were increasing, and public high schools, developing later than common schools, were beginning to be more widespread, it is also important to remember that not all children had equal access to school, even at the end of the century.

As common schools gained support, and increasing numbers of children were attending school at mid-century, significant changes in the printing industry were having widespread effects. Among them, according to Lehmann-Haupt (1939), were the evolution of new principles in type casting and setting, of new designs in press building, and of the capability of manufacturing paper, by machine, in large quantity and in sheets of any size. An additional and significant part of this change of printing "from an art to an industry" was the importation of the process of "stereotyping" by David Bruce sometime between 1811–1813. Stereotyping was the process in which a papier-mâché mold was made from type that was set, and from that mold, a metal plate was made. From this metal plate, books that require few or no changes could be printed frequently and in large quantities. Such books included catechisms, Bibles, the English masterpieces, popular American works, and, of course, textbooks.

One result of the tandem changes occurring in education and in printing was a burst of subject-specific textbooks created specifically for children. As John Nietz (1961) points out, while primers and hornbooks and some subject-specific texts were using during the colonial period, spellers; readers; grammars; arithmetics; geographies; American histories; civil government texts; physiologies; and

penmanship, art, and music books were all in established use by the mid-19th century. And there were composition texts as well, not just rhetorics, and not just composition texts for secondary students as Nietz suggests, but composition texts for beginning students. Most often produced by printers who, in some cases were also publishers, these composition texts were written by clergy, by teachers, and by textbook compilers. The absence of a single curriculum and the absence of a "textbook industry" to authorise what was published meant that a range of "topics" and a range of pedagogies were represented in the composition texts and that their shelf life spanned a tremendous range. It was also true, however, that in a society in which written communication was increasingly important and most children would not continue school after the primary grades, one feature that most composition textbooks for children shared was a chapter on letter-writing. Of all the composition genres that textbooks might include as school assignments, it was the "letter" that students were most likely to write after they had left school. In Samuel Kerl's 1869 textbook *Elements of Composition and Rhetoric*, he wrote, "By far the largest part of all that most people write, or have occasion to write, consists of letters. Skill in writing them is therefore of the greatest importance" (pp. 209–210). At the end of the century, Edward Shaw (1892) wrote in his introductory note to teachers, "Give great attention to Letter-writing. No part of composition work is more neglected — no part is more important" (xi).

Composition textbooks and letter-writing: Instruction in knowledge

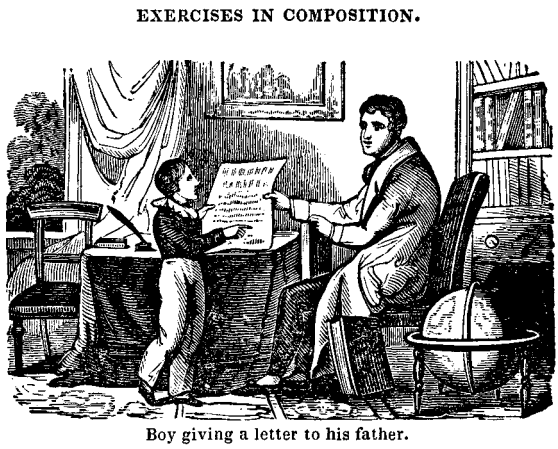
The earliest text-based letter-writing instruction for children, as for adults, appeared in letter-writers, collections of letters intended to model letter-writing for their readers and sometimes even to explain the rules for polite correspondence in the texts of the letters. Caleb Bingham's *Juvenile Letters* (1805?) contains 36 letters, a "correspondence between children" intended to "encourage [readers] in their first attempts in this pleasing and important art" (p. 3). The letters in Bingham's collection, written by "students" with names like "Eliza Learner", "Samuel Thoughtful", "James Meanwell", and "Henry Hopeful", report the children's delight in receiving letters from each other, reveal their worries that their letters are "correct", and describe various school-related topics and social gatherings. In these letters, Bingham models topics that are appropriate for children to write about, and beyond that, he suggests attitudes that children should adopt in their daily lives, but he offers very little direct advice about the form(s) of letter-writing.

Mrs. John Farrar's *The Youth's Letter-Writer* (1834), on the other hand, is more of a prescriptive text about the particulars of letter-writing than it is a collection of even somewhat plausible letters. Under the guise of a correspondence between the youth Henry Moreton and both his adult mentors and his childhood companions, Farrar instructs her readers in the formal properties of letter-writing. Her chapter titles include such topics as "Paragraphs"; "Place of Beginning"; "Margins"; "Folding"; "Schoolboys' Difficulties in Writing Letters" (see Appendix 1 for the text of this section); "Directions for Sharpening a Penknife, and for Making a Pen"; and "Choice of a Seal" (ix–xi). Yet another letter-writer for children, Joseph Dowe's *The Little Writer* (1836) is a collection of letters between siblings, friends, and older relatives. While the letters describe events of ordinary life, they also include "teachings" about letter-writing. An older brother, for example, writes to a younger sibling, "As an exercise to improve you, I impose it on you to write to me once a week, and do not hurry over the page, but make your periods where they should be, and your minor stops in their places. Practice is the only thing that can improve you in letter-writing" (p. 11).[1]

With increasing numbers of children in school and increasing numbers of composition books for school-age students, the composition book superseded the letter-writing manual as the repository of letter-writing instruction and the instrument used to impart that instruction to school-age children. A major difference between the letter-writing manuals and the composition books is that the instruction in the textbooks was formalised, and delivered for the most part as precept, not as example; a second difference, of course, is that because the textbooks were used in schools, and not dependent on an individual family's owning the book, the textbooks had a wider audience than did the letter-writing manuals; it is thus that the textbooks became a mechanism as it were for delivering, indeed popularising, the instruction that originally was available only in the manuals or directly from a teacher and the child's own experience with letter-writing.

In the very earliest composition textbooks in the United States that were written specifically for children and included letter-writing instruction, the authors focused, not unlike Caleb Bingham, more on the content of the letters than on the formal properties of preparing the letter for the post office. In John Frost's 1839 *Easy Exercises in Composition*, for example, he includes a very brief section (three pages) on letter-writing. He offers a short paragraph about the importance of the letter's subject; he includes some remarks from "an English author on the epistolary style"; and he offers a 22-item list of "subjects for letters." Among these subjects are "A letter to an acquaintance describing the writer's last holiday

amusements", "A letter to a friend, requesting the loan of a book", and "A letter from a young lady to her schoolmate, descanting on her favourite books and authors" (77–78). (See Fig. 1 for an illustration from Frost's book.)



26 EXERCISES IN COMPOSITION.

Boy giving a letter to his father.

Description. Boy probably wishes to have his mistakes corrected. Pleasures and advantages of letter-writing.

Fig. 1. Illustration from John Frost's *Easy Exercises in Composition.*

Similarly, in *A Practical Guide to Composition* (1839), Charles Morley includes several pages on letter-writing (See Fig. 2 for an illustration from Morley's book).

Like Frost, he offers brief directions, including such cautions as "Be particular that you spell correctly, and violate no grammatical rule" and "Express your ideas with clearness, and at the same time in few words" (p. 41), but unlike Frost, he also includes sample letters for his readers to use as models and instead of a list of subjects, he offers several "skeletons" of letters for the students to complete. Here, for example, is the first skeleton he offers:

Letter I.

Hartford, November 1st, 1838.

Dear Sister,

I take this opportunity to write you a few lines.

1. Mention the state of your health, and that of your friends.
2. Of your school and how you like it — of your studies — the progress you make in them — how you like each, and which the best — and why.
3. Use of these branches — and which the most useful.
4. Particulars. (p. 41)

Fig. 2. Illustration from Morley's *A Practical Guide to Composition*.

Peter Bullions (1854) gives even fewer guidelines for letter-writing in *Practical Lessons in English Grammar and Composition*, but in a note to teachers, Bullions suggests students write to each other in order to improve their skills in composing:

> One pupil may be directed to write to another concerning anything he pleases. A post-office might be set up in the school, with its letter-box, to be opened at stated seasons, and its contents read for the amusement and instruction of the school. This exercise, because voluntary, would be entered into with spirit, and prove of great benefit. (pp. 131–132)

These three texts — by Frost, Morley, and Bullions — are representative of the texts that were written for beginning students and focused on the subject of the letter rather than on formal letter-writing properties.

A watershed in letter-writing instruction occurred with the publication of Richard Green Parker's best-selling *Aids to English Composition* (1844), a text that as Robert Connors points out was in print for 30 years and went through 21 printings (p. 185). Written as many 19th century texts were, for "students of all grades", Parker's text addresses not the youngest students, but students in "the higher departments of English composition." Unlike Frost who told students that letter-writing is "generally considered an easy form of composition" (p. 76), Parker wrote that "it is generally allowed, that epistolary writing, if not one of the highest, is one of the most difficult branches of composition" (p. 194). And,

unlike Frost and Morley and other very early writers (and in seeming disregard of the many letter-writing manuals that were popularly available) he argued that "Few directions can be given with regard to the composition of a letter" (p. 195) and he focused, instead, on the "mechanical execution" of letters. Parker names the parts of a letter, describes the placement of each part, explains in great detail the proper way to seal a letter, and even includes illustrations for folding a letter; ironically, a mistake appears in the illustration — in the proportion of the folds of the letter — which Parker feels obliged to explain in a note. At the end of Parker's section on letter-writing, he includes a list of topics for letters that is very similar to the lists of other writers, but the emphasis in Parker's instruction is clearly on the mechanical execution of letter-writing. And after Parker, most 19th century composition textbooks that include letter-writing also include detailed and formal guidelines for letter-writing.

While 19th century textbook authors differed in the extent of the explanation they offered about the content and form of letter-writing, they shared two qualities, even at the end of the century: they often echo the letter-writing advice of Hugh Blair (1785) that letters be "conversational" and "natural", and in their advice to the letter writer, they embed and reproduce 19th century conduct codes for children.

It was not uncommon in the 19th century, especially in the early decades, for writers to borrow liberally, and often silently, from earlier writers and rhetoricians as well as from each other. We know, for example, that many textbook writers borrowed their topics and approaches to writing from the rhetorics of George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whately, as well as from the work of John Walker. Of those four rhetoricians, it is Blair who speaks most directly and at greatest length about letter-writing. In Lecture XXXVII of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1785), Blair devotes four pages to epistolary writing that is personal correspondence rather than public document (pp. 413–16). While his recommendations are not unlike the suggestions that Lord Chesterfield gave his son and grandson in the celebrated Chesterfield letters, Blair's suggestions appear not as avuncular wisdom delivered in a personal letter, but as instructional directive. Elaborating each of his points, Blair recommends that correspondence between friends should be "natural and simple", "conversational", marked with "sprightliness and wit", written with grace and ease, and, of course, subject to proper decorum and taste. The implication of course was that "natural and simple" were not inconsistent with "proper decorum and taste." In fact, some readers, rejecting the constructed nature of "proper", no doubt saw "natural" and "proper" as equatable.

Without acknowledging his debt to Blair, John Dunham, in the introduction

to his *A New Classical Selection of Letters* (3rd ed, 1810) borrows large chunks from Blair's Lecture XXXVII. Textbook writers also borrowed freely from Blair. Although the fountainhead for John Frost's (1839) approach to teaching composition was the Swiss education reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi,[2] Frost's section on letter-writing notes that the remarks "of an English author on the epistolary style" are important; and that un-named English author, Scottish actually, is Hugh Blair. In *Easy Exercises*, Frost includes eighteen sentences — almost verbatim from "Lecture XXXVII."[3] And like Frost, many 19th century textbook writers, among them Knighton, Lewis, Lockwood, Welsh, and Williams, also echo Blair's suggestions. Knighton (1853), for example, writes that "a letter should be natural, simple, and free from restraint" (p. 124); Welsh (1896) that "The most delightful letters are the most natural" (p. 161); Williams (1894) that the style of letters should be "simple, easy, and natural" (p. 266).

Instruction in manners and morals

Beyond their indebtedness to Blair, an even stronger link among these books is their representation of the dominant culture's prescribed knowledge about letter-writing and of the culture's behaviour codes for daily living. That is, the books are offering not just "knowledge" in letter-writing, but also education in "virtue", that is, in manners and morals. Thus learning to write a good letter was learning to become, by 19th century codes, a well-mannered person.

Behaviour codes for children appeared in many formats. In Thomas Palmer's 1839 award-winning essay *The Teacher's Manual*, he includes a "Table of Virtues, with Their Opposite Vices" (207). Some of these 104 virtues and vices also appeared in the popular 19th century composition books as topics for compositions. "Prudence" and "rashness", "obedience and disobedience", "industry" and "indolence" are, for example, both in Palmer's list for behaviour and in lists of subjects for theme writing in compositions texts (see Parker's *Aids*, 1844, pp. 97–102). In James Currie's *The Principles and Practice of Early School Education* (1887), he includes a section on the Moral Training of a child, and once again topics that appear here — topics such as kindness, honesty, modesty, and punctuality — also appear as topics for compositions in writing texts. As Bernard Wishy notes in his study entitled *The Child and the Republic* (1968), the hero in children's literature modelled these same qualities:

> He was a person who lived up to his ideals and constantly proved his self-reliance and dedication by going through trials and ordeals by which he mastered himself and acquired the virtues that the child could find listed in

> almost any manual of conduct: conscience, justice, honestly, faithfulness, truth, obedience, industry, patience, etc. (56–57)

Regardless of the specific subject matter they were illustrating, the examples in schoolbooks placed a heavy emphasis on what we have come to think of as early Puritan values such as personal discipline, self-sacrifice, duty, and obedience. In letter-writing instruction, these same codes prevailed.

In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke had observed that "no Gentleman can avoid shewing himself in [letter-writing]"; that it "always lays him open to a severer Examination of his Breeding, Sense, and Abilities, than oral Discourses" (164–5). Although Blair (1785) allowed for the possibility of the "concealment and disguise" of the letter-writer, and in his way anticipated the construction of the author or persona as we understand those constructions today, he also argued that letter-writing gave the reader "some acquaintance with the writer", by which he meant not an authorial construction but the man or woman who wrote the letter. Like Blair, other writers were also very forthright in arguing that to read a person's letter was also to read the character of the letter's writer. In Charles Northend's manual intended for teachers and parents, he wrote,

> It is to be hoped … that all pupils may possess the ability, when they cease attending school, to write letters which shall be accurate and natural in their style, correct in orthography, systematic and proper in all their parts. A letter neatly written, correctly expressed, and properly folded and superscribed, will always prove a 'letter of recommendation' to its writer; while the reverse will exert an influence in no respect favourable or complimentary. (p. 228)

Here I draw on three texts to illustrate letter-writing instruction as character-representation: Richard Parker's *Aids to English Composition* (1844), Samuel Kerl's *Elements of Composition and Rhetoric* (1869), and Sara Lockwood's *Lessons in English* (1890). All three were all-purpose textbooks. The Kerl and Parker texts were written for both "young pupils and advanced pupils" (Kerl, p. 210); the Lockwood text, coming as it does at the end of the century, models some of the changes in composition instruction that occurred during the century. Parker, as I noted earlier, focuses on the formal properties of letter-writing. He comments that "the teacher cannot be too particular in his directions with regard to folding, sealing, &c., for early habits of negligence, or want of neatness, are with difficulty eradicated" (p. 194). Putting special emphasis on the sealing of a letter, Parker quotes Chesterfield who on receiving a letter sealed with a wafer is reported to have said, "What does the fellow mean by sending me his own spittle!" Parker adds that to seal a letter with a wafer, rather than with wax,

"implies haste, which is inconsistent with the studied courtesies of polished life" (p. 205).[4] Parker also teaches that in composing a reply, a writer should follow the same style of address used in the original communication. Using "a different style, or form", Parker wrote, "seems to express a want of respect, or an arrogance of superior knowledge, — faults equally to be avoided in the intercourse of polished society" (p. 195). For Parker, therefore, the writer's character is revealed not only in the "style" of the letter, but in how she or he deals with the physical properties of the letter.

Later in the century, when gummed envelopes for the most part had replaced the need to seal a letter with wax or with a wafer and spittle, Kerl emphasised the language of the letter, but to the same end: to suggest that letters reveal the writer's character and that character is judged by little things. I quote Kerl at some length here because he offers one of the fullest statements of "epistolary etiquette":

> Avoid egotism, flattery, and flunkyism… Avoid bad penmanship, improper spelling, interlineations, errors in regard to capital letters, false syntax, improper punctuation, improper words, improper or silly thoughts — particularly such as are low or indelicate, excessive length, excessive brevity, excessive haste, and all kinds of affectation; especially avoid excess of quotations, and long or numerous postscripts. Avoid tautology, clumsy connection of thought, and abrupt transitions… In short, let nothing in your letters be in bad taste; and always preserve your temper, your presence of mind, your self-respect, and your dignity. (p. 211)

Following Kerl, and nearer the end of the century, Sara Lockwood (1890), reiterates the practical importance of learning to write letters ("After you leave school; but all through life there will be occasions for writing letters of business and of friendship", p. 257), and she represents the importance of both the form of the letter and its essential qualities. Like Parker, she explains each of the five parts of a letter (heading, introduction, body, conclusion, and superscription) and includes illustrations of some of the parts; and, like Kerl, the qualities she names as desirable in a letter, even essential, are really the qualities that were desirable, even essential, to the person writing the letter. Those qualities, as Lockwood names them, include Good Taste ("Never choose writing-paper which is highly coloured, showily decorated, or in any way conspicuous", p. 269); Neatness ("a soiled, blotted, or scribbled letter indicates that the writer is careless, slovenly, and selfish; since he has not sufficient regard for the feelings of his correspondent to take a reasonable amount of time and pains in writing the letter", p. 270); Carefulness ("Be thoughtful about the arrangement, the punctuation, the spelling, and the grammar", p. 270); Promptness ("Letters in general should be answered

as soon as possible after they are received", (p. 270); Courtesy ("A letter need not be brusque or in any way suggestive of rudeness, simply because it is a business letter. In letters of friendship, remember not to devote the entire space to chat about yourself and your concerns", p. 272); and Caution ("Remember that while the 'idle words' which you speak may soon be forgotten, those which you write may some time appear as evidence against you. Letters have frequently proved to be very dangerous witnesses", p. 273). For other writers as well, the appearance of the letter was a trope for the character of the letter writer. John Hart (1886) made this point in his discussion of the exact way to write the superscription, the address on the outside of the envelope. He cautioned students that any want of propriety in the superscription would give the third parties who attended to the delivery of the letter the impression that the person receiving the letter had a friend who was "an ignoramus" or a "boor" (p. 127).

Toward the end of the century, a number of writers recognised that the rules for letter writing they offered were "custom", not transcendent. But I see no writers who recognised that their claim that letters should be "simple, natural, and easy" — descriptive terms that appear over and over in chapters on letter-writing — were elaborate masks for very complex and artificial constructions or that an elaborate irony was embedded in that instruction. And I see no writers who questioned the metonymy in which the appearance of the letter was read as a representation of the character of the writer.

Letter-writing instruction as cultural capital

Although even at the end of the century not all children had equal access to public schools, one clear goal of educational reformers was to provide universal and public education for all children. Although we know that children of colour were still under-represented, we also know that more working-class and rural children were attending school at the end of the century than at the beginning. And yet the textbooks falsely assumed, and this is especially visible in letter-writing instruction, that all students in school were European American and upper-middle class. From a contemporary perspective, the formalism of letter-writing instruction and the boldness with which this instruction reproduced, even reified 19th century hegemonic values and behaviour codes was significant in a number of ways.

On the one hand, in perpetuating upper-middle class values, the instruction denied the realities of the lives of some of the children who were in school. Sample ceremonial notes, for example, both invitations and replies, excluded

large numbers of students whose families were not writing that "Mr. and Mrs. Smith accept with pleasure the kind invitation of Mrs. George Brown for Wednesday evening, December the thirteenth." So, too, while some topics for familiar letters included the events of ordinary life (a letter to a distant friend or relative), many topics for familiar letters also excluded large numbers of students. Consider, for example, these topics:

> Write a letter to a railroad company asking the rates, time table, accommodations, etc., for a trip to Yellowstone Park or some other desirable summer resort.
>
> Write a letter to your absent father, describing a pony and asking for money to buy it.
>
> Write an imaginary letter from a puppy to an express company about to convey him to his purchaser in San Francisco. Let your letter describe the kennel he wishes to travel in, the meals he wishes to have, and the hours he wishes them served, etc. (Hall 1897, pp. 173, 192)

Another way some students were excluded was through the occupation or employment of their families. Topics assume that parents of students were highly educated, had the literacy skills to write letters, and often held prominent positions in their town or city. So a letter topic that asks students to write "a note to your washerwoman" suggests that parents of students in school were hiring washerwomen, not earning their living washing for other families. And so children whose parents worked at trades or manual labours were excluded or "othered, " teachers being reminded that "some of the class may have very crude ideas" about letter-writing" (Davis, p. 31). Thus in a school setting that was intended to level the playing field and make possible universal literacy, groups of people were systematically excluded. And in the instruction in the one genre, albeit a genre that allows for a range of discursive practices from narration to argument, that could be a part of daily lives and in the one genre that would have an audience outside the classroom, the emphasis was on the rigidity and formality of the instruction.

I am not arguing that schools should not have taught letter-writing or that letter-writing is not subject to conventions the way any genre is. The letter was the primary form of long-distance communication in the 19th century, and the ability to write a letter was thus important to many citizens. While the goal of those teaching letter-writing was no doubt seen as an inclusionary move — enabling people to engage in long-distance communication — I am arguing that 19th century letter-writing instruction not only excluded groups of people, it also perpetuated that exclusion and at the same time worked to preserve the culture of the upper middle class. Emblematising that preservation attempt, Alfred Welsh (1896) wrote to students, "Avoid highly coloured, showily decorated, or conspicuous

paper. Cultured people pay little heed to the changing fashions stationery" (162). John Schilb (1996), drawing on and elaborating Pierre Bourdieu's work, explains that according to Bourdieu, schools reproduce social stratifications. They provide cultural capital — "the kind of education that allows you to join or remain in the upper classes", the dominant groups expecting potential members "to acquire certain competencies, experiences, and dispositions — none of which, of course, should threaten to shake existing hierarchies" (39). One very important way to read knowledge of letter-writing — as represented in letter-writing instruction — was as a form of cultural capital.

On the other hand, letter-writing instruction also contributed, in however small a way, to the beginnings of an enormous breakthrough in 19th century composition instruction. Especially early in the century, students were taught to write themes about impersonal and abstract topics (like modesty, patience, industry, clemency, for example) and to write with a voice that mimicked the voice of an adult. Unlike these assignments, letter-writing instruction held the promise of inviting students to write about their own lives, about their own experiences, and in their own voices — and thus to contribute to the democratisation of writing instruction by valuing the diverse lives of all students. Most children's letters that I have seen follow the suggested codes, the children writing about how much they enjoyed school, how hard they were studying, and how faithful they were to parental and Biblical teachings. But occasionally a letter was also a site for expressing resistance to culturally imposed codes. In, for example, a collection of letters written from 1835–1837 between members of the Elfreth family, a Quaker family living in Philadelphia, the children write primarily about their school work, their love for family, and daily events like a trip to a dentist or seeing a fire engine. In an 1836 letter, though, eight-year-old Jane Elfreth wrote to her father about France's refusal to pay the debt negotiated at the Treaty of Paris, a topic her father had written about in an earlier letter. In her text, Jane argued that "France has acted very badly in refusing so long to pay a debt which she had acknowledged to be due to the United States …" But she then went on in her letter to write, "But little girls like me had better learn to knit stockings than to be talking about politics" (*The Elfreth Book of Letters*, p. 103).

In 1840, an unnamed 12-year old girl wrote to a family friend criticising the school-based practice of awarding prizes for examinations: "as to prizes, they scarcely ever fail to create some degree of bad feeling. People must have but a poor opinion of our motives for writing and studying, if they think that the hope of obtaining a prize would be any inducement to great effort. It makes me think of promising a child a sugar-plum, if it will only be good." Reproduced in the March 1840 issue of *The Common School Journal* in a short article entitled

"Prizes", the letter is preceded by an editorial headnote that reads in part, "were we a believer in the expediency of electing women to fill civic offices, we should wish that this little girl might be placed on some of the school committees" (76).

Raymond Williams (1980) argues that at any one point in the life of a culture, both residual and emerging practice can inform the lives of citizens (pp. 40–42). By "residual", he means not so much an exact match with current dominant values, but some form of residue of previous social formations. By "emergent", he means the new practices and formations that are being created in a living culture. The earliest social formation of school in this country — the private school — was geared toward the education of the upper middle class. With the growth of the new democracy, however, school was to become public and universal. From this earliest social formation, however, lingered what Williams would call residual values; and these were the values that continued to accompany letter-writing instruction in 19th century schools; at the same time, however, as the early republic began to instantiate democratic principles, emerging values and emerging practices evolved. And these included the possibilities for children of all classes to see their lives valued in school, for letter-writing instruction to reflect the material conditions of the lives of all children, and for letter-writing to serve as a site for resistance. At the same time that children were taught the formalities of letter-writing an individual child, Jane Elfreth, used a letter to question culturally-imposed gender codes, suggesting she would rather talk about politics than knit stockings. Another child, also a girl, in questioning the institutionally sanctioned practice of awarding prizes for examinations, prompted a journal editor to reflect on the role of women in society. It is thus that letter-writing instruction in 19th century schools serves as a site for analysing the tensions between residual and emergent social practices.

Notes

1. Other collections of letters to children, no doubt modelled on the Chesterfield letters to his son and grandson, were written as advice manuals. American examples include Enoch Cobb Wines' *Letters to School-Children*, Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1839, and Hosea Hildreth's *Book for New Hampshire Children, in Familiar Letters*, Exeter, NH: F. Grant, 1823, and his *Book for Massachusetts Children, in Familiar Letters*, Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins. In addition to giving advice for daily living, the Hildreth books both discuss topics such as the geography, the industries, and the public institutions of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Other books written as letters of instruction include, for example, three volumes of letters by missionary George Thompson entitled *Letters to Sabbath-School Children in Africa*. These volumes were published in Cincinnati by the American Reform Tract and Book Society in 1859 and were intended to introduce children at the Mendi mission in West Africa to Christianity.

2. With Comenius and Locke and Rousseau, Pestalozzi was among the first to recognise a difference in learning styles between adults and children and insisted that children begin to learn with "things" not with "words"; for a fuller account of Pestalozzi's contributions to composition instruction, see Schultz, *The Young Composers*.
3. In some cases Frost, makes a slight change in language to accommodate the understanding of children, adjusting, for example, Blair's "A slovenly and negligent manner of writing, is a disobliging mark of want of respect" to the simpler "A slovenly and negligent manner is writing is a mark of want of respect" (Blair, p. 415; Frost, p. 77), but for the most part, Frost uses Blair's exact language.
4. George Quackenbos includes this same anecdote in his *Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric*, New York: D. Appleton, 1855.

that and the wagon. On showing this exercise of his ingenuity to his friend and oracle, Anna Price, she perceived the omission immediately, because she had been so much amused by Jane's way of mentioning the parasol, that 'it was very convenient for bringing home things;' Jane meant to say that of the wagon, but *it* referred to the parasol. Anna told Henry that this was a common fault of young writers, and advised him always to observe whether his pronouns stood for the nouns he intended them to represent. 'The rule is, for a pronoun to refer to the person or thing last mentioned; so you must be sure that that is what you mean, or you may say something as absurd, as that a torn parasol is very convenient to carry home green-house plants in.'

Henry laughed, and confessed that he had not perceived that error of Jane's. He knew so well what she meant, that he overlooked the manner of her saying it.

CHAPTER VII.

SCHOOLBOYS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING LETTERS. — LIST OF TOPICS. — PROPER ATTITUDE IN WRITING. — MANNER OF HOLDING THE PEN. — DIRECTIONS FOR SHARPENING A PENKNIFE, AND FOR MAKING A PEN.

There was a boarding-school for boys in the neighbourhood of Oakwood; and as some of the pupils came from the city of New York and were the children of persons known to Mr. Price, they were occasionally invited to eat a Sunday dinner at his house, or to pass Saturday afternoon with his sons.

During one of these visits, the subject of writing letters was mentioned, and the young visitors freely expressed their extreme repugnance to the task. On inquiry, it was found that the great difficulty consisted in the want of topics. Henry and William agreed with their guests that, at school, it must be very difficult to find anything to say; whilst Mr. Price and Anna maintained, that even the monotony of a school-boy's life was no excuse for not writing to his friends.

'What can we find to say, sir,' asked one little boy, 'when we do the same things every day?'

'The same things in the main, but not in all the details,' replied Mr. Price; 'you sometimes say your lessons well, and sometimes ill; you sometimes have difficulties with your teachers, when you conceive yourself to be aggrieved, at others you have done wrong; now parents like to know all such particulars.'

'O but I should not like to tell such things as that!' exclaimed the same little boy.

'Well then, there are your amusements which vary with the different seasons, and the little accidents and incidents which occur on the play-ground; these might furnish matter for a letter.'

'But they do not want to hear about such trifles,' said another school-boy.

'There is your great mistake, my dear boy; nothing that concerns an absent child is a trifle to a parent. Your lessons and your plays are the great business of your lives, and your characters and dispositions are as much shown on the play-ground, as those of men are in the Senate or on the Exchange. The games that are in season, anecdotes of what occurs to yourself or others, with the behaviour of your companions, would be very good subjects for a letter at any time. If you form any intimacies, you should describe your friend and the particular qualities for which you like him; if you have any quarrel

with any of your companions, you should tell the particulars, and state the whole affair, and how you feel about it. If you meet with an accident, such as spraining your ankle, or cutting yourself badly, or if you have a bad fall, you should always mention it; tell how it occurred, how much you suffered, and how you feel at the time of writing. If any interesting event happens in the family of your teacher, you should tell it to your friends; any unusual indulgence, any visits that you pay, should be communicated to them. If you read anything that interests you, write about it, and tell what is your opinion of it. A long walk in the country may always furnish a page or two, if you have eyes to see and hearts to feel the beauty of nature. Now have I not suggested a good number of topics, on each of which you would feel quite at home, and could say a good deal?'

The boys all acknowledged that Mr. Price had named more things to write about than they thought existed; and one said, he wished he had noted them down as Mr. Price spoke, for he should not be able to remember them all.

Here Anna offered her services, and said that if the young gentlemen really wished for a list of topics to assist their memories, she would make out one for them at once. The proposal was gladly accepted and she wrote the following memorandum.

List of Topics for a School-boy writing to his Friends at home.

'General progress in studies, with any new one lately begun.

'Interest in any particular exercise or preference of one to another.

'Difficulties with teachers, or with yourself.

'Amusements, what games are in season.

'Anecdotes of the play-ground. Feats performed by yourself or others.

'Characters of your school-fellows, in and out of school.

'Description of your most intimate friend at school, with the reasons of your preference.

'Accidents that befall yourself, such as sprains, bad cuts, falls, &c.

'Any remarkable state of the weather, or of the country.

'Accidents by floods, or thunder and lightning, or unusual cold or heat.

'Events in the family of the gentleman who keeps the school.

'Books that you have read out of school hours.

'A long walk, or any extraordinary indulgence.

'A visit to any of your friends; when made, how long you stayed, who was there, and what they said worthy of note.

'Observations on birds, insects, and plants. If you have a taste for any branch of natural history, it will furnish you constant amusement, and interesting matter for letters.'

Whilst this obliging girl, Anna Price, was making out the important list, all the boys were crowding around her, and reading aloud every line as she wrote it, and many discussions were held by them over the different heads as they were noted down; but all the school-boys agreed that it would afford them some help, and that they were much obliged to Miss Anna; and she, never tired of doing kind things, actually made a copy of the list for each of her young guests.

Whilst this copying was going on, Mr. Price conversed with his young visitors upon the subject of penmanship, and enforced upon them the importance of early forming a good legible hand. One of the boys now declared that he always found enough to say to his friends at home, but the trouble of writing was so great that he never put down a quarter of what he had in his mind; he said that it tired him all over to write half a page. On hearing this, Mr. Price observed, that bad habits in holding the pen, and sitting at the desk, often produced this difficulty; and he requested his young guest to show him how he sat when writing, and how he held the

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CHAPTER 8

Young Children's Explorations of Letter Writing

Nigel Hall, Anne Robinson
Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Leslie Crawford
Georgia College and State University, USA

Introduction

This chapter starts from a different position than most of the other chapters in this book. In many of these other chapters authors study the existing practices of letter writing in a particular community or group at a given point in time. This chapter examines what happened when a letter writing activity was introduced to a group of very young children in school and considers to what extent the children responded in ways which indicated they were able to construe letter writing as a social practice rather than as a school exercise.

In common with all literacy activities, letter writing is a socially negotiated practice. While letter writing has through historical time been subject to attempts to fix its parameters, define the letter as a particular form of object and the practice of letter writing as a particular process, investigation of these attempts shows how much the task was ultimately impossible (see Dierks's and Schultz's chapters in this book, and Chartier, Boureau & Dauphin 1997). Nevertheless, such attempts continue today and booksellers still have available numerous guides to letter writing. Children in schools do not escape letter writing, and recently in the UK an option in the national assessment of writing of ten- and eleven-year-olds was to write a letter. This was evaluated by criteria, some of which, in being quite conventional (such as only one acceptable way of laying out the address), were at variance with much contemporary practice.

The project from which the data for this chapter is drawn did not actually start as a project at all. A teacher (AR) wanted her children to have some experience of communicating with an out-of-school audience, and the other two authors of this chapter were looking for a way of keeping in touch with children

while work kept them away from classrooms. However, what was expected to be a few exchanges of letters until the children were tired of writing turned out to be a lengthy exchange. It was only after about six months that we realised that the letters were beginning to become something rather rare in literacy research — the data for a longitudinal study of a mode of written communication.

We did not set out with any explicit, pre-conceived notion of what counted as a letter, although we inevitably have some and, as indicated later, these could not be hidden from the children. We were not interested in the extent to which young children were able to reproduce idealised forms of letters — although we were interested in the extent to which they did so — but in how they construed the form and process in relation to their own understanding of the function of letter writing.

Although our study was with very young children at school, they do not arrive in school ignorant of letters. Certainly, Western children, quite early on, seem to be aware of letters as a physical objects. They see letters and cards arrive through the door and are often witnesses to parents reading them. Probably less frequently, they see parents writing letters, and most preschool children will at some point have been lifted up to put the letter into the post box. Children may have carried letters from school home to their parents, although being unstamped and rarely in envelopes these may not be seen as letters by the children. Clearly there will be great differences in young children's experience of letters and letter writing. A few preschool children seem to know quite a lot about the socially embedded nature of letter writing. For instance, one four-year-old had the following conversation with her father, a letter in his hand, who collected her from the nursery.

Dad:	Come on love, got to go to the Post Office.
Rosemary:	What you got got there?
Dad:	Guess.
Rosemary:	Looks like it's from the electricity.
Dad:	How did you know that?
Rosemary:	It's got blue on it, and the envelopes a window.
Dad:	We've got to post it quick.
Rosemary:	Is it important?
Dad:	It certainly is!
Rosemary:	Better post it now. Don't want no electricity. How long will it take?
Dad:	See that (points to 2nd class stamp). Well, that means two days.
Rosemary:	If it has a '1' does that mean one day?
Dad:	Yes, now come on afore it's tomorrow.

While what is being discussed is not the writing of a letter, the child clearly knows a great deal about the importance of the object, its particular function, and the mechanism by which it is transferred between correspondents.

The extended observation of one of the authors while working in a writing centre in a nursery class suggests that most preschool children (which in the UK would be under five-years-old) see the letter more as a physical object than a communicative object. Every day children would come to the centre, get paper, draw on it, fold it (often highly imaginatively) and stuff it into an envelope. They would then announce that they were going to send it to someone, usually a parent, and put it in the post box. At the end of the session, when the post box was emptied hardly any envelopes had any marks suggesting an attempt to write an address or addressee. If there was anything written there at all it was a representation of their own name. In other words they had simply labelled their ownership of the object, as they labelled most objects they created in the nursery school. While most of the children understood that a letter had a physical shape, and understood it was associated with giving or posting, and opening, it was less common for any child to suggest that the marks they were making on their paper were intended to convey a meaning to the opener. It was more as if the letter as object and gift constituted a token of relationship, just as giving any present signifies a social relationship of some kind.

In general, preschool children probably have few opportunities to write letters for real. Their own experience is likely to be mostly either pretend or making their mark (or possibly their name) on something sent to a relation after a birthday present. It is probably extremely rare for a preschool child to engage in a regular, sustained written exchange with an adult, especially a relatively unknown adult.

Thus in our project, while we readily acknowledge that the children were already aware of letter writing, the children with whom we worked would have been relatively inexperienced letter writers at the start. This view was supported by discussions with many of the parents, and particularly conversations with the children.

Background

Young children's early formal writing experience in schools has through history been dominated by reductionist views of learning. For the most part authorship was a process which had to await the acquisition of basic skills, and these usually involved the decontextualised and often rote learning of spellings and

handwriting (Hall 1998). Even in more recent times there has been a strong tension between those who argued that children need the basic skills before real literacy could begin, and those who claimed that children operate in a literate ways from the start of their writing careers (Hall 1987). While changes have operated in some countries, the dominant model (and one very recently officially sanctioned in the UK through the National Literacy Strategy) is still one which puts the emphasis on exercise-based experience of writing rather than real engagement in using literacy for a genuinely communicative purpose.

The thee authors of this chapter are all very experienced in the field of early literacy education and did not perceive authorship as simply being about the acquisition of spelling and handwriting skills. Our reading, our research, and our extensive involvement with young children had convinced us that children, from the start, brought to the authoring process experience, ability and a commitment to making meaning. It was not appropriate to think of authorship as something which happened after children had learned to write neatly and spell correctly. Our belief was given an opportunity to be tested when the writing exchange began.

The selection of letter writing as the means for doing this evolved from three initial principles:

1 That children should have full responsibility for their own texts.
2 That authorship is given a certain 'bite' if the writer understands that an audience exists for their text, and that audience is interested in, and cares about, the meanings generated by the writer.
3 That the most convincing demonstration of an interest in, and care for, a child's texts, is to respond to it by using the same medium.

An opportunity was created to see if the children would be interested in writing to Les and Nigel. Anne had started to use the book 'The Jolly Postman' by J. and A. Ahlberg. The book details the journey of postman as he delivered letters to fairy tale characters. What made the book so powerful was that each letter existed as a physical object and was contained within an envelope in the book. Thus they could be appreciated both as a physical object and as a text. The book was very cleverly written and constructed and Anne hoped, through using it, to introduce the children to their own letter writing. After the children had been studying this book, Les and Nigel visited their classroom and spent a morning working with the children. Before they left, each child was given a letter which invited the child to write back. A major part of this strategy was for Les and Nigel to make a substantial impact upon the consciousness of the children as it was felt it would be easier for the children to write to someone they had met. This first contact was extremely successful and most of the children two years

later had very vivid memories of that first visit. If we are honest, even if the children chose to write back we did not anticipate them engaging in any correspondence for very long, after all, children are often short-lived in their commitments at the age of five. We were wrong! It was three years before the exchanges finally faded away as a result of a whole range of circumstances. An interview with the children after two years revealed that the children still enjoyed writing and receiving the letters, and that they wanted to continue and had no notion of the exchange ending (Robinson, Crawford & Hall 1990). One child commented, 'shall we write till we're dead?'.

The decision to locate this project in letter writing necessitated a number of other decisions about the procedures to be followed. One was political and involved writing to all the parents about what was going to happen, another was structural and a decision was made that the children would be invited to write more than a single letter. It was felt that while one-off letters are important, their understanding of letter writing as a social process was more likely to be seen over time as relationships between writers developed. Other procedural decisions were ethical:

> Firstly, we believed that each participant must have equal rights in the exchange. Although as mature writers we clearly had formal competencies much greater than those of the children, this did not entitle us to use that competence in a didactic way. It was not our function to control the dialogue; the children were partners in an exchange.
>
> Secondly, we believed that the meanings were more significant than the form of those meanings. Friends do not normally correct, mark, or grade each others letters. They write because they have important or interesting things to say to each other; they want to know about each other's lives. Each accepts the other's letters as they are. Friends do not seek to embarrass or humiliate each other.
>
> Thirdly, we believed that as people with, in most respects, more power than the children, we would not exercise that power by ending the exchanges. We determined to continue writing to the children as long as they wanted to write to us.

The first letters

Before Nigel and Les left the classroom on that first visit, each child was given an envelope which had on it their name and the school address. Inside was a short letter from either Les or Nigel. The class had been divided into two groups

and Nigel would write to one half and Les to the other. All the letters were identical except for the child's name at the beginning. The decision was made to use the University address as our location and thus we decided to use the university's headed notepaper.

The letter was as follows:

> Dear …
> I have enjoyed being in your class. I hope you would like to write to me. I promise to write back to you.
> Love

This letter needs some comment. We mentioned above that some of our own beliefs about letter writing could not be hidden from the children. Above all else this was inevitably true because it is impossible to write to a child without that letter providing evidence of the writer's beliefs about form and content — the choice of headed notepaper, the layout, the opening and closure, the use of 'love' and the use of a handwritten text, all potentially carry a message to the child about how letter writing and letters are to be defined. However, even the general commitments expressed earlier also demonstrated a number of things about us and letter writing which would be manifested through the letters written to the children. The decision to be in the classroom at the beginning signifies beliefs about the nature of the relationship to be embedded in the exchanges, the commitment to timelessness, avoidance of one-off letters, equality of power, and decisions to attend to meaning rather than spelling and handwriting, and the inclusion or absence of elements would inevitably be suggestive to the children about the nature of activity in which we were inviting them to participate.

What was important for us though, was not whether they adopted elements of our letters, but the extent to which they made their own decisions about the form and appropriacy of the form and content.

The text of that initial letter had been chosen with care. It was designed to avoid suggesting any agenda for the content of the child's reply. We wanted it to contain an invitation to write back as well as a statement signalling enjoyment at having met the children. However, we were keen that the letter did not influence or predispose the children towards any particular content choices. It was, in effect, a non-committal letter; it was friendly but vacuous. The responsibility for what to say when they replied was handed over to each child. Equally, each child was left free to include or exclude any of the conventions associated with letter writing. The initial letter did come to them set out in a conventional form and was on headed notepaper but the children were given no instructions or guidance about how their replies should be set out.

When Les and Nigel had left the class, Anne suggested to the children that if they wanted to write back, they were welcome to do so either in writing time or whenever they had spare moments. She told them that in a week's time she would post any letters that had been written to Les and Nigel. She completely refused to aid them in anyway. This meant that spelling, handwriting, ideas about content, and layout were all decisions to be made by the children alone. Anne gave a reminder a couple of days before the post date, and every child chose to write a letter back to Nigel and Les (including one boy who was absent when they were in the classroom. It was completely his decision to write (see Hall & Robinson 1994 for his story).

When starting a correspondence with a relatively unknown interlocutor there is, as far as strategies and topics are concerned, a variety of choices. Somehow from a range of topics a letter writer has to select those that they feel are the most appropriate. What do you say to someone you do not know well? What style do you adopt? What relationship do you assume? How do you choose to say it? Where do you pick your topics from? What do you think the other person wants to know? What assumptions do you make about a reply to your letter? Do you commit yourself to a relationship through the writing? These questions and many others underpin the determination of a response. They may not be answered explicitly but, in some way, each individual's choices indicate a stance upon those questions. It is, however, also true that writing to a relatively unknown person also constrains some of the choices that can be made. The greater the unknowing, the less appropriate it would be to launch into the middle of a story, or write about things in a decontextualised way, or make completely unwarranted assumptions about the nature, interests and concerns of the audience. Thus, the potential mixture of possibilities and constraints demands some very interesting cognitive decisions from the children, but these decisions are inevitably bound up in their ability to make a 'reading' of the social nature of the activity, and construct what seems to them an appropriate response.

All thirty children chose to reply. Close examination of the first responses suggested that the children were using four main general strategies (although, of course, many of the letters contained elements of more than one of these strategies), and that each of these strategies contained within them a recognition of a social relationship.

1 The 'reference to shared experience' strategy

Letters written between friends often make great use of shared experience. Shared experience gives them a common reference point. It is sometimes a way

of re-establishing the nature of a relationship. A lack of shared experience makes generating a meaningful dialogue between two people very difficult. With what is mainly a written language relationship, time and the existence of many texts gives a kind of shared experience which can then be drawn upon in future letters. The shared experience has the function of easing the way into a letter and re-establishing the relationship. The children, in writing their first replies, were faced with a real problem. If using shared experience makes starting a letter much easier, what kind of shared experience could they use to give them a basis for the content of their letter? The strategy of many of them was to use the principal bit of shared experience that did exist — the visit, and many children started their letters by referring back to the visit. It should be noted that these children were very young, all five-years-old at the time of writing, and in some respects their word level knowledge (spelling) and sentence level knowledge (as manifested through their ability to demarcate sentences) was at an early stage. As the concentration in this chapter is on their meanings, in the examples that follow spelling has been corrected, although line integrity has been retained as this is sometimes used instead of punctuation to mark units of meaning.

> Dear Nigel did you like being in my class and have
> you got any children and would you like to come to the strawberry fair

> Dear Les
> I have enjoyed your coming to our
> school I hope you would like to
> come back

> Dear Nigel I hope you will come back to
> the school and my brother is
> being good and he is called Ben
> and he is 8

Some children used the letter from Nigel and Les as their shared experience and in doing so began to approach one of the most typical conventions of letter writing, that of thanking the writer for their letter.

> Dear Nigel
> I like your letter I read all
> the way through it Did you
> have a good time

And one child made specific reference to the actual text of the letter from Nigel and Les which said “I have enjoyed being in your class”. She wrote back:

'I have enjoyed you being in my class too'

The word 'too' is the important one. It clearly signifies acceptance of the dialogic nature of letter writing. Both the above ways of using shared experience can be seen in many of the other first letters printed in this chapter. Clearly this 'shared experience' strategy worked as well for these children as it does for most adults. What it does represent is recognition that for two people to develop a relationship through letter writing, common ground has to be established.

2 The 'I'll tell you all about me' strategy

The kind of information contained in letters of this type is perhaps what one might expect in the first letter to a pen friend by a more mature writer.

Dear Les
My name is Sarah and I have two sisters
my mum is called Rene and my dad is
called John my other sisters
are called Alice and Emma my
favourite thing at home is playing
on the trampoline.

Dear Nigel
my sister is called Kathy
and she is fifteen and I
am six and I am called
Anne I don't like doing
pictures and that is why
I can't do a picture

This strategy reflects a recognition that a 'distanced other' needs information. In other words there is an understanding of what it is to be in that other's position. Psychologists have been debating the ability of young children to do this ever since Piaget suggested that their egocentric nature limited their ability to understand other people's perspectives. Donaldson (1975) and many others since have suggested that when the context is more concrete and clearer to the child this is less of a problem Certainly in this project it seems that there was quite a deep level recognition by the children of what was needed by a distanced and relatively unknown person. The children understood and acted upon the knowledge that although Les and Nigel had visited the class and talked to many children, they really did not know very much about them as individuals.

So these children set out to inform Les and Nigel about themselves and

their lives. The means chosen to represent this knowledge was essentially the 'list'. These children were, in part, 'mapping' their own world, but were doing so not for self gratification (which young children often do) but in the context of making their world comprehensible to other people. Apart from being a contextually appropriate strategy, lists offer an entry into the world of coherent texts and, maybe, ultimately into the world of cohesive texts. The lists in the letters above are collections of facts to do with each child's immediate family. As such they make perfect sense as maps of the most significant part of their world.

3 The 'I want to know more about you' strategy

The alternative strategy to telling about one's self is to ask for information about the other person. Collecting information about an individual is like having shared experience. It allows the writer to refer back to it or to draw on it in making hypotheses about a person. When a dialogue has not yet been established the sensible way to gain such information is to ask questions. Quite a few of the children used questions in their letters. Some used questions to clarify something about the visit.

> Dear Nigel I have enjoyed you
> being at our school. When my group
> were in the play area did you
> really take our picture. Did
> you like the house that we made my
> house is on high road, Uppermill. I have
> a little brother called Shane he is
> three years old. I am six years old
> my sisters are 15 and 16 my mum
> and dad are 42 and 39

> Dear Mr Hall I hope you are
> well and I would like your
> camera I love you to write back to
> me what sort of camera is it big
> camera

Some children asked questions to elicit personal information about either Les or Nigel.

> I love your letter
> I like your house
> Why have not you

got any children?
From …
I forgot my address

Dear Les where do you work with people and is it fun.
do you have some friends. my dad works at Manchester
my auntie lives in Manchester too she is called auntie… do you have a brother

The existence of questions in these letters is important in terms of the child's conception of the exercise as dialogue. Why ask a question unless you anticipate that the reader is going to reply? It is clear that these children understood very well that they were involved in a series of exchanges.

4 The 'I'll be your friend' strategy.

Most writing undertaken by young (or even older) children in school is in the nature of a one-off piece. It is written, read, marked and left behind as the child moves on to the next exercise. Despite the power of this expectation, in their first letters many of the children expressed pleasure in the new-found relationship, affirmed this friendship and set up an expectation that the friendship would continue. Some letters were in the form of a wish for a return visit.

Dear Les I
Have got a new reading
book would you like to
visit my class again
if my teacher says
that you can come
to my school

Dear Les
Think for your letter
I enjoyed you being in my class
and I have enjoyed Nigel being
in my class as well I wish
you both could come again
Class is very very very
noisy today When I was
just going to school I
trapped my fingers I am 5

Others took this even further by inviting Nigel and Les to their homes.

> Dear Nigel I have enjoyed
> you being in my class too.
> are you all right and you can
> come to my house one day

One child extended an invitation to her birthday party (even though it was ten months off) and offered further enticement in the form of a description of the food.

> Nigel would you like to come to my party when I am 7
> Nigel I might have red jelly and I might
> have a chocolate cake and Angel delight.

Some children presumed on this friendship even further and requested a visit to the homes of Nigel and Les.

> Dear Nigel
> I hope you will come to
> school again I like you and I
> can I come to your house Nigel

Twenty-two out of the thirty children expressed, in some form or other, the desire to extend the relationship or expressed pleasure in the relationship. For the most part this is done in a child-like way, that is from the child's perspective of making friends. The invitations are tokens of friendship: 'you are my friend and you can come to tea'. All these responses clearly suggest an assumption about the nature of the relationships perceived by the children; it was clearly one that was going to continue.

The replies made by the children to the original letter were, although varied, anything but random. Every child seemed to be able draw upon previous experience, other people's experience, or formulate a hypothesis about what was appropriate for a letter. The children also appeared able to utilise a variety of strategies within one letter to give more power to the dialogic strength of the text. We are convinced that children wrote with care, with thought, and with considerable sense. Certainly Les and Nigel felt they had received letters which gave them considerable scope for reply. In essence the children had made their job easier by instituting agendas for future dialogue. It was also clear that the children understood that they had entered into some kind of sustained dialogue and that they wanted to be in that state. One child made this very clear.

> Dear Les I
> can make
> things
> out of lego

I would
like you
to write
back

The children's approach to conventions

Conventions are highly significant social devices. Although they are arbitrary (each culture or group develops its own) at the same time they probably reflect deeper psychological and social needs. Conventions operate to regulate transactions between people; they operate as guidelines for behaviour. They have, nevertheless, evolved from custom and practice rather than been established as 'rule of law'. While it is inevitable that as social behaviour changes so what counts as convention will also change, convention does have some significant benefits for any cultural group.

With letter writing it is the existence of certain conventions that allow us most easily and most often to recognise a piece of text as belonging to the category that is called 'letter writing'. Why do people do the things they do in letter writing? Why have we conventionally put the address in the top right hand corner? Why do we put our address on letters when we know that a reader already knows our address? Why do we put the date when it is often of no consequence? Why do we put 'Dear …' when we are writing to someone we hate or despise? What causes us to adopt any of 'yours', 'yours faithfully', 'yours sincerely', 'yours affectionately', 'your most humble and obedient servant', 'love', 'many thanks', etc? Why do people often indent the first line of a letter?

Children have to learn that there is an issue at all. After all, why not simply start with what one wants to say and when one has written it, stop. Identifying the issue demands some kind of social, and consequently contextual, sense; a realisation that your communication is to a person with whom one has a relationship that involves more than just passing messages.

We had thirty 'first letters' from the children. Ten children simply put the name of the school, thirteen put the full address and nine put the date. All the children except one started their letter with either 'Dear Les' or 'Dear Nigel' (apart from the one child who wrote "Dear Mr. Hall). Twenty-four of the children signed off with 'love', three simply put 'from', and three put nothing. Only two children failed to put their name on their letters; these two also omitted any address and date. It should be noted that Nigel and Les had chosen to put 'love' at the end of their initial letter and the children's use of this term may be a reflection of this.

Only two children completely laid their letter out in a way which would normally be accepted as fulfilling the layout conventions. However, seventeen of the children made a very good attempt and simply did not separate out the salutation or closure from the body of the text. While not the subject of this chapter, it is worth noting that the children did move towards conventionality but not evenly. After the initial success in using the address and date there was a considerable drop-off in the usage. By their fifth letter only five children gave partial addresses and none gave a full address. Six gave a date. We suspect that the children were much more involved with the business of actually saying something. As they appreciated that Les and Nigel were genuinely responding to them, were not trying to dominate them and were genuinely interested in what they had to say, form became much less important than content, particularly as for very young children the burden of orchestrating all aspects of writing is a substantial burden. By their fifth letter almost every child concluded with "love' and did so from then on. By this time while only one child had a complete conventional layout, about half were very close and half fairly incomplete. By their tenth letter, twelve children gave a complete address and almost everyone gave the date. By now the children had a new teacher and we believe there had been some discussion about the use of addresses and dates. What is significant is that a move towards using the date and full address caused no problems at all for the children at this stage of the exchange. If those conventions had been introduced in a more formal way earlier when the letters were very short, then we suspect that it would have interfered with the children's willingness to develop the content. There is little joy to a child in having to write a date and address when doing so takes as much time and space as writing the two or three lines of the content of the letter.

The later letters

The children's first letters were posted off to Les and Nigel, who replied fairly promptly. While it is the first letters that are the objects of analysis in this chapter, we would like to say something about the development of the exchanges. One principle adopted early on by Les and Nigel was that they would attempt to write as friendly adults to young people rather than in a childish way which would be both patronising and uninteresting; the effort was going to be directed towards writing to the children as people and not to be writing down to them. Alongside this was a commitment to write at reasonable length. Thus each child received back an individual one page letter from either Nigel or Les. To do full

justice to the dialogic nature of the writing would need examination of both child and adults letters as well as considerable space which is not available here (but see Robinson, Crawford & Hall 1994). Perhaps the most dramatic change occurred with the children's second letters; they grew longer and more intense.

The increases in length were consistent across all the letters except in one case where the length decreased. Such increases were not confined to the second letters. All the letters grew in length, eventually averaging out at about 70–80 words, although there was considerable variation across letters, just as there would be in any adult correspondence. In one instance a girl wrote a series of letters, each about 200–250 words long (Robinson, Crawford & Hall 1994). The replies also became more intense, a word we are using to characterise a collection of attributes: interest, dialogic features, chattiness, friendliness, greater topic variation etc.

How do we account for these changes? Firstly, the replies they received from Les and Nigel were much longer than the children's initial letters. In one sense the length of the adults' letters legitimised a longer length for the children. It is fairly well established that the length of adult responses in interactive writing does have an effect on the amount children write (Peyton & Seyoum 1987) However, the very existence of the replies is itself significant for the children. An individual reply is confirmation of the relationship and your correspondent's commitment to you. Thus, the arrival of the promised letters turned what might have been experienced as an exercise into real communication with someone who really cared about what you wrote. Although located within school, the school did no more than provide space, time and encouragement. This was not an exercise, nor yet another decontextualised experience which treated literacy as an autonomous practice (Street & Street 1995) Now they could experience truly individual and extended letters. It could well have been the first time any of these children had received a personal letter (other than cards at birthdays and Christmas). All this created a greater understanding of the reality of the 'other' involved in the exchange. The children had met Les and Nigel only briefly, and for a long time the only contact they were going to have was through the letters. The second letter from Les and Nigel offered each child additional knowledge of them, but also served to indicate what kinds of things had been responded to by them. In other words a sense of audience was being developed, an audience which was allowing the children's voices to be heard as unique individuals.

Conclusion

At the heart of a genuinely communicative event is some awareness on the part of each participant of the needs and perspective of the other person, in other words, an understanding of audience. Some researchers have claimed that young children have little facility to understand audience in writing because doing so demands a higher level of cognitive ability to understand the world from the perspective of other people. However, they have often chosen to explore audience awareness in writing using older children and highly inauthentic 'audience-adaptation' contexts (Kroll 1984; Nigrosh 1985). In almost all such studies it is the construction of a relatively decontextualised, artificial, pair of letters which forms the text for evaluation (each purportedly to a different type of audience). It seems our five-year-olds knew more about what was needed than did the researchers: a real audience, one which responded, and one which as time passed it was possible to know better. One of the children summed it up in his second letter, "Some day I will know all about you."

A more probable reason why many literacy researchers have not looked closely at the audience awareness of young children was because they simply did not believe it would be there. The exchanges occurring in our project clearly cannot answer questions relating to the audience-adaptation of very young children. We did not set the children the task of writing to different audiences. However, we do believe that the responses of the children do make a contribution to the debate about young children's perception of audience. When the first letters were written, Les and Nigel were almost totally unknown to the children but they still used strategies which acknowledge the essentially social nature of the activity; the children wrote as if they were going to build a relationship through written dialogue.

Perhaps the reason that our children seemed so easily to understood letter writing as a social practice was that they simply used those interpersonal skills that they had developed though being socially, psychologically and linguistically proficient in their everyday lives. Shuy (1988, p. 79) claimed that children at age five are tuned in to many aspects of social relationships: "Four year olds were even shown to have a social sensitivity which enabled them to vary their strategies for giving directives, depending on how they perceived the status of the persons to whom they addressed these directives." For our children, writing this letter for a relatively unknown audience was not an exercise, but the adaptation of print to their life strategies. For them, writing was not different to living; it was a means of extending living. They already possessed a set of 'social linguistic forms' which could be employed in writing.

If for our children the exchange had been set up as an exercise where accuracy and correctness of form were paramount, then we suspect that the outcomes would have been rather different. The audience would not have been Les and Nigel but the teacher, and children are so proficient in understanding the true agendas of classroom life. The authenticity of the exchange made it quite distinct from most other classroom experiences. We are not trying to claim that our children knew all about, or could manifest all their understanding of, 'audience'. Could anyone? The children were inexperienced writers and had (and have) many aspects of the writing craft to perfect. One of the most powerful consequences for the children's ability to respond to 'audience' was, of course that their 'audience' answered back. It was the 'answering back' which marked the activity as being distinct. It showed so powerfully that written language can be an effective instrument for getting things done, in this instance eliciting a reply. We are sure that part of the motivation for continuing with the exchange was that it allowed exploration in the use of a new tool in a new but non-threatening context.

The first replies from the children helped us understand some important points. It was clear that even inexperienced letter writers nevertheless made appropriate social moves and generated effective social strategies given a genuine letter writing context. All the children responded with a form and content that was appropriate to letter writing (even though many did not contain all the conventional forms associated with letter writing). Every child demonstrated to us through their letters that they understood that a genuine audience was going to read what they wrote. Every child employed strategies which recognised the dialogic nature of the communication, even though individuals used different strategies; they all anticipated a response to their letter and every child made it clear that they wanted to engage in the letter writing dialogue. They behaved from the start as letter writers who understood something about the obligations and responsibilities of being involved in a social exchange. That is not to say the writing of the letters was always easy or totally successful but it does mean that they took on the role with no doubts about their ability to make it work.

Perhaps our final word should be about the overall significance of the letter writing experience for the children. A high proportion of them kept the letters received during the course of the exchange. The degree to which the letters were 'preserved' reflected, to some extent, parental interest or support, and the degree of control the children had over their own belongings. When, two years after the project began, we discussed with the children what they did with their letters and where they were kept, we received a variety of responses: "In a book like a photograph album", "In my desk", "On my notice-board", "In a big folder". One

child explained how she had to keep them away from her dog who would take any scrap paper left lying about, and another child appeared to have an over-tidy mum who was a constant threat to the preservation of the letters. Further evidence of the pleasure derived from the letters was shown in the degree to which they were shared with other people. The majority of the children shared them with friends in school, and with their parents on occasions. Perhaps even more interesting was the effect upon other children. Les and Nigel started to get letters from other children, particularly brothers and sisters.

> My sister writes to Nigel. She writes to him a lot and he writes back. She has got a lot of things off him like letters, postcards, and Christmas cards. She keeps them in a brown envelope. When she has gone I have a look at all her things. Its fun to have a look.
>
> My brother writes to you. He pins his letters from you on his notice-board. I am nine years old. I also have a brother called … who is four.
>
> I have a friend called … She writes to you. Its easy for her because she has got a brother who writes to you. I don't know what to write.

Clearly other children had recognised that something special was going on in the correspondence between Nigel and Les and their young correspondents.

Our examination of the children's letter writing indicates to us that these young children had little difficulty in relating to another person through letter writing. It was clear that many of their strategies implicitly acknowledged the dialogic nature of the letter-writing and that the use of those strategies was sensitive to the textual and contextual demands of letter-writing, and to the relationship being develop with their new friends. Clearly children do not have to acquire a complete set of basic skills before they can operate as literate people.

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CHAPTER 9

Death Row Penfriends

Some Effects of Letter Writing on Identity and Relationships

Janet Maybin

Introduction

While personal letter writing is no longer a primary mode of communication for most people in contemporary Britain and North America, within some contexts it may still emerge as a surprisingly powerful channel for self expression and for pursuing relationships. Particularly when people are socially isolated, they may turn to letter writing as one of the only channels available for contact with others. For many of the 3,469 men and 48 women on death row in the United States,[1] letters provide a last link with the outside world. Prisoners wait for up to twenty-three years to be executed, and during that time are often locked individually in 9' by 6' cells for 18–24 hours a day. With limited access to the telephone and few, if any, visits from the outside, writing and receiving letters takes on a central role in prisoners' lives. In the very lonely and violent conditions on death row, many prisoners use letter writing not just to try to keep in touch with family and friends but also to make new social contacts with people whom they have never met and who may indeed be their only outside link. This chapter is based on a study of the correspondence between prisoners and penfriends whom they have acquired after coming to death row, focusing in particular on the role and functions of the correspondence in the letter writers' lives, how the relationship by mail develops, and how people feel the correspondence has changed them.

Data collected about the experience of this unusual group of letter writers has its own intrinsic interest in offering a rare glimpse of life on death row from the perspective of prisoners themselves, and of how they construct relationships through correspondence with strangers from the outside world. The data is also

of interest at a more theoretical level, both in relation to literacy research about the role of writing, and to more general issues about dialogue, thought, and identity. In order to understand the function and meaning of the letters passed between the prisoners and their penfriends, I would argue that the correspondence needs to be viewed as a literacy practice which serves particular personal and social functions within the lives of the participants. Street (1993, p. 141) suggests that, "what it is to be a person, to be moral and to be human in specific cultural contexts is frequently signified by the kinds of literacy practices in which a person is engaged". This idea has special saliency within the context of death row, where I shall suggest that letter writing is a major channel for the expression of certain moral and human attributes which are essential to the prisoner's retention or recovery of their sense of being a person. From a social constructionist view, identity is constructed and reconstructed through a person's experiences, and particularly through their interactions and dialogues with others, so that we are constantly negotiating and reassessing who we are in the course of our conversations (Harre 1983, Shotter 1993). For some prisoners, correspondence with penfriends provides their only current experience of extended and reflective dialogue, and I shall suggest that it also offers an unusually intense and revelatory dialogue for many of the penfriends in Britain and gives both groups considerable scope for negotiation and the reassessment of identity. There is also the possibility that this correspondence becomes internalised at a more profound level. Volosinov (1986) argues that meaning is generated not from inside one person's head, but through the give and take of dialogue. We rerun the dialogues we have with others as part of our own thought processes, so thought itself is a kind of dialogue and other people's ideas and reflections feed into the ongoing renegotiations of our sense of personal identity. This raises the question of how the dialogues between people from such different lives and backgrounds might be internalised and become part of each other's inner lives. In discussing the functions of the death row correspondence for the people involved, and the relationships they develop by mail, I shall suggest that this study highlights the rich generic potential of letter writing to fulfil a variety of personal and social needs, and illuminates some aspects of the complex interrelationships between writing and experience, and between dialogue and the construction of identity.

Participants in the study

LifeLines, the main British organisation that puts potential British penfriends in touch with prisoners on death row has over 1,500 members, and Arriens (1997)

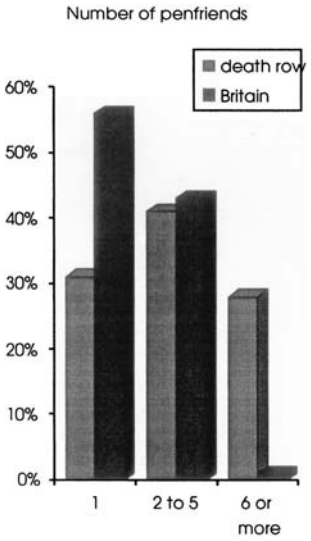
provides a rich collection of letters and writings from prisoners contacted under their auspices. But there has been no systematic research on this letter writing, nor on its function and meaning for the men and women involved. The group of one hundred and sixty two letter writers on whom this study is based were contacted through an advertisement in the LifeLines newsletter. Fifty seven men on death row in fourteen different US states and one man on death row in Jamaica, and a hundred and four British letter writers (ninety women and fourteen men), volunteered to complete questionnaires about their experience of the penfriend correspondence (see appendices A and B). I subsequently carried out hour long telephone interviews with six British respondents of varying ages and exchanged letters with five prisoners in different states who had offered additional help, in order to explore in more depth how the correspondence had affected their lives. The British respondents to the questionnaire focused on their experience with penfriends on death row contacted through LifeLines, but the prisoners' responses reflect their experience over the years with penfriends contacted via a range of sources. While the questionnaire respondents are clearly a self-selected group, there is sufficient variety in their age, gender, race, and personal situation to suggest that they represent a wide range of experience. In terms of race and gender, the prisoners and British penfriends in the study reflect patterns in the overall death row population and overall membership of Life-Lines, respectively. I am a member of LifeLines myself, and have corresponded with prisoners on death row for seven years. My own penfriends did not take part in the research, but commented on an earlier draft of this chapter, as did a number of other prisoners and British penfriends who took part in the study.

The role and function of the letter writing

Responses from both the prisoners and their British penfriends suggest that the penfriend correspondence plays a central role in their lives. Many respondents stressed the depth of friendships that had developed, the openness and intensity of the written dialogue, and the ways in which the correspondence had changed them. In this section I shall examine the functions of this letter writing in more detail, first for the prisoners and then for the British letter writers. Tables 1–3 show the number, length and frequency of the penfriends' correspondences. Prisoners tend to have a larger number of penfriends than the British letter writers, they write more often, and they have a larger number of long-term correspondences. However, nearly half of the British letter writers have more than one penfriend, and 50% have been corresponding for at least four years. Table 4 shows that the

correspondence I am documenting involves male prisoners (99% of prisoners on death row are male), over half of whom are in their thirties (Table 5), writing to British women of varying ages, with a small number of British men also involved. All except one of the British correspondents are white, while 35% of the prisoners described themselves as African American or a related term, 6% as Mexican or Hispanic, 3% American Indian, and 4% as mixed race. Although ethnic minority groups make up only 20% of the general US population they constitute around 50% of the death row population. Research provides strong evidence of racism in the application of the death penalty (Bright 1995).

Table 1.



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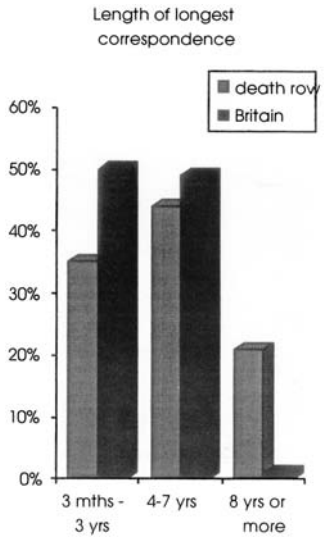

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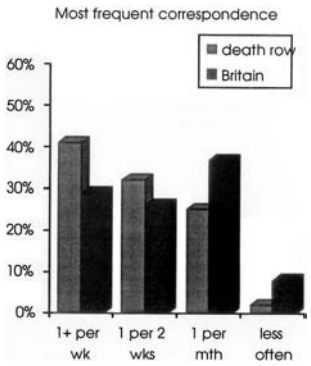

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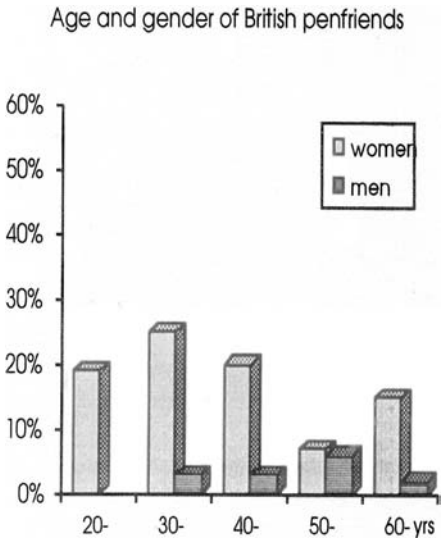

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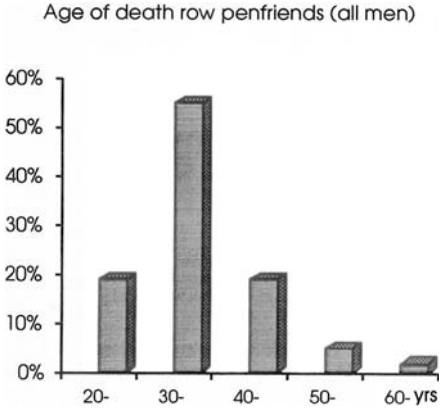
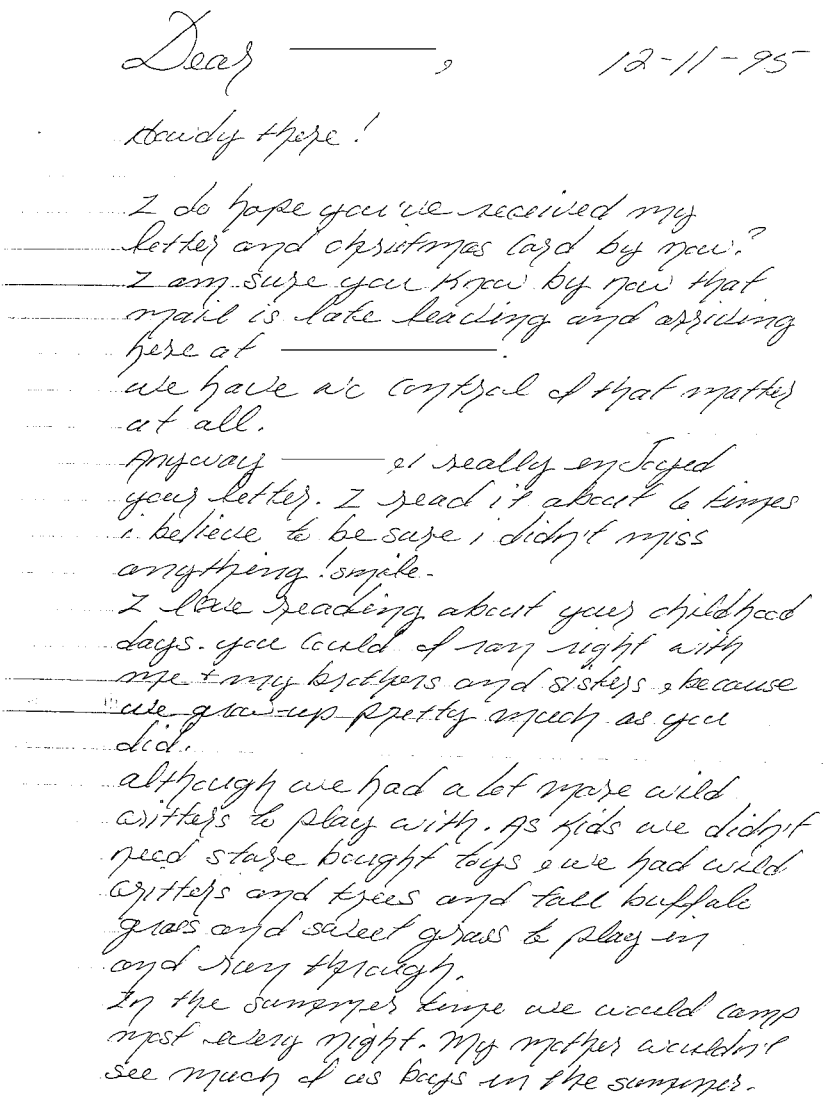


The significance of the correspondence for the prisoners

The prisoners' responses to the questionnaire suggest a considerable variation in terms of educational background and literacy competence, ranging from the



Dear ———, 12-11-95

howdy there!

I do hope you've received my letter and christmas card by now? I am sure you know by now that mail is late leaving and arriving here at ———. we have no control of that matter at all.

Anyway ———, I really enjoyed your letter. I read it about 6 times I believe to be sure I didn't miss anything! smile.

I love reading about your childhood days. you could of say right with me + my brothers and sisters, because we grew up pretty much as you did.

although we had a lot more wild critters to play with. As kids we didn't need store bought toys, we had wild critters and trees and tall buffalo grass and sweet grass to play in and run through.

In the summer time we would camp most every night. My mother wouldn't see much of us boys in the summer.

Example 1. Part of a handwritten letter from prisoner on death row.

July 27, 1997

Yep, me again :

Just a short note as I'm a busy cat lately - another 4-6 hours working on my trypewriter last night - yes, still giving this porr thing a lot of trials : I had to write (60) copies of letters with the fund raising thing I was talkirq about, and I think the poor thing fot a little tired. I try and handle things in spells, but when I'm up and about doing things, I hate sitting too idle, and off I go to writing.

Anyway, big hugs and smiles of course, with comntinued hopes that things are well with you.

And don't feel that I don't consider your professional life, family life, and takirq care of that lovely garden of ours, etc. : In other words, don't feel that I expect you answer every little thinq I write.

Tonight, it's just a short note because I was going over your letter and saw that I didn't answerr all of it - you ask so little, I hate to miss answering what things you do ask...and by the way, you should feel free to ask me anything - I never take offense, and believe me, I've been asked everything. Good times, bad times - none of it bothers me, along with my sentence which I've lived with for many yeras now, and never mind talking about it when people have questions...so always speak freely.

Example 2. Part of typed letter from prisoner on death row.

barely literate to accomplished and fluent writers. Some had used their time in prison to considerably improve their literacy skills and it was clear that most of the prisoners did far more writing in prison than they had ever done before. Over half said they did some kind of creative writing, two have written books, and others mentioned articles for newspapers and magazines, religious or spiritual compositions, autobiography and journals. A third of the prisoners worked on legal briefs and motions in connection with their own and other prisoners' cases. In terms of letter writing there was considerable variation, from the six prisoners who wrote to just one penfriend and no one else, to the five men who each had around thirty active penfriends, and the considerable number of men who wrote to penfriends and large numbers of family and friends as well. Men who wrote frequently to a wide range of people included one who wrote to five penfriends and approximately twenty-eight other people, and another who corresponded with fifteen family members and nine friends as well as his four penfriends.

74% of the prisoners had been on death row for at least five years, and 36% for between ten and twenty one years (two respondents' sentences had been commuted to life without parole). Visits are difficult for many prisoners' families because of distance and expense, and while a quarter of the prisoners received visits at least once a month over a third were rarely or never visited. Actually receiving a letter is a highly charged event in prison. One man who had been on death row for thirteen years wrote, "Mail to every prisoner is the high

point of their day. It's word from the outside, proof that someone cares and remembers you. It's also something to get you out of here, even if it's only in your mind". And another man said, "Every weekday I catch myself just tuned to the sound of the squeeky wheels on the mail cart. My anticipation builds as it comes down the tier closer and closer". One man reported "I write daily to keep up with everybody, two or three letters a day"; another said "I write every day and sometimes sixteen hours a day". A man who had been on death row for ten years wrote, "I write from 280–300 letters a month and have written as of today 18,328 letters since the day of my incarceration". For some, letter writing provides a purpose and reference point in the otherwise featureless days in prison: "I start writing 5–15 minutes after I wake up… otherwise, once you've been caged up like I have, in an 8 by 12 cell for years, you get to where you can watch TV^2 or do whatever and a few hours later you're tired and ready to go back to bed". Some argued that writing and receiving letters is essential to emotional survival on death row. As one man put it, "Prisoners who do not receive letters and packages are, from my personal observation, grumpier and lack life and hope".

The reasons prisoners gave for seeking penfriends focused firstly around their social isolation. One man said, "I started writing when I realised I had lost every one of my so called friends", and another explained, "After twenty one years my family is dead, in bad health or never showed any interest in me, I needed to adopt a family". Penfriends were also seen by many prisoners as a potential source of money (prisoners have no access to money for stamps, toiletries, food treats and so on, other than that sent in by family and friends), and romance or sex. A thirty-two year old man who had been on death row for twelve years wrote, "Our libidos are still fully active as prisoners so its expression and unfolding is sometimes a big part of writing. Until my mid twenties my main expectations were sex and money; I've had about fifty correspondents over time, it was mostly about sex and my expectations were all met." Another man who was forty-two and had been in prison thirteen years wrote: "Depriving me of sex falls right in place with all the other things I must do without. To say my missing things has actually become a physical pain would be saying the least. After so many years, it does me good to write or read about things I miss/need/think about. I mean, if I can't have it, at least let me hear about it. But like I said, nothing rank".

While prisoners' responses emphasised the basic need for human contact, with some men seeking funds, romance and sex, their responses also suggested that the letter writing can serve a wider range of complex functions. First, prisoners with a number of penfriends reported developing different kinds of

relationships which correspond in some ways to the variations of depth, closeness and formality in face-to-face relationships with friends and associates in the outside world. Thus prisoners take on different roles in their different correspondences. One prisoner wrote, "I've found myself being an adviser, counsellor, marriage consultant, religious instructor, brother, friend, lover, editor, writer, poet". Letters seem to be able to stand in for the wider range of social contacts which people in the free world experience naturally in the course of daily activity. One prisoner, who is unusual in owning a typewriter, wrote,

> I have been locked up here for over 9 years. During all of this time the written word has been my only form of communication with the outside world. I have been writing letters since the beginning of my incarceration and during all these years many people have come in and out of my life. My typewriter is my telephone, and I am always getting on the phone (typewriter) and ringing up a long lost friend, or ringing up someone or some place new, or just writing or answering a letter from a friend I've been sitting on for 2–4 weeks already, or writing a business letter, or writing to pass along some kind of info to someone I know who is part of the abolitionist movement and could use it. Unlike people on the outside, I can't speak to friends and acquaintances in passing, while standing in the line at the grocery store, or at work or at the pub or whatever, I have to sit down and write a letter.

Another man who has since been executed wrote,

> The only writing I did in the free world was school work but when I got locked up at age 17 I learned immediately it (letter writing) was my connection to the world and how I was going to get whatever I wanted out of it. … Most of our time, our life is the correspondence, we love, we cry, get upset, hurt, angry, share sexual experiences and fantasies, we grow, we learn and we live. I want to live and have the human experience and all the emotions that come with it.

In addition to living and learning through the dynamics of the correspondence dialogue itself, prisoners sometimes gained specific knowledge about subjects that interested them, or learnt new skills. For instance one British correspondent had encouraged her much younger, almost illiterate, penfriend to practise his writing and he was now sending her two letters a week. More important for most prisoners than the acquiring of knowledge or skills, however, was the opportunity to share vicariously in their penfriends' lives. They drew particular pleasure from accounts of ordinary everyday activities, citing these as one of the topics they most liked to hear about. Prisoners said the correspondence gave them an alternative life, which kept them sane, and that they particularly wanted to read,

> things that show me how I play a part in their everyday lives and that I'm not just an abstract thought on paper. For instance when they write about how I came up in a conversation with their friend, it shows that I am with them and interacting in their world with them. That is what makes me feel that I have worth, that I exist.

Descriptions of the countryside and nature were especially appreciated by prisoners who had not had contact with these for up to twenty years; their penfriends became their eyes and ears in the outside world. One British woman who exchanged audiotapes as well as letters with her penfriends (one of whom was illiterate) talked of the added dimension these provided: "The men can 'hear' the wind in the trees, the rooks cawing, a helicopter going by, and children playing, and I can hear shouting voices, doors clanging, the men sloshing around cleaning their cell. 'Hold onto your hat, S., it's cleaning day' says A."

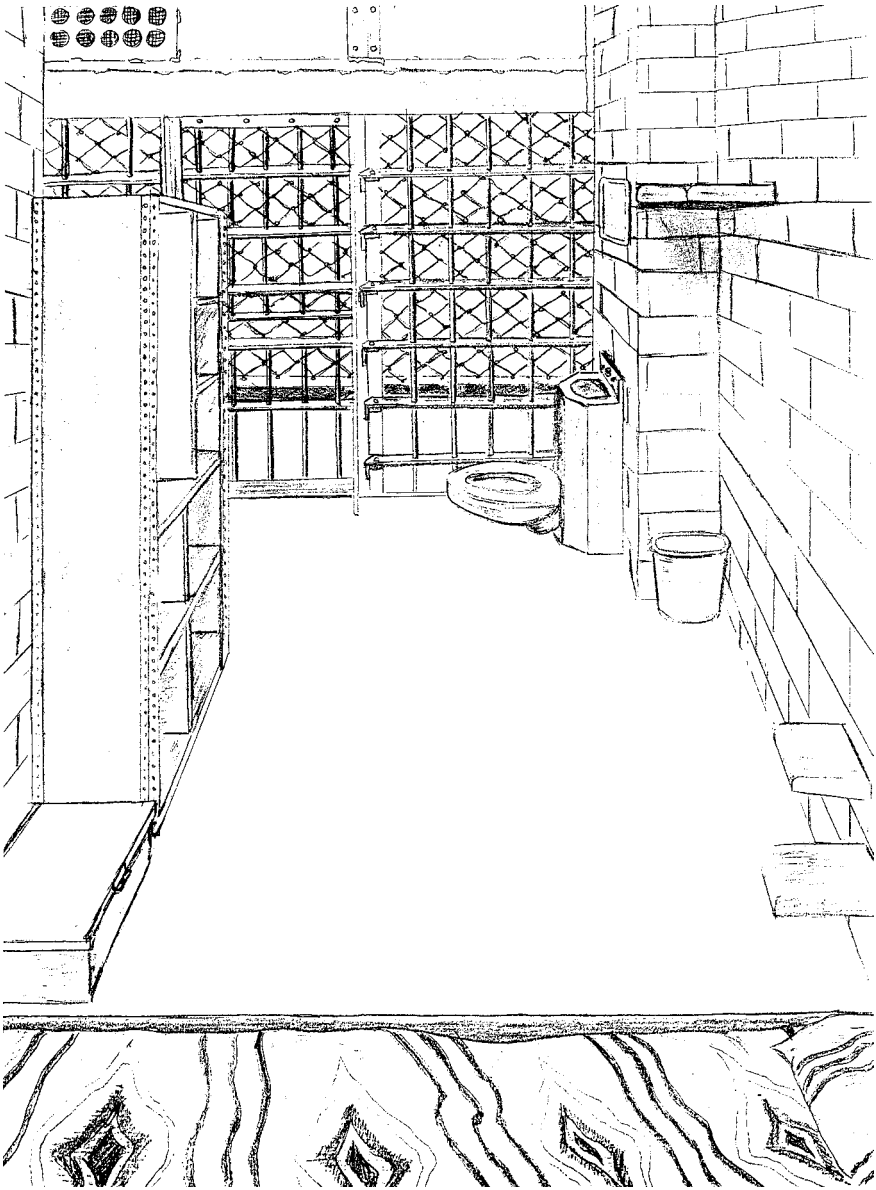
As well as giving vicarious access to everyday experiences in the outside world, prisoners reported that penfriends provided much needed emotional support and said that having someone to rely on was a key part of the relationship:

> Two of my penfriends have supported and stood by me when the only person in my family (my grandmother) passed away. I had just about given up on everything and they kept writing and encouraging me to hold my head up and keep moving forward with my life.

> Being on death row comes packed with problems, execution of friends, lawyer problems, family problems… but through it all my penfriends are right there with me whether I needed encouragement or just a shoulder to cry on.

The penfriends of twenty-five British letter writers had received execution dates and twelve had been executed. Because of the lengthy and complex procedures involved in administering the death penalty, most prisoners have been on death row for at least eight to ten years and receive two or three execution dates over a period of about eighteen months, before their death penalty is finally carried out. Executions are often repealed at the eleventh hour when prisoners have already been moved next to the execution chamber, and a number of prisoners wrote in their questionnaires about how important their penfriends' support had been to them during this extremely stressful period.

Prisoners repeatedly emphasised the importance of trust and honesty in their relationships with penfriends. Where trust was established, the letters seemed to provide a rare opportunity for prisoners to express feelings of emotional attachment, affection and care which otherwise had no outlet in their daily life on death row. Being able to express this side of themselves was connected for prisoners with the sense of an inner self: "I wanted someone I could be open and



Example 3. Illustration of cell drawn by a prisoner on death row.

honest with, and who would believe in me" and "I needed someone to talk to, to share the inner and real me. I needed a way to mentally escape the monstrosity that surrounded me". As Goffman (1961) points out, the 'processes of mortification' integral to prison life — the loss of civil rights, the denial of normal adult self-determination and autonomy, the frequent experience of social and physical humiliation, all mean that the prisoner's daily experience 'dramatically fails to corroborate his prior conception of self' (p. 40). This is accentuated in the particularly brutalised and degrading environment of death row, and many prisoners talked of having lost their self-esteem, their ability to trust and the sense of who they were. As one man put it, "Regardless of whether a person belongs in prison, if you take a person and put that person in a cell and isolate them, that person will begin to doubt whether they are capable of loving or being loved. I was at that point of doubt". Against this background, men wrote that the correspondence had enabled them to "gain a sense of somebodiness", "anchor my being" and "keep … sane and whole". They reported that it enabled them to express, and receive validation of, personal feelings that had long been buried: "I've gained a more profound understanding of self and others, a greater capability to love and be loved, and I have gained, or regained, my sense of trust in myself and others". In this way the correspondence appears to offer prisoners a powerful opportunity for the reclaiming, or reformation, of lost identity. I shall suggest in more detail what it is about letter writing that enables this to happen later below but first I shall review the role and function of the correspondence in the British penfriends' lives.

The significance of the correspondence for the British penfriends

The majority of the British penfriends who responded to the questionnaire were white collar workers or professionals: clerks, secretaries, administrators, civil servants, nurses, teachers, journalists. While a third lived in rural areas, a slightly higher proportion than in the general British population, their domestic situations broadly reflected general living patterns in Britain (Central Statistical Office 1996): 25% lived alone, 33% with a partner, 20% with partners and children, 14% with their children, and the remaining 8% with other relatives or friends. They all wrote to male penfriends on death row, and one woman also had a female penfriend. Most of the British penfriends used writing regularly in their everyday lives. Many had jobs which involved writing, and three were professional writers. Around a fifth reported doing some kind of creative writing, and smaller numbers kept diaries, followed educational courses, and used writing in voluntary work. Other writing mentioned included articles, autobiography, family

history and calligraphy. A number wrote letters to the press and as part of political or social campaigns. In terms of personal letter writing, most people wrote to a few family members and friends every couple of months, or at least twice a year, and a small number of prolific letter writers wrote one or two personal letters a week. Some saw their current letter writing as part of a long history of personal correspondence; one woman in her twenties said she had written ten letters a month to family and friends since she was thirteen years old. Another woman in her seventies remembered as a child sharing her grandmother's bedroom and hearing through the screen around her bed the sound of her grandmother's typewriter, as she sat up late into the night writing letters to family and friends. In contrast to the more prolific writers, thirteen British respondents listed letters as their only writing activity and two of these, one of whom was dyslexic, did not write to anyone other than their correspondents on death row.

Two of the British correspondents had been introduced to LifeLines through a friend and a few had got in touch with prisoners via individual advertisements, but 90% had contacted the organisation either after viewing one of two television documentaries[3] or reading an article in a newspaper or magazine which included the LifeLines address. These television programmes and media articles presented a compassionate view of the harsh conditions and isolation of prisoners on death row, and most of the letter writers I surveyed stated their main reason for writing as a desire to offer comfort and support, together with interest in a life experience very different from their own. In addition, comments by some respondents suggest that their decision to correspond with a prisoner is related to aspects of their political or religious identity. Over half mentioned their opposition to the death penalty, some referred to other campaigning work, and 8% of the letter writers had already been involved in corresponding with people in other prisons, for example through Amnesty International. A small number referred to their Christian beliefs.

It has been argued that letter writing provides a transitional space between public and private lives. For example, Gring-Pemble (1998) describes the role of private correspondence in the consciousness raising of feminists in nineteenth century North America as a "pre-genesis' stage of the women's rights" movement. Women, denied access to public life, used the exchange of letters to try out and refine particular ideas and beliefs, develop a shared ideology, and create network links before becoming more active agents of social change and claiming a space in the public arena. There is evidence that both male and female British letterwriters have entered into a network of contacts with other LifeLines members, penfriends' families, members of support services for prisoners in the

United States, and campaigners against the death penalty in the US and Britain. While some letter writers had come to the correspondence with strong prior concerns about social justice, others developed political awareness and interest in the course of the correspondence. British letter writers reported their raised awareness of conditions on death row, and of the abuse, racism, and injustice experienced by many prisoners at various points in their lives. They wrote of their distress and feelings of powerlessness when execution dates for their penfriends were issued, and those British letter writers whose penfriends had been finally executed talked of shock and grief and feelings of helplessness and panic. In one case the prisoner had maintained that he was innocent.[4] One British man wrote, "It is a travesty, a shallow ritualistic response to the complexities and potentialities of an individual human being. I have felt degraded; their death has diminished me." As a result of the correspondence and their own subsequent reading in the area, many letter writers reported that they had learned a considerable amount about the death penalty and about the US legal system. Often this had led to a loss of faith in society, politicians, and institutions, and some had become more involved in campaigning against capital punishment. It is important to stress, however, that for a significant minority of the British respondents the correspondence has remained a private and personal activity.

As I mentioned earlier in discussing the function of the letter writing for the prisoners, part of the relationship between penfriends often included the expansion of mental and intellectual horizons. Both sets of penfriends talked of the positive gains of learning about different life styles and about their penfriend's interests. One prisoner was teaching his penfriend about jazz, and another British correspondent wrote, "My penfriend is an articulate and intelligent man; through him my knowledge and ideas have been broadened immensely". It was also clear from the responses that on a personal level this correspondence offered the British men and women a quality of mutual empathy and emotional rapport which they had not expected. While they had started out with mainly altruistic aims, the relationships soon took on a momentum of their own. British penfriends commented, "The relationships developed are far more significant and two-way than I ever imagined" and "I hoped it would make a change to a prisoner's life, and had no idea how much difference it would make to mine". Some British letter writers had themselves experienced the death of someone close to them or had been the victim of abuse or violent crime, and these writers found their penfriends an unexpected source of sympathy and understanding. One woman in her twenties listed the high point of her correspondence as "being able to help each other through childhood trauma- only someone else who's been sexually abused really understands". On the negative side, however, two British

penfriends reported that their correspondent had become manipulative, abusive and intimidating. One woman in her twenties wrote "I don't like him; he scares me; I am getting to the stage now where I dread opening his letters". Others reported continuing to write without a response, sometimes because a prisoner had become depressed or been moved to another prison. One woman in her twenties had written to a prisoner for two years and established a warm, close friendship, when his letters suddenly stopped. She discovered later that her penfriend was retarded and illiterate, and that the letters she received must have been written by someone else. She continued sending cards and photos and writing to him every fortnight for over a year, in the hope that her letters would be read to him.

The same kinds of comments about care, closeness and commitment in their correspondence are made by both the British men and women, and there are clearly men (who tended to be among the older British respondents) for whom the mutually supportive and close friendships had become very important. However, the great majority of the British letter writers are women and it could be argued that the correspondence offers them a traditional female role of care and support. It also offers a special quality of male attention; prisoners wrote of wanting to get to know their penfriend as a 'real person' and to discuss "topics that define her intellect, subjects that bring forth her passion for life, things that allow her sense of humour to shine through". The one British woman who corresponded with a woman on death row reported much less intensity and involvement in the relationship, which was more like that between 'ordinary friends' who kept in touch and exchanged news and gossip. Responses from the British women in particular suggest that these dialogues offer an experience of being needed, valued and special to the other person, and that the correspondence may give them the space and opportunity to do imaginative and creative self-presentational work in a way which is not possible in their normal talk with men.

I have suggested that the prisoners' experience of the correspondence reveals the flexibility of letter writing as a channel, which can fulfil communicative, emotional, and functional purposes normally covered by spoken language and direct interaction. It provides them with a range of social contacts, vicarious experience of the outside world, and sometimes money or romance. Letters are also an important source of emotional support and provided a vehicle for the expression of aspects of the self which are otherwise denied within the death row environment. On the British penfriends' side, the correspondence was often initially prompted by feelings of compassion for the prisoners' situation and a desire to offer support, sometimes as part of other interests or activism in relation to human rights. Very quickly, however, many British penfriends were

drawn into a more mutual relationship and received unexpected emotional support, mental stimulation, and an experience of being personally needed and valued by another person. Like the prisoners, the British women in particular found that the letter writing gave them opportunities for the presentation and development of aspects of the self which were not otherwise available to them in their daily lives. I shall now turn to look in more detail at the development of relationships and identity, in the next section below.

Correspondence relationships and the (re)formation of identity

Almost all the prisoner respondents and around two thirds of the British correspondents reported the development of a close relationship. For others the correspondence provided an enjoyable but not too intimate friendship, and a few had found it difficult to get close to their correspondent or felt that they had both run out of things to say, and in some cases the correspondence had petered out. The friendships established were seen as exceptionally deep. One prisoner wrote, "My penfriends are the closest friends I've ever had", a woman commented that she had gained "an appreciation of the value of unconditional friendship", and an elderly British man wrote, "Throughout almost a lifetime I have discovered that one has many acquaintances, but very few friends. R. is a friend!" In the case of two prisoners and two British letter writers the relationship with a penfriend had developed into a mutual romantic commitment, and two other prisoners mentioned ongoing sexual writing relationships with penfriends. In some cases penfriends made romantic or sexual advances which were not welcomed. While this was the most common problem reported by British letter writers, prisoners also spoke of rejecting correspondences of this kind initiated by women. Where platonic relationships had been renegotiated after a sexual advance, they were felt to be stronger than before.

Various relationships were reflected and pursued within the contents of letters, both explicitly, and through the choice of topics. These ranged from family, everyday activities, work, holidays, travel, pets, food, music and books to world events, politics and death penalty issues. However, as relationships grew closer the letters became more personal and writers spoke of sharing thoughts, feelings, plans, hopes, and dreams. The nature of the small gifts which penfriends exchanged: handmade cards, poems or pieces of craft work from prisoners, and presents of money, toiletries and sweets from the British penfriends (depending on institutional regulations), could also reflect the changing nature of the relationship. Particular topics were sometimes explicitly negotiated,

for example some penfriends had agreed not to discuss sex or religion, but others talked through spiritual issues, or drew comfort from shared religious beliefs. Many of the penfriends who had become close discussed personal problems in their letters, and the development of trust and the 'opening up' over time of the other person were mentioned as high points of the correspondence by penfriends on both sides. For some British letter writers, being told by their penfriend about the details of his crime was proof of his trust and a turning point in their relationship. Prisoners also spoke of this as a crucial test of friendship which could jeopardise the identity projected through letters, and therefore the relationship with a penfriend or, alternatively, confirm its strength. For one man the establishment of a relationship helped him "realise that I am more than the sum total of my crimes against men and God". For prisoners who believed they had been unjustly convicted their penfriend's reaction and support were crucial confirmation of their innocence, which was otherwise negated by every aspect of their daily experience.

Within these close, intense cross-gender relationships, one way which was often used to mark the intimacy of the relationship, while at the same time limiting its sexuality, was the expression of metaphoric family kinship. This also provided a vocabulary for close relationships between male penfriends, and where there was a wide disparity in age. Around a third of the letter writers said that their penfriends were like a brother, sister, daughter, son, mother, father, grandmother, or 'part of the family'. Comments from prisoners included: "I love them all, some of them very deeply and consider them family more so than my own blood family"; "I love her very much, she is my grandmother"; "I would describe my relationship with E. and A. as the family God never saw fit to give me"; and "I see K and her family as family. I care about them and love all of them as I love my siblings, mother and kids". The British penfriends wrote: "There is a very strong bond; I am his surrogate brother"; "They are totally interested in their Scots cousins. Every letter brings mention of them. I have always been their gran"; "We are like close family and confide in each other"; and "They are like blood ties; one doesn't always agree with one's family or always understand why they do or say what they do, but the love and support is always there". This metaphorical kinship could extend to correspondence with other members of their penfriend's family, one British man saying that he felt closer to his penfriend's family than to his own relatives. Another man wrote just before he was executed, in his final letter to his penfriend of six years, "What makes me the happiest is that you opened the door of your family to me and this is something many people just don't do, I shall forever love you for all you have done."

Since relationships of family kinship, close friendship, and romance are normally conducted through a range of communicative channels and especially oral speech and direct interaction, they might be expected to be somewhat impoverished when restricted to letter writing alone. Yet many respondents stressed the depth and authenticity of their penfriend relationships, and the rapidity with which they have developed. While this is undoubtedly partly a function of the prisoner's isolation, it also seems to be related to the nature of the letter writing process and the way in which it manages relationships across distance and time. Debates concerning the differences between orality and literacy have often contrasted the closeness, informality and involvement of oral communication to the more distant formality of writing (e.g. Olson 1977; Tannen 1985), but within the death row correspondence the distance between the writers, and the absence of visual or paralinguistic information, seems to work in the opposite direction. One prisoner suggested that letters are safer than face-to-face communication because they provide an opportunity to open up and confide without having to immediately face the consequences. Another confirms this, and also points to the greater time for planning that letters allow: "In some ways through a letter honesty comes quicker- face to face, embarrassment or shame may cause a short response or a quick subject change but with a letter you can reflect on what to say". Thus the geographical distance between the letter writers, paradoxically, seems to encourage intimacy and enables people to reveal personal information and inner feelings. The presentation of self and the conduct of the relationship are freed up in the absence of the visual and aural clues which in face-to-face encounters lock people into particular positions and scripts in terms of assumptions about age and social and cultural background. Social differences between the prisoners and their penfriends are not so intrusive in their disembodied correspondence dialogue. The lack of an immediate physical or social context for the encounter, and the initial absence of knowledge about their penfriends' present or past life create a space within which the letter writers have the opportunity to represent or reconstruct themselves as people, and to rewrite their own histories in new ways. This is particularly crucial for the prisoners, and it is the relationship between the potential of letter writing as a channel and the contexts of the writers which enables the particular kinds of construction of relationships and identity that I am describing.

In addition to the positive effects of distance, the opportunity for reflection after receiving a letter, and before replying, were seen by many as important to the success of the relationship. While some penfriends, both on death row and in Britain, wrote letters spontaneously, others drafted and redrafted, with some British letter writers jotting notes down as things occurred to them and later

weaving these into their letters. Writers both on death row and in Britain spoke of thinking carefully about what they were writing and of considering what their penfriend's response might be. Some prisoners spoke of not writing when they were feeling depressed and would sometimes hold a letter back and reread it the next day, before deciding to send it. Thus the time lapses between composing, writing, sending, receiving, and answering letters allow a more careful monitoring of the presentation of self, and of responses to the other, than is possible in everyday direct interactions. One British man wrote about the feeling of transmitting and receiving images of himself, and of his penfriend: "We project, we bat the ball, we collect the bits, we try again". A prisoner, who had been on death row for fifteen years, the last ten without a visit, wrote. "One cannot live in isolation, so life is relationship and without relationship I am not. To understand myself, I must understand relationship, because relationship is a mirror in which I can see myself". I would suggest that the correspondence slows down and reveals the dialectical process within all relationships, in which aspects of the self and the other are projected, mirrored back, and reassessed.

The penfriends' initial absence of knowledge about each other, together with the prisoners' urgent need for human contact, might suggest that the prisoners or the British writers are creating an image of their penfriend which is more closely related to the writer's own unresolved fantasies and desires than to their penfriend's actual attributes. In the psychoanalytic context Freud saw this kind of transference, which often involves strong emotional and erotic elements, as a projection rather than a real relationship, and it has been suggested that the correspondences of some literary authors (e.g. Charlotte Bronte, Emily Dickinson) with a mentor figure have more to do with objectification of the self than with mutual communicative interaction (Jackson 1994). The penfriends, however, stressed their desire for genuine engagement and wanted to get to know the 'real person', and to be 'not just an abstract thought on paper'. Where direct meetings had occurred (reported by 25% of the respondents), it was felt these had enhanced an existing relationship. One prisoner wrote, "Its one thing to meet a person on paper, to pour yourself on paper in ink, but to actually meet the person in person, what a high that is". It is now generally accepted that elements of transference and countertransference (where people respond in terms of the image or positioning projected onto them) occur in all human relationships (Thomas 1996). Again, the correspondence shows this process in slow motion, as part of the continual negotiation and reconstruction of identity through the written dialogue.

For both sets of penfriends, the connection with another and the mirroring back of self have been experienced mainly as a positive extension of identity.

Through the mutual exchange of support, affection, and commitment people on both sides of the correspondence experience themselves as more trustworthy, lovable, and personally valuable, and this is particularly powerful in the prisoners' context. Comments also suggest some painful readjustments. One prisoner wrote about the correspondence, "Even to myself I lied. I learned a lot about myself and faced many aspects of myself I had avoided looking at. It's given me the strength to accept responsibility for myself", and a British woman wrote, "The correspondence made me realise how hard I find issues such as trust, allowing people close, fear of losing. I've seen my own fears mirrored almost exactly in someone else". In one case, where a woman had found her penfriend difficult and manipulative, the mirroring had become negative and destructive: "G. has made me feel like I'm selfish and heartless — is that how I really am?".

This reflective process also led British penfriends to re-evaluate their ordinary everyday experience. It has been argued that we do not just tell stories to describe our experience, but that we recreate it and, to some extent, ourselves through the stories we tell (Widdershoven 1996). Stories are constructed for particular audiences and in many ways the audience shapes what it is possible to say and how it is said. Because the prisoners place such a high value on their penfriends' everyday, ordinary activities in the free world and respond positively to accounts of these, the British penfriends in their turn began to write and reflect more about their everyday experiences and to see them as more significant. British letter writers acquired a double perspective in seeing their lives through the eyes of their prisoner as well as through their own. One woman suggested that it was as if he was always looking over her shoulder. The prisoner's viewpoint invested new meaning in everyday events; one woman said that she would never take a walk or a sunset for granted again. In addition, British penfriends reported planning how to recount an event to their penfriend even as they are experiencing it: "I find myself taking in more of the events going on in my life as I'm consciously aware that I can describe things that happen in my letters if I concentrate on every detail." The knowledge that they would be writing about an event further enhanced its significance and also shaped the experience through providing an additional framework for perception. In the same way prisoners select and construct their own accounts of themselves and their experience in anticipation of their penfriend's response, as well as in relation to their previous exchange of letters, and these accounts then become part of their own mental repertoires for interpreting future experience. Volosinov (1986) argues that an utterance or piece of writing always faces in two directions: its structure and content are shaped both in response to previous voices or texts, and also in anticipation of its own response from others. He suggests that

this dialogic process underlies all communication and that it also structures thought. When we interpret another person's utterance or writing we have a kind of inner dialogue with it, so that the meaning we take from it is realised interactively: "For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words… meaning is realised only in the process of active, responsive, understanding." (Volosinov 1986, p. 102–103). In this sense speech, writing, and even thought are far more joint and collaborative than is commonly acknowledged. For Volosinov, individual consciousness is an accumulation of dialogic experiences, and for the penfriends these dialogues become part of the writers' conceptual and imaginative frameworks and in this way feed back into, and change, their everyday experience and sense of self. Thus the prisoners reported new hope and a sense of personal value which had extended beyond the correspondence relationships, and the British letter writers reported that they had become less judgmental, more self-confident, and more resolute about their own beliefs. One woman's journey to meet her penfriend was her first experience of travelling abroad, and another woman who echoed many other respondents wrote, "The correspondence brought out emotions in me I didn't know I had and heightened others; it's brought me into contact with people and places I never would have known, brought out the campaigner in me and strengthened my character."

Conclusion

In the context of death row, letter writing as a channel reveals a capacity for communicative and social flexibility that is not usually demanded of correspondence in the outside world. It fulfils a wide range of personal and social functions for the prisoners, some traditionally associated with writing and others more with direct speech. Letter writing seems to be able to take on the work of other channels, fulfilling the communicative, emotional, and functional needs normally associated with face-to-face encounters or voice-to -voice on the telephone. The writers themselves use metaphors from spoken language to describe their written communication: "I needed someone to talk to"; "I am always getting on the phone (typewriter) and ringing up a long lost friend". Prisoners reported taking on a variety of roles and relationship through the correspondence, which also for many of them provided emotional support and the only outlet available for the expression of care, affection, and intimacy. Through these dialogues they felt that they had reclaimed or reconstructed parts of themselves which had been lost or destroyed. The British penfriends also

found that this correspondence led to close friendship and that it provided an opportunity to express and develop aspects of themselves and to enhance personal experience in ways which were sometimes not available through other dialogues. Some penfriends reported significant and observable changes in their own behaviour, for example becoming more fluent, effective writers, or active campaigners against the death penalty.

The management of time and distance within the correspondence encourages the writers to 'open up' and facilitates the negotiation of images of the self and the other. Time between letters creates the space for planning and reflection, and I have also suggested that the absence of paralinguistic and visual information normally available in face-to-face encounters, together with the penfriends' lack of knowledge about each other's lives and backgrounds, creates a space where they can to some extent reconstruct their lives and themselves. Within the correspondence writers reflect and extend their relationship through explicit statements, choice of topic, length of letter, speed of response, and so on. While the letter content may include descriptions of experience and the explorations of ideas, these are shaped by the image of the recipient, the perceived nature of the relationship, and the writer's aims to extend or renegotiate it. Thus there is a strong dialectical relationship between the ideational and interpersonal functions of the letters (Halliday 1978). This relationship is present in all uses of language but is highlighted in the death row correspondence where functions which would normally be fulfilled through a range of communicative channels are condensed into written text.

This research shows that in specific contexts letter writing as a social practice can combine the individual and reflective functions of private writing with the interpersonal functions of conversation, and I would argue that it is this combination, together with the extreme situation of the prisoners, which makes the deathrow correspondence such a rich site for the negotiation and reconstruction of identity. Other research has showed how the act of personal writing can create a private space in crowded or alien circumstances (cf. Sheridan et al, forthcoming). For the prisoners, who often write at night "when things within this hell are quiet", their letters create a personal and relatively private space[5] in lives which are constantly, down to the most intimate bodily functions, under strenuous surveillance. Comments from the British penfriends also suggest that people choose particular private times and spaces within their lives for writing to their penfriend, or that the act itself creates that space, for example on a crowded train. Within this private space people pour themselves on paper (some compared it to writing a diary) and yet the contents of the letters and the process of the correspondence are, as I have described above, intensely interactional. However, because this interaction is in a sense disembodied and occurs outside the normal

conversational constraints of space and time, it allows considerable scope for imaginative and creative presentation and negotiation of both the relationship and the self. People have the opportunity not only to reconstruct aspects of themselves which are otherwise denied in their daily circumstances but to try out new kinds of selves within an attentive and empathetic dialogue. The positive experience of a sympathetic cross-gender dialogue enhances writers' senses of their own gendered identity, although some have to explicitly negotiate boundaries if the relationship is to remain platonic.

Death is still largely a taboo subject in Anglo-American culture and the correspondence gave British letter writers, as well as prisoners, an opportunity to weigh up different parts of their life experience, and to sort out their priorities. As one British man put it, "The prisoner's closeness with death shocks into focus the transience of our own lives, and the factors within it which are unresolved." Another British man wrote that the correspondence had put him in touch with "deep inner sadnesses and limitations" which he thought had probably unconsciously brought him to it in the first place. While the correspondence enabled the prisoners to express, or rediscover "what it is to be a person, to be moral and to be human", it led some British letter writers to radically reassess their lives and themselves as people. The experience of these penfriends illustrates how the kinds of dialogues we have with others reframe our experience and give us various possibilities for the ongoing reconstruction of identity. Moreover, the processes of reflection, mirroring and negotiation which occur within the correspondence suggest that boundaries between the 'real' and the 'imagined' are more permeable and shifting than is commonly acknowledged, both in relationships and in reflections on the self.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. N.A.A.C.P. figures as of October 1998.
2. Television sets are usually fixed at a point along the tier where prisoners can watch through the bars of their cell.

3. The BBC documentary ‘Fourteen days in May’, about the execution of a young man in Mississippi was, broadcast in November 1987 and September 1998. An Everyman documentary in February 1992 focussed on the correspondence between an English woman and her penfriend on death row. This documentary resulted in 6,500 enquiries from viewers wanting to write to a prisoner (Arriens 1997).
4. It is very difficult for prisoners to prove their innocence once they are on death row. Since 1973, 69 men on death row have been proved innocent and released (Death Penalty Information Center 1997).
5. Correspondence is often read by prison staff.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BRITISH PENFRIENDS

(Questions were set out with space for answers on the original questionnaire)

Letter writing to Death Row: research questionnaire

Please return as soon as possible

Thank you for agreeing to help with this research. Please answer all questions as fully as you wish, and continue on a separate sheet if necessary.

I have asked for some personal details so that I can say whether we are a completely mixed bag as a group of letter-writers, or whether there are certain patterns e.g. concerning age and gender. The question about race is included because some letter-writers have found getting close to someone of a different race from themselves particularly rewarding and enlightening.

All information will be treated as anonymous and confidential.

For the multiple-choice questions, please circle the appropriate category.

1. First, please give some brief information about yourself.
a. gender: M/F
b. age: under 20/20–30/30–40/40–50/50–60/over 60
c. race:
d. occupation (paid or unpaid):
e. who else lives in your household:
f. the kind of community you live in (e.g. rural, suburb of industrial city, etc.)

2. How many people on Death Row do you write to? For each person please give their gender, approximate age, race and the length of time you have been corresponding.

3. a. How often do you write to your penfriend(s), approximately?
At least once a week/every fortnight/every three weeks/every month/every six weeks/infrequently
b. Please indicate what else you send as well as letters, and how often:
cards, photos, books, magazines, presents, money, …, …
c. What kinds of things do you write about (e.g. family, outings, personal problems, religion, world events…)?

4. a. Why and how did you first start writing to someone on Death Row?
b. What kinds of expectations did you have before you started, and how far were these met or not, once the correspondence got going?

5. a. Do you write to many other people regularly, as well as your Death Row penfriend(s)? Please indicate e.g. 3 family members, 2 friends etc.
b. What other kinds of writing activities are an important part of your life e.g. does your work involve writing, or do you do any creative writing?
c. How does your letter writing fit in with your other daily activities e.g. do you think about a letter for a while, then sit in a particular quiet place to write, or perhaps write quickly in spare moments on the train to work?

6. What do you see as the main purposes of your correspondence with your Death Row penfriend(s)? Please mention any religious beliefs or political convictions which you see as relevant to the correspondence.

7. a. How would you describe your relationship with your penfriend(s), and has this changed in any way, over time?
b. Have there been important moments or key turning points in the correspondence that stand out for you? Particular high points or problems?
c. If your penfriend has been given execution dates, how have you coped with this? Have you had to face an actual execution? If so, please describe, if possible, how this has affected your life.

8. a. Have you met your correspondent? Yes/no
Do you plan to meet him or her? Definitely/possibly/probably not/definitely not.
b. If you have met your correspondent, how did this change the nature of the correspondence, if at all?

9. a. What have you personally gained, or lost, from writing to someone on Death Row?
b. Has the correspondence changed you as a person, and if so, in what ways?

10. Please give your name, address and telephone number if you are happy to be contacted for a follow-up interview:

11. Any other comments you would like to add:

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PENFRIENDS ON DEATH ROW

(Questions were set out with space for answers on the original questionnaire)

Letter writing to penfriends: research questionnaire

Please return as soon as possible in the envelope provided.

Thank you for agreeing to help with this research. Please answer the questions as fully as you wish, and continue on a separate sheet if necessary. If there are any questions you are not happy about answering, please leave these blank.

The question about race is included because some letter-writers have found getting close to someone of a different race from themselves particularly rewarding and enlightening.

All information will be treated as anonymous and confidential.

1. First, please give some brief information about yourself.
a. gender:
b. age:
c. race:
d. how long have you been on death row?

2. How many penfriends do you write to? For each person please give their gender, approximate age, race and the length of time you have been corresponding.

3. a. How often do you write to your penfriend(s), approximately?
b. Do you send anything else as well as letters, for example cards, photos, or presents?
c. What kinds of things do you write about (e.g. family, daily activities, personal problems, religion, world events…)?
d. What kinds of things do you most enjoy reading about in your penfriends' letters to you?

4. a. Why and how did you first start writing to a penfriend?
b. What kinds of expectations did you have before you started, and how far were these met or not, once the correspondence got going?

5. a. Do you write to many other people regularly, as well as your penfriend(s)? Please say how many family members and friends you write to.
b. Is there a particular time of day when you write a letter, or do you need to be in a special kind of mood? Do you think about a letter for a while, or write it straight off?
c. What other kinds of writing do you do in prison as well as letters?

6. a. When was the last time you had a visit from a relative or friend?
b. How often do you have relatives or friends visiting you?

7. a. How would you describe your relationship with your penfriend(s), and has this changed in any way, over time?
b. Have there been important moments or key turning points in the correspondence that stand out for you? Particular high points or problems?

8. a. Have you met your penfriend? Yes/no
Do you plan to meet him or her? Definitely/possibly/probably not/definitely not.
b. If you have met your correspondent, how did this change the nature of the correspondence, if at all?

9. a. What have you personally gained, or lost, from writing to your penfriend(s)?
b. Has the correspondence changed you as a person, and if so, in what ways?

10. Any other comments you would like to add:

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Chapter 10

'Absolutely Truly Brill to See From You'
Visuality and Prisoners' Letters

Anita Wilson

> Dear Anita, Absolute truly brill to see from you again. what can I say!? Regardless of the sheen screen scene you still shine on as bright as the new day's dawn — a northern light a-lit the night, shedding colour upon the gray of my day. (personal correspondence)

Introduction

Conventional views of prison as a total institution separated from the wider society might presume that there is little opportunity for prisoners to engage with any form of social interaction, let alone social correspondence. But the realities of day-to-day life in the prisons of Great Britain which I have observed as a long-term prison ethnographer would suggest differently. Adult and young offender males communicate constantly by arguing, talking, working, and living alongside each other in their everyday prison lives. Reading and writing are integral and significant aspects of their routine social practices and various forms of correspondence play a central role in maintaining modes of communication.

The overall focus of my research is to try and understand the complex variety of literacies owned, used, and re-appropriated by members of the prison community and in this context during the past eight years I have corresponded with many men in prison. I have written to them at all stages of their various custodial sentences — at points ranging from near the beginning to towards the end — and willingly renewed correspondence with them when they have been returned to jail. I have written to them while they have been undertaking hunger strikes and during times when they have considered (and tried) suicide. In

response, men in prison have written to me about their feelings, their families, their crimes and their innocence, sometimes by return of post and at other times only after weeks of 'disappearing' into the system. Together we have discussed our politics, our opinions, and our preferences and we have shared sadness, happiness, and an appalling sense of humour.

During our correspondence prisoners expressed considerable enthusiasm towards my contribution to this book, and setting aside my privileged position as letter-writing participant I had anticipated that writing this chapter would be a simple and pleasurable task. Materially, I had amassed in excess of 300 letters — many with various enclosures — from a number of prisoner-correspondents in England and Scotland. Ethically, I had full permission to reproduce the contents of any letter. Theoretically, the opportunity to use such correspondence in order to present a more balanced view of prisoners' existing literacy abilities to a new audience sat comfortably with the rationale for my research.

But when deciding how to write about prison-related correspondence I found myself becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of discussing what had essentially become part of the life, not only of the prisoners involved, but also of myself. I realised that while participation in prison letter-writing had provided me with first hand experience of the social process, as an exercise it had transcended its functionality to become a part of my personal and private sphere.

Ethical and practical considerations

My uncomfortableness with sharing the contents of prison correspondence may have stemmed from the fact that my initial involvement in prison letter-writing came about not as a research tool but as a means by which to maintain links with prisoners I already knew. I had approached the activity with much the same attitude as any other person who corresponds with someone in prison — as an essentially social practice and one of the few means by which to maintain personal communication. To change the emphasis to divulging large sections of content for publication would for me have been inappropriate and unethical.

Even when I went on to use letter-writing as a method by which to share my developing theories on prison literacies with prisoners, any idea of retaining a purely analytic stance towards such correspondence was a naive dream on my part. It was made very clear by my prison correspondents that I was interacting in a social and personal way with human beings, not merely gathering information by an abstract or detached method of data collection. I feel that the quality of data I re-present in this chapter has been made available to me precisely

because I partially relinquished my role as impersonal observer and accepted the more honest position of interactive, personal correspondent.

However, it would be dishonest of me to say that my interest in letters and letter-writing remained only within the personal domain. My overall research project (Wilson 1999) focuses on the means by which large numbers of prisoners use various literacies to communicate with each other and with their inside and outside worlds, and this necessarily includes the activities, practices and materials associated with various forms of letter-writing. However, although my experiences of personal letter-writing gave me a more knowledgeable and thus more acceptable basis from which to speak with other prisoners, letters between these other prisoners and their correspondents remain equally personal and confidential. Even though some prisoners generously allowed me to read letters written by them or sent to them, and although I have occasionally collaborated in writing letters alongside them, the problems associated with the invasion of research into the private spheres of prisoners' lives remained a contentious issue.

Yet my research shows (Wilson 1996 and 1999) that letter-writing is a fundamental, literacy-orientated, social activity integral to the lives of most prisoners. I needed to find a suitable means by which to recount its significance while retaining my over-riding ethical concerns regarding exploitation and confidentiality.

Paraliteracy features and a focus on the visual

The vehicle by which to present some relevant aspects of prisoners' letter-writing in an informed way came via a somewhat unexpected channel. I had been reading Mayhew and Binny's *Criminal Prisons of London* (first published in 1862) and inwardly marking the uncanny way in which their observations matched my own, even though there was a time difference of well over 100 years between the studies. Mayhew and Binny, like myself, had noted that prisoners were considerably more literate than was suggested by the dominant ideology of the day and that formal prison education could not be assumed to be a universal panacea for recidivism. It was their comments regarding a visit to the female convict prison at Brixton however, which acted as a catalyst for the focus of this chapter. They noted

> that there is hardly a cell that is not furnished with some fancy letter-bag, worked by the prisoner… and we were assured that the documents treasured in such bags are prized as highly as if they were so much bank-paper, and that in the moments of sadness which overcome prisoners, they are invariably

> withdrawn and read — perhaps for the hundredth time — as the only consolation left them in their friendlessness and affliction' (Mayhew & Binny, p. 194)

From letters and conversations that I had had with prisoners, I too was aware that letters were highly prized and often re-read. The comment below, written in a letter to me by a prisoner in the adult system, is one voiced by many prisoners: —

> I always keep my letters because when I feel down I just get them out of my box and read what people have been saying or trying to help me and it is good. (personal correspondence 24/1/95).*

The action of re-reading letters appears to be a physical affirmation of prisoners wanting not only to enact but to re-enact a social practice associated with their day-to-day personal and human lives outside their prison experiences. Even if a letter was not forthcoming, it was possible for a prisoner to take out and re-read one that was already in their possession.

Prisoners' attention to the material value of the letter itself led me on to consider other elements of letters which might have been overlooked had I confined my focus only to content. Just as in spoken interaction, where participants enrich their understanding of dialogue by taking into account paralinguistic features or semiotic markers, prison correspondents enrich the social value of certain texts — particularly letters — by acknowledging a number of sensory influences. I have named these as 'paraliteracy' features, aligning them with the five senses. Taking Mayhew and Binny's observation above, the physicality of touching an existing letter and the reassurance of its tactile materiality contributes significantly to the importance attached to the activity of reading or re-reading personal correspondence.

Considering smell, it would be possible to link social correspondence with certain aromas. For example, from my personal experience, a collection of letters received from one particular prisoner can tell me whether and what that person smokes while they are writing and large collections of correspondence have indicated that letters received from one establishment smell differently from those I receive from another. I am told that in the austere environment of prison, letters which I send carry detectable traces of perfume, cooking or general non-prison scents identified by prisoners, deprived of such everyday aromas.

With regard to taste, official censorship of letters at the present time is often extended to the detection of the illegal 'flavouring' of letters. In an environment where drugs are banned but addicts live, quantities of various illegal substances — such as tabs of acid — are sometimes attached to stamps or envelope glue.

Letters can also take on the qualities of speech. It is very common for me

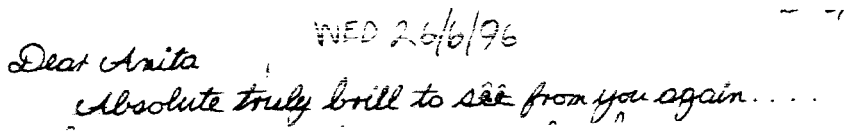
to read that a prisoner agrees or disagrees with something I have 'said' rather than with something I have written and an indication of laughter in letters is translated into written sound by the iconic markers of 'smiley faces' or HA!!HA!! or he!he!. When receiving mail, prisoners often hear their letters before seeing or even touching them as prison protocol sometimes declares that names are called out to indicate that mail is waiting to be collected.

The pivotal point of Mayhew and Binny's observations, however, was in their significant attention to the visual — the sighting of the *'fancy letter bag'* — which I too had noted in various contemporary forms as,

> 'a home-made box that looks like a small filing box or letter rack' and 'an excellent letter holder in yellow made from some kind of a box' (personal journal)

It became apparent to me at this point that restricting my interest solely to the content of prisoners' letters would have been somewhat misrepresentational. In addition to exhibiting specific proof of reading and writing ability, prisoners' interaction with their letters and letter-writing involved significant attention to paraliteracy features too important to be marginalised. Visual and visible qualities particularly play a very significant part in activities and practices connected to prisoners' personal correspondence.

My chapter's title 'absolutely truly brill to see from you' reflects the importance of visuality to prison correspondence. As a phrase, it was often included as an opening line in many letters sent to me by one prisoner. His implicit recognition of visual significance is reflected not only in his creative use of the word 'see' but in his pertinent embellishment of it, shown below:



Example 1. Original hand-written 'absolutely truly brill'.

His attention to the visible and visual significance of my letter precedes any activity relating to his reading it and he retains this focus on the importance of visuality by incorporating it into his response in a creative and equally visual way. Visuality is not, however, confined to my personal correspondence and I now turn to illustrate the wide variety of forms it may take.

Letters, letters, and more letters

It would be understandable for a reader with little knowledge of prison life to assume that letters are merely confined to those connected with maintaining contact with family and friends outside prison. But letters too come in a variety of social and visible layers, each of which has a significant element of para-literacy and particularly visual importance. Some letters extend beyond the prison while others pass between prisons, some pass between prisoners, and still others are sent between prisoners and staff. Each group has distinctive qualities, purposes, and elements of visuality and so for the purposes of this chapter I pattern such correspondence by relating it to the audiences to whom it is intended to be made visible. It can be divided into three groups: letters between prisoners, letters between prisoners and authority, and letters between prisoners and their social communities outside the prison environment. I discuss each group taking a social rather than an institutional stance.

'Stiffys, kites and moodys' — letters between prisoners

> Blackpool sort that out for me lad and whatever you send I will send you the same… (subversive note passed from one young offender to another)

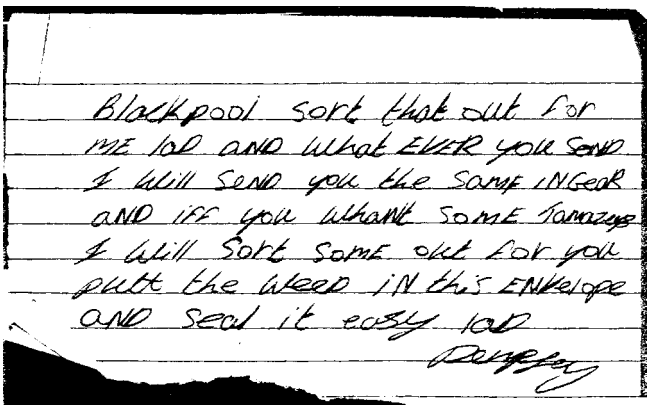
Written letters between prisoners are intended to be seen by very few people but this is not to say that their visibility (or invisibility) and visual qualities are not significant. The majority are sent either subversively or for subversive reasons and this is reflected in their often being named in culturally-specific language. 'Kites' comes from the American system, as in "One of my neighbours is going out in the morning, so I'll kite this out with him". The term can be used to describe both the letter and the act of passing it. 'Stiffys' come from the Scottish system and I am using the definition cited in a glossary of terms sent by personal communication: "Stiffy — private note passed from one to another." (correspondence dated 10/1/97). 'Moody' was in contemporary use in 1997 as explained by one of my correspondents:

> I have heard the word 'moody' used for letters smuggled from one inmate to another. (personal communication 19/1/97)

The means by which these letters are transferred from one prisoner to another are imaginative, diverse and predominantly unreportable! but two examples are presented below. The first was recorded in my journal maintained during a sustained period of research at a Young Offender institution and illustrates that the subversion may relate only to the act and not to the intention of the sender.

> 16/7/95 — Talking to the gardener outside X block who is busy collecting 'notes' from other people (passed through the windows of cells) — one has the name and number of someone who is being 'shipped out' … the other one is a folded up note which I do not get to read — the number note has a drawing on the front …[next day 17/7/95] followed up the 'courier' … he says that the illustrated note was sent by someone to his mate being shipped out[2] … it contained his name and number so that he can write back to him … he volunteered the information regarding the other note saying that someone had written to his uncle and cousin in [another prison] but had received no reply — the note was to tell him that they were not in [a certain jail] but in [a different jail] which explained why he had not heard from them. (excerpt from my personal journal)

The second — 'Blackpool' — was used as a means by which to undertake more subversive activities and delivered by the act of 'swinging a line'[1] from one window to another:



Example 2. 'Blackpool' hand-written subversive note.

Visibility of such documents is open to various interpretations dependent upon the cultural position of the viewer. The sighting of the second letter by a Prison Officer, for example, resulted in the sender being found guilty of an offence against Prison Rules and subsequently punished by having days added onto his custodial sentence. Had the former letter-deliverer and his letters been seen, he too would have been charged with being in breach of Prison Rules even though his intent was rather more altruistic.

Such letters are intended for a restricted and very specific audience and therefore usually remain invisible to all but a select few. Each subsequent owner

is required to sustain the initial subversion of the writer and the practice carries with it an assumption of cultural knowledge, compliance, and the maintenance of invisibility.

Visual aspects of such letters often extend beyond the materiality of necessity. While they need to be small or light in order to be delivered by hand or by unravelled blanket and tend to use scraps of paper torn off from larger sheets of student A4 (as in the first note)… or from statutory A5 prison notepaper (as in the second), decorative visuality is often significant. For example, the letter 'delivered' by the gardener I described in my journal as having, "a drawing on the front — 'between the zones' — and a name and number on the other side." (personal journal 17/7/95) Its visuality drew on that of conventional social documents, being a hybrid between a personal business card and a flyer for 'The Zone' night-club. The activity of circulation became a form of subversive social networking. The second note, written on prison issue paper, confirms my suggestion — discussed further below — that a paraliteracy consideration as to the texture and appearance of the paper deems it suitable only for selective literacy-related activities.

Visual embellishment extends into prisoners' social correspondence with people outside the jail which I discuss in detail in the third section. But next I move on to focus on letters which pass between prisoners and figures in authority. These also contain significant aspects of visibility and visuality, manifested in different ways.

'To the Right Honourable Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Scotland' — Letters to external authority figures

> Where a prisoner petitions the Secretary of State in order to ventilate a complaint about prison treatment and wishes to write to a person outside about the complaint, it should be noted that the letter may be subject to a slight delay (Prison (Scotland) Standing Orders Section M: Mc1–7)

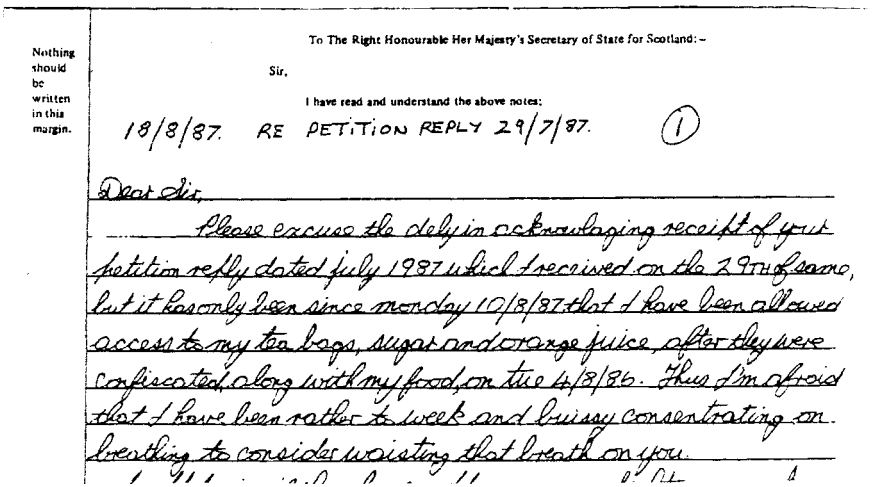
> All I want is the same right of access to the newspapers that the Prison Service and the Department enjoy and use to white wash or con the public, I only want to put our side of the arguments without censorship or penalty (personal correspondence from a prisoner)

It might seem from the conflict between the official Rules and the prisoner's comments quoted above that communication by correspondence between prisoners and authority would be strictly monitored and severely curtailed. Such Rules also direct as to how and with whom a prisoner may communicate, and in addition to

controlling the letters between a prisoner and his family, his victim, his solicitor, the press, the media or government departments, these statutory instruments rule on who may see the contents of such letters. Although they go largely unchallenged by prisoners, in 1989, Thomas Campbell, imprisoned in the Scottish system took his case to the European Court of Human Rights with regard to legal correspondence being opened and seen by Officers. The ruling in his favour subsequently redefined relevant legislation for all Scottish prison procedures and the practices surrounding the viewing, opening and reading of prisoners' legal mail.[3] Prisoners also protect the visibility and safety of their mail by sending it by recorded delivery, asking for proof of postage or paying for letters to be photocopied as a precautionary measure against losing 'sight' of them.

Unlike stiffys, kites or moodys, letters to authority often pass before intermediate audiences over whom a prisoner has little control. Visual qualities of such letters sometimes continue to reflect the long-standing strategies of prisoners who have experienced the effects of having their mail examined. In the past, censorship of correspondence in the Scottish system was effected by using scissors to cut out sections of letters and I have seen letters sent by long-term prisoners which continue to be written on one side of the paper only. As a means of ensuring that no page becomes 'mislaid' or 'lost' these prisoners often repeat the last phrase on one page as the first phrase of the next, or list in the letter heading the number of pages written and details of any enclosures.

Letters to external authority figures such as the Home Office, Scottish Office, Members of Parliament, Prison Service or the press usually conform to generic letter-writing conventions in their visual layout. They display customary forms of address and closure with the return address at the top and 'yours faithfully' written at the bottom. However, they also retain the visual appearance of social correspondence and as prisoners are often restricted in the forms of writing technology they may use, an appeal of considerable gravity can retain an appearance of informality by remaining hand-written, such as that illustrated in Exp. 3.



Nothing should be written in this margin.

To The Right Honourable Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Scotland: –

Sir,

I have read and understand the above notes:

18/8/87. RE PETITION REPLY 29/7/87. (1)

Dear Sir,

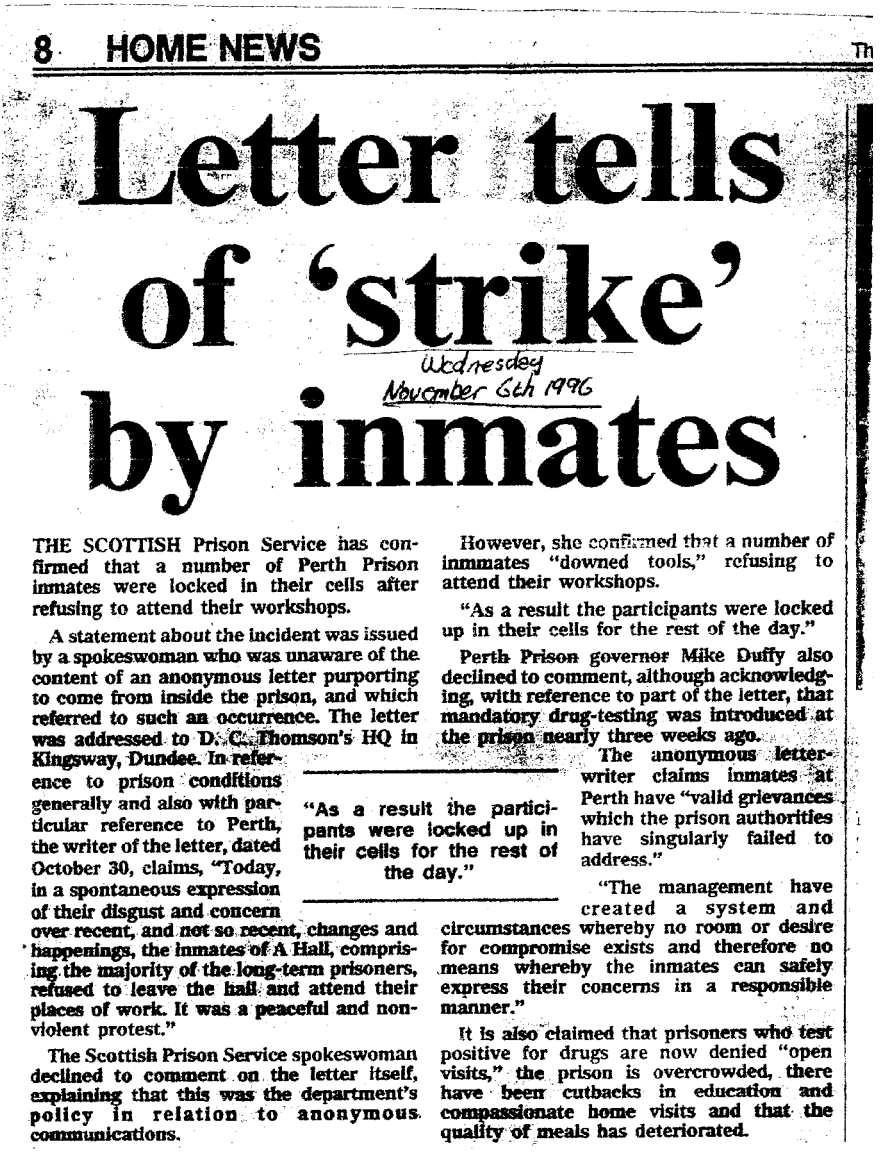
Please excuse the delay in acknowledging receipt of your petition reply dated July 1987 which I received on the 29th of same, but it is only been since monday 10/8/87 that I have been allowed access to my tea bags, sugar and orange juice, after they were confiscated along with my food, on tue 4/8/86. Thus I'm afraid that I have been rather to weak and busy concentrating on breathing to consider wasting that breath on you.

Example 3. Dear Sir, please excuse the delay in acknowledging receipt of your petition. Reply dated July 1987.

The visual appearance of published letters to the press are either drawn back into the conventional practices associated with print media or, as in Example 4, referred to only indirectly. Example 4 is an indication that it is possible for such correspondence to breach the 'invisibility' demanded by Prison Rules. While the author remains invisible, the letter is made visually accessible to a wide audience.

Such an enterprise is not without risk and the alleged writer in this instance noted an increase in attention towards him in terms of discipline after the article was published, even though authorship was never directly attributed to him.

Although statutory rules governing communication with external authority figures appear to restrict and control certain letter-writing activities of prisoners, many still manage to retain a practice freely available to people in wider society. The means by which they do so, such as in the added expense of recorded delivery and the risks associated with the smuggling out of letters, reflects the lengths to which prisoners are prepared to go in order to retain a social practice — with its visible affirmation — that connects them with outside worlds.



8 HOME NEWS Th

Letter tells of 'strike' by inmates

Wednesday
November 6th 1996

THE SCOTTISH Prison Service has confirmed that a number of Perth Prison inmates were locked in their cells after refusing to attend their workshops.

A statement about the incident was issued by a spokeswoman who was unaware of the content of an anonymous letter purporting to come from inside the prison, and which referred to such an occurrence. The letter was addressed to D. C. Thomson's HQ in Kingsway, Dundee. In reference to prison conditions generally and also with particular reference to Perth, the writer of the letter, dated October 30, claims, "Today, in a spontaneous expression of their disgust and concern over recent, and not so recent, changes and happenings, the inmates of A Hall, comprising the majority of the long-term prisoners, refused to leave the hall and attend their places of work. It was a peaceful and non-violent protest."

"As a result the participants were locked up in their cells for the rest of the day."

The Scottish Prison Service spokeswoman declined to comment on the letter itself, explaining that this was the department's policy in relation to anonymous communications.

However, she confirmed that a number of inmmates "downed tools," refusing to attend their workshops.

"As a result the participants were locked up in their cells for the rest of the day."

Perth Prison governor Mike Duffy also declined to comment, although acknowledging, with reference to part of the letter, that mandatory drug-testing was introduced at the prison nearly three weeks ago.

The anonymous letter-writer claims inmates at Perth have "valid grievances which the prison authorities have singularly failed to address."

"The management have created a system and circumstances whereby no room or desire for compromise exists and therefore no means whereby the inmates can safely express their concerns in a responsible manner."

It is also claimed that prisoners who test positive for drugs are now denied "open visits," the prison is overcrowded, there have been cutbacks in education and compassionate home visits and that the quality of meals has deteriorated.

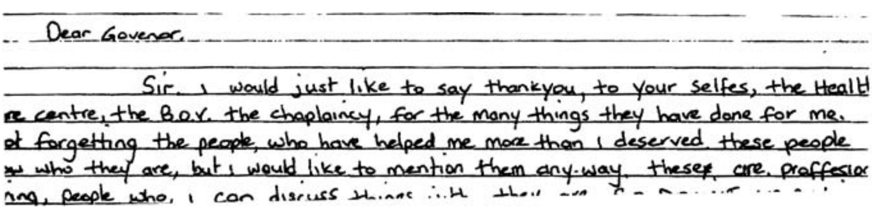
Example 4. Newspaper cutting 'letter tells of strike by inmates'.

‘Dear Governor’ — letters to internal authority

> Dear Governor, Sir, I would just like to say thank you to yourselfs…

During my years of observations at one Young Offender Institution, I was surprised to discover the extent to which prisoners communicated by letter with authority figures within the establishment. Such correspondence displays varying degrees of visuality and may be exposed to varying levels of visibility. Anonymous letters for example, written by prisoners to alert staff to potential problems or matters for concern such as bullying, are ‘invisibilised’ by being ‘put in the box’ along with out-going mail. (‘Posting a letter’ in prison retains the nomenclature and visible physical action associated with the equivalent outside practice). They are seen only by whichever officer is allocated to correspondence duty for the day or passed to someone in higher authority should it be deemed necessary.

Letters to the Governor, on the other hand usually pass before a variety of intermediate audiences such as correspondence officers and secretarial staff before being seen by their intended respondent or being viewed further by even wider audiences. Such letters usually continue to display the visual qualities of letters sent to official parties outside the system, being written according to conventional formal letter-writing styles, usually in blue or black ink, on the almost universal A4 student pad or official prison notepaper. The letter in example 5 is one of many which have been displayed prominently on a noticeboard within one prison I visit so that they can be visually and visibly acknowledged by staff passing by.


Dear Govener,
Sir, I would just like to say thankyou, to your selfes, the Healt
re centre, the B.O.V. the chaplaincy, for the many things they have done for me.
ot forgetting the people, who have helped me more than I deserved these people
who they are, but I would like to mention them any-way. theses are. proffesion
ng, people who, I can discuss things with

Example 5. Dear Governor, I would just like to say thankyou to yourselfs.

While I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the writer of this particular letter, its tone is reminiscent of obligatory notes often imposed by parents as ‘thank-you’ letters, which again reinforces my suggestion that much prison correspondence relates to social practices carried over from pre-prison experiences rather than as institutionally imposed activities. Thus correspondence which is deemed to be ‘official’ either by the writer towards the intended audience or in its means of delivery tends to retain a standard of visual and

visible conventionality reminiscent of the conventions of letter-writing which exist in the outside world.

Such conventions are accorded less however, to what I have suggested as those more 'social' and less visibilised letters, either between prisoners themselves, described in the section 'Kites, stiffys and moodys' or in this final section on prisoners' letters which are sent to their outside communities. It is in prisoners' letters between themselves and their outside worlds that the highest degree of both visibility and visuality is encountered. Visibility appears to be foregrounded in social correspondence which come into a prisoner's possession whereas aspects of visuality have more relevance to letters which prisoners send out.

'Dear Anita' — Social correspondence coming in

Dear Anita, Absolute truly brill to see from you again' (personal correspondence)

The comment 'Absolute truly brill to see from you again' written by a prisoner on receiving a letter from me means precisely that, and many prisoners prioritise the visibility of the letters they receive to the extent that activities and practices around such letters become invested with considerable cultural significance. In addition to 'hearing' the arrival of their mail, prisoners tell me that they "watch the board" which indicates whether they have mail to collect. They "look at the pool table" where letters are laid out for collection and Young Offenders in my experience are often reprimanded for "looking through the window" of staff observation units (and employing their specialised literacy skill of reading upside down!) in order to see if the mail has arrived.

Just as Mayhew observed that prisoners set great store by the actual possession of letters and enclose them within a 'fancy letter bag', so prisoners in contemporary jails store their in-coming letters in particular and personalised ways. Those shown in example 6 are contained in a coloured box which previously held paper tissues and as mentioned earlier in this chapter I have noted other inventive and creative ways of storing and 'visibilising' correspondence.

Furthermore, prisoners reflect the emphasis they place on the specificities of letters by organising the correspondence they receive in very specific ways. Filing systems often reflect prisoners' preferred identities of themselves as a defendant, or a father or a son as letters are primarily divided into categories of sender such as solicitor, girlfriend or family before being sub-divided into date, size or colour of envelope.

Prisoners often display the letters they receive in such a manner as to raise them almost to the level of icon, using the visual display of letters and cards to

signal that their owners retain a life other than the one in which they find themselves. To create an image as a person with wide social networks using the visible proof afforded by letters and cards is considered in prison to be preferable to being seen as an institutionalised prisoner with no outside connections. This artefactual display is carefully orchestrated and letters are positioned in cells so that they may be seen but not touched — those in Mark's cell in example 6 are indicative of many cells where letters are visible but placed far back into the cell.

I have also noticed that in some Young Offender establishments traps are set in front of letters in order to ensure that addresses or actual correspondence does not fall into the hands of someone else. The complexity of such a trap is amply illustrated in example 7, showing Steven's cell.

Example 6. Mark's cell showing letter and card display.

Example 7. Steven's trap for his letters.

The volume of letters which prisoners amass is managed by either putting them into storage[4] or sending them out for safe-keeping, although prisoners tell me that letters continue to retain possessional value and a kind of 'mental visibility' even when they are no longer 'in possession'. I have also noted that while prisoners often leave behind items of clothing, radios or other possessions when they leave the jail, prison correspondence always go with them. In addition to being a visible reminder of incarceration, these letters often retain a 'prison' smell. For a person to wish to retain any aspect of his prison persona when he

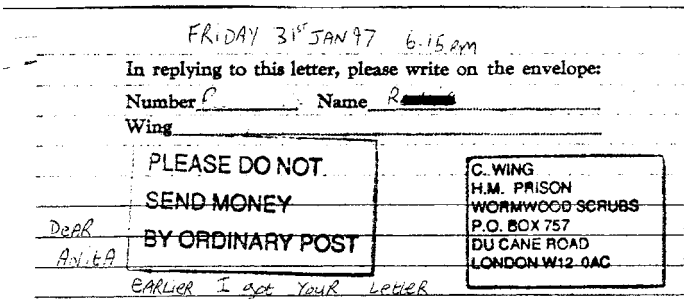
leaves prison is unusual and it is therefore indicative of the value which prisoners place on their correspondence that they choose to carry a visible and olfactory reminder of jail back to their outside worlds.

To observe the visuality of in-coming correspondence is a delicate and rather unethical endeavour. Prisoners have occasionally volunteered to share incoming mail with me, usually in order for me to read it to them or to show me a particularly important or salient point we may have been discussing. Any correspondence that I have seen remains predominantly conventional in style, often containing small drawings, cartoons or abstract patterns. The most salient aspect of incoming correspondence then is in the value attached to the visibility of such documents which acts as an aid to the maintenance of social personhood. It is in prisoners' letters to their personal correspondents on the 'out', however, that levels of visuality and traces of other social practices are at their strongest. Prisoners may write and send out two forms of personal mail. Statutory letters, known as OLs, supplied once a week by the prison and social correspondence, funded by prisoners themselves.

'In replying to this letter' — Statutory Letters going out

> 'In replying to this letter, please write on the envelope: Number… Name…'
> (Directions on OL letter heading)

The statutory letter, implemented by Prison Rule 34, is commonly known as the OL or Ordinary Lette. It has a number of visual markers which identify it as prison issue. On the bottom left-hand corner of the front page is a printers mark, showing that these letters are produced within the system. Each is printed on landscape A4, folded in order to produce a four- sided A5, narrow lined booklet. An OL and its paper is immediately recognisable by anyone with cultural knowledge of day-to-day prison business. Although it takes a recognisable universal form, such letters are often additionally visually customised by individual establishments with regard to regime policy, as in example 9.

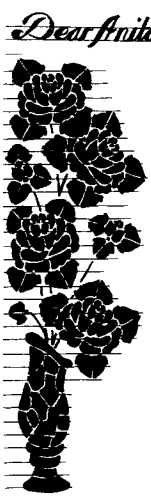

FRIDAY 31ST JAN 97 6.15 PM
In replying to this letter, please write on the envelope:
Number C Name R[redacted]
Wing
PLEASE DO NOT
SEND MONEY
BY ORDINARY POST
C. WING
H.M. PRISON
WORMWOOD SCRUBS
P.O. BOX 757
DU CANE ROAD
LONDON W12 0AC
DEAR
ANITA
EARLIER I got YOUR LETTER

Example 8. OL letter heading.

To prisoners, these institutionally-oriented visual markers render Ordinary Letters unsuitable for personal correspondence. They tend to use them only to make initial contact with their families, confining them thereafter to inter-prison correspondence, subversive messages, or letters to solicitors.

A large proportion of personal outgoing correspondence is undertaken at prisoners' own expense and again it is a reflection of prisoners' wishes to retain social networks that they are willing to spend a large proportion of meagre wages on buying A4 student writing pads, pens, envelopes and stamps.

'*Dear Anita*' — Social correspondence going out



At this point the reader needs to be made aware that prison is necessarily a place of extremes. The imposed uniformity and dullness of prison buildings, clothing, living space, time management, and routine is countered by excessive language, heightened emotionality and various forms of exaggeration. These excesses are carried through into the visuality of social correspondence.

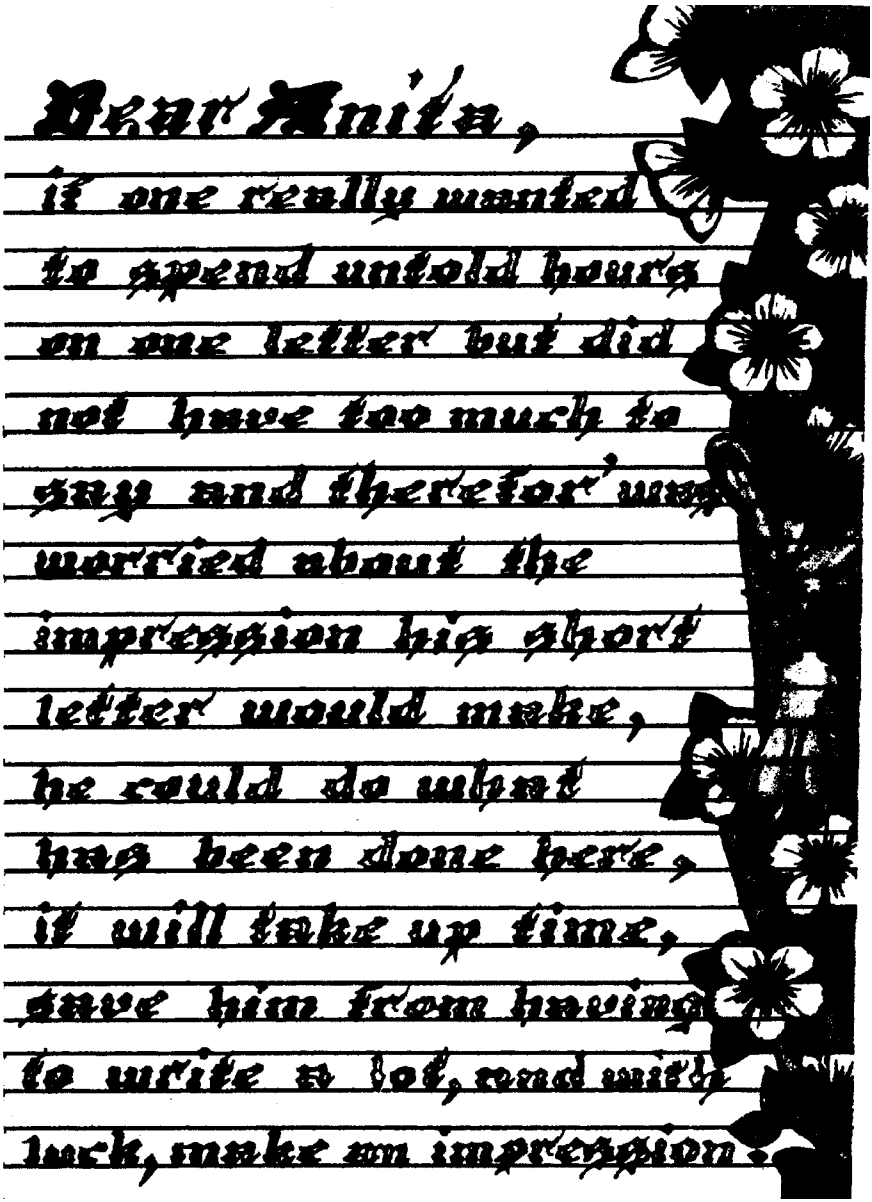
Prisoners write letters of inordinate length — it is not uncommon for me to see anything up to 15 pages of closely written text. The writing is concentrated, often with few paragraphs which are deemed an unnecessary waste of good writing space rather than any ignorance of linguistic convention. Few letters ever end before the last line of the page. Letters often include passages of emotional poetry, excessive language and highly decorative ornamentation and decoration. This extreme visualisation and personalisation of social correspondence cannot

Example 9. Embellished envelope.

be judged by the diluted conventions of outside life. An adult male in prison is acting in a culturally approved, validated and respected manner if he undertakes to send his letters with embellishments and sentiments such as these illustrated in examples 9 and 10.

Not all prisoners engage with elements of visuality to the same standard or degree. Some prisons forbid the decoration of envelopes altogether, refusing to allow any decorated envelope to be mailed, but in my experience most letters I receive contain visual markers of some kind. Personalised icons may be used not only to express humour but as a marker to indicate sarcasm or to dispel misunderstanding as to the tenor of a remark. Many prisoners expand their sense of personal identity by writing their signature in particular ways or using a personalised image when 'signing off'. Social interaction therefore, rather than being subdued by the controlling influences of the prison environment, is supported by the visually creative efforts of prisoners operating within it.

The visualisation of correspondence can benefit the writer as well as the receiver of the letter. Prison is numbingly uneventful and the impoverished



Example 10. Embellished letter.

content of a prison letter can be off-set by its visual qualities.

Prisoners tell me that their embellishment of out-going mail is undertaken not only to present a visually pleasing piece of correspondence but that the time and concentration required to produce it allows the illustrator to be detached from the boredom of his situation. Levels of absorption in the task go some way towards transporting a prisoner out of the drabness of the environment in which such work is created. From my interpretational perspective, it is noteworthy that such illustrations are reminiscent of monastic illustrations, created in an environment which has some resonance with the secluded, cellular and removed nature of closed prison existences.

Conclusion

Prisoners are doubly bound by traditional views of prison as an impersonal abstract construct and literacy as an asocial entity used for evaluation and assessment, being denied as social beings within the former and excluded as literate beings by the latter. A central intention of my research is to challenge these perceptions and I suggest instead that penal institutions have a social dimension, supporting and supported by a network of social practices in which a complex arrangement of multi-literacies flourish through their appropriation by social beings. Letters — more than any other form of literacy-related prison activity — are a prime indication that prisoners are inordinately successful in their endeavours, and not only display and use their literacy talents but use them in a way specifically designed to retain a sense of social identity in an institutional world. Embedded within these endeavours is an understanding of literacy as multidimensional and multisensory. The literacies of letters are not confined to a single domain or a single activity but are acknowledged by prisoners as integral to a multiplicity of social practices. As I suggest, these practices cannot be restricted merely to the act of putting pen to paper but include aspects of smell, taste, sound and particularly visuality.

To return to my observations made at the beginning of this chapter, there is little doubt in the minds of either myself or the prisoners with whom I have communicated, that letter-writing is unquestionably considered a fundamental social practice undertaken in order to challenge what is often perceived and intended as an asocial environment. A woman prisoner re-reading a letter in Brixton jail in 1860 and a young man writing a letter in Durham jail in 1996 are both different and similar. Each are creating and re-creating activities, actions, perceptions and practices drawn from any number of social worlds, re-appropriating various kinds

of letters in order to sustain and retain a sense of social identity within their day to day lives. For any prisoner, in any temporal or geographical incarcerative environment it is "truly brill" to see, hear, touch, read or write even a fragment of social correspondence.

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible if it were not for the generous attitude of many prisoners at Lancaster Farms Young Offenders Institution 1993–7. I am also particularly indebted to Alastair Thomson and Thomas Campbell for sharing their considerable expertise.

Notes

1. The act of swinging a line usually involves using a piece of thread taken from unravelling prison blankets, weighting it (often using a piece of rolled up paper or a plastic knife or spoon) and swinging it from window to window — it can be used to transport a variety of articles — usually newspapers, notes, tobacco or other items.
2. Being moved to another prison.
3. Application No. 13590/88. Thomas Campbell v the United Kingdom — decision 8th November 1989.
4. Volumetric control rules that prisoners can only be in possession of items which will fit into boxes of a designated size. Anything in excess of this must be sent to central storage or sent out of the jail for safekeeping.

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Chapter 11

True Traces

Love Letters and Social Transformation in Nepal

Laura M. Ahearn
University of South Carolina

In June 1992, Bir Bahadur wrote his first letter to Sarita, the young woman who would eventually become his wife:

> Sarita, I'm helpless, and I have to make friends of a notebook and pen in order to place this helplessness before you. Love is the sort of thing that anyone can feel — even a great man of the world like Hitler loved Eva, they say. And Napoleon, who with bravery conquered the "world," united it, and took it forward, was astounded when he saw one particular widow. Certainly, history's pages are coloured with accounts of such individuals who love each other… in which case, Sarita, I'll let you know by a "short cut" what I want to say: Love is the agreement of two souls. The "main" meaning of loving is "life success." I'm offering you an invitation to love.[2]

The richness of this text and many others that I have collected over the years from residents of the Nepali village of Junigau will form the core of a larger project that I have just completed: an ethnography that explores some of the issues surrounding incipient literacy and social change in rural Nepal (Ahearn n.d.). In this book I draw on the work of practice theorists, feminist scholars, and cultural Marxists as I examine the intersections between the microprocesses of social action in Junigau and global processes of transformation. The ethnography not only analyses the linguistic form and content of the love letters but also situates Junigau's new epistolary genre within the concrete social contexts in which villagers read and write these letters that have so quickly become central to their changing practices of courtship and marriage. I offer in this chapter an overview of some of the main themes of the project.

In order to provide some background for this discussion, let me first describe the village that I call Junigau, where I lived for several years as a Peace

Corps Volunteer before conducting the anthropological fieldwork upon which first my dissertation and now this project are based. Junigau, a village in Nepal's Palpa District, has a population of approximately 1250 people, almost all of whom belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group called Magars. Spread out along the side of a ridge at an elevation of about 4500 feet, Junigau is a day's bus ride from Kathmandu and then a half day's walk off the road. Although electricity arrived in the village just before I returned for a visit in May of 1995, on subsequent visits in 1996 and 1998 electrical service was sporadic at best.

Electricity is only one of the many dramatic economic, political, and social transformations Junigau has been undergoing for the past dozen years or so. I will mention only a few of these important changes here. The village's economy has become increasingly monetised, leading to further reliance on foreign army service and factory jobs in India, both of which keep most men away from Junigau for much of their lives. According to a survey I conducted in 1993, among the 46 households in Junigau's central ward, all but three had some income from male family members working outside of Nepal. Educational opportunities have also expanded, especially for girls. Greater access to education, both formal and nonformal, has had an undeniable impact on marriage practices in Junigau. For girls as well as boys, school attendance has afforded many of them greater exposure to ideas, particularly those associated with the nationalistic themes of "development" and "progress," and some measure of independence from their parents. Boys and girls who attend school also interact with one another more than they would otherwise. This is especially true of young people attending classes at the college campus in the district centre several hours' walk away from Junigau.

In addition to increased monetisation and educational opportunities, other changes in the village have had an impact on what I call patterns of valuation in Junigau. More villagers have been able to afford battery-operated radios and so have begun to listen to programs on "rural women's development," romantic songs from Hindi and Nepali movies, and serialised weekly soap operas. Even more influential in setting patterns of valuation and practice are the Hindi and Nepali films themselves, which villagers view at the cinema hall in the district centre.

It is in the context of these dramatic social transformations that I wish to explore with you the novel courtship practice of love letter writing among young people in Junigau.

Before 1980 love letters were rarely, if ever, written in Junigau, for prior to that time most young women in the village were illiterate. With the opening in 1983 of the high school in the village, however, many families have begun to send their daughters to school for at least a few years. Love letter writing in

Junigau therefore provides a case study of the often unexpected ramifications of increased female literacy in a country where only 25% of women are currently literate. The love letters also shed light on Junigau's rapidly changing marriage practices. Three main types of marriage occur in the village: arranged marriage, capture marriage (quite rare now), and elopement. All three kinds have been practised for as long as the oldest villagers can remember, but in recent years there has been a dramatic shift away from arranged marriage and capture marriage toward elopement. Between 1963 and 1982, for example, arranged marriages comprised 73% of Junigau women's first marriages, whereas between 1983 and 1993, the figure was 54%, and in the five years between 1993 and 1998, only one of the sixteen marriages in Junigau was arranged, while the rest of the matches were the result of elopements (Ahearn 1994).

Although elopement has been practised in Junigau for generations, courtship practices have changed significantly in the past decade or so. Previously, elopements would be preceded by an extremely brief or nonexistent courtship. Such abbreviated courtship still occurs, though less commonly than before. Couples might, for example, meet at a songfest and then elope a few hours later, or a matchmaker might arrange an elopement between two people who have never met each other. Villagers also report that in the past some matchmakers used to cast spells on women in order to make them willing to elope.

Nowadays, most courtships are longer and include expressions of romantic love, usually in the form of love letters. Young people in Junigau do not date openly in the way that young Americans do. They might try to meet secretly in Tansen to view a Hindi or Nepali film (usually a variation on the theme of star-crossed lovers), or might look for a place where they can meet in private. But because most parents do not approve of their children, especially their daughters, carrying on even a light flirtation, courtships in Junigau are never public, even when, thanks to village rumour, everyone knows what is going on. The inability of young couples to meet in private, or even at all, used to lead quickly either to elopement or dissolution of the relationship. In the past dozen years or so, however, as most of the young women in the village have become literate, many young people have begun to exchange love letters. Couples might see each other every day while working in the fields or attending school, but because opportunities to meet are so rare, many have resorted to writing love letters as a way of carrying forward the courtship. Young people either compose their love letters alone or in small, single-sex groups of close friends and/or relatives, drawing on their common knowledge of appropriately romantic tropes and occasionally referring to booklets that offer instructions on how to write a good love letter. Reading and writing love letters are activities that are at once both private and

social, as recipients share them with a few chosen individuals, reading and rereading the letters to themselves and to others until they become so worn as to be almost illegible. Such correspondences have thus served to elevate romantic love to a new position of central importance in creating and maintaining intimacy not only in courtship and marriage but also in same-sex friendships.

The increased emphasis on romantic love is both a reflection of and one of the sources for a shift in patterns of valuation among villagers. As Junigau residents have begun to value individual agency more highly than fate as an explanation for why events occur, they have also sought to choose their own marriage partners based on the criteria they think would provide a suitable "life friend." Along with the increased emphasis on individual agency, villagers are more adamantly asserting the importance of a woman's "consent" in the matter of her own marriage. They are less and less likely to attribute events to fate, or karma, linking them instead to the actions of individuals. As my Nepali sister told me, when it comes to marriage, "It's up to one's own wishes, it is! One should wear the flower one likes, you know."

In the love letters that Junigau's young residents have begun to write in recent years, one can see evidence of these same forces of social and agentive change as correspondents negotiate their relationships and identities, often intertwining individualism and interdependence, accommodation and resistance. Echoing sentiments indicative of increasingly westernised conceptions of personhood and romantic love, such letters pose a potential threat to the Hindu pattern of extended patrilineal families. As Lynn Bennett notes, romantic love represents "a shift of loyalties dangerous to the joint family and the patrilineal ideals it embodies" (1983:177). Likewise, Karen Lystra finds that in the United States in the nineteenth century, romantic love as expressed in love letters had the effect of creating "some special experience within an individual before marriage that was not shared by others," thus contributing to the formation not only of close conjugal bonds but also of "American individualism" (1989:8–9; cf. Besnier 1995). Although the contents of Junigau's love letters differ from those written by nineteenth century Americans, the novel practice of exchanging such letters over a protracted courtship period similarly reflects and contributes to significant changes in family patterns and power dynamics in the village.

In the remainder of the paper I'd like to share with you some excerpts from two correspondences. The first, of which I have letters from both parties, was carried on between the two individuals I call Shila Devi and Vajra Bahadur for over two years, starting in 1990. I have known Shila Devi and Vajra Bahadur from the first day I arrived in the village in 1982. Shila Devi was then a skinny, mischievous little girl of twelve or so at the time, long since pulled out of school

in order to help her widowed mother. Vajra Bahadur was one of my brightest students in seventh grade English, eventually going on to study at the campus in Tansen. In those years I never imagined that the painfully shy Vajra Bahadur and the vivacious, popular Shila Devi would ever get together. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1990, when they were both in their early twenties, it was clear to everyone who attended Tij songfests that year that they were an item. Shila Devi was the aggressor at these events, mercilessly teasing Vajra Bahadur when he declined to dance or was too shy to even look at her.

Shila Devi and Vajra Bahadur's courtship involved both novel and more customary activities. Like many couples before them, they attended songfests and met whenever their daily tasks would allow them to do so. Unlike courting pairs in years past, however, Shila Devi and Vajra Bahadur carried on a lengthy courtship of over two years and wrote frequent love letters to each other, even though they lived a mere ten minutes' walk apart. Under pressure from his parents to choose a wife or have one chosen for him, Vajra Bahadur tried to convince Shila Devi in letters and in person to elope with him after they had been courting for a couple of years. Shila Devi's response was to remind him that they were related in an inappropriate, if distant, way, and to urge him to try to find an educated woman to marry. With two years of college education, Vajra Bahadur was at the time (and still is) one of the most educated people in Junigau, but he consistently attempted to reassure Shila Devi, especially in his love letters, that she was capable and intelligent enough for him. Eventually, Shila Devi allowed Vajra Bahadur to persuade her (though, of course, it's a much more complicated story than this), and they eloped. Vajra Bahadur remains in the village, one of the few men who are not in the army or working in India, and he and Shila Devi have what seems to me to be an unusually close and happy marriage — one that is not, however, without its tensions, especially in the area of relations between the couple and Vajra Bahadur's parents, with whom they lived until recently.

The other couple whose letters I excerpt here I call Bir Bahadur and Sarita. Because I know Sarita (a former Junigau resident) much better than I know Bir Bahadur, I only have the eighteen letters she received from him. Sarita and Bir Bahadur met while studying together at the campus in Tansen in 1992, when Bir Bahadur took a liking to Sarita after only having spoken to her once. He sent her the "invitation to love" I presented at the start of this chapter, an invitation that caused Sarita extreme puzzlement when she received it, for she had no idea who Bir Bahadur was. Several exchanges of letters later, they finally met to talk, both accompanied by their best friends, and subsequently they met secretly whenever they could. From the start of their courtship, promises of everlasting love were made by both in their letters, and it continued to be mainly in their letters that

they expressed their deeply felt emotions. A year and half after they began their correspondence they eloped. They currently live with Bir Bahadur's family in a village in the far western part of Palpa District, where Sarita takes care of their small daughter and son while teaching at the local primary school. Bir Bahadur periodically tries to enlist in the British or Singaporean armies and has run (unsuccessfully thus far) for office. From long talks with Sarita during the summers of 1995 and 1998 and from my very limited observation of her interactions with Bir Bahadur, it seems that their relationship is somewhat strained and unhappy. The reasons for this are many; unfortunately, I have no time to go into them here.

Let us look first at how Junigau love letters reflect and shape the shift — a shift that is not yet complete or even necessarily unidirectional — currently underway in how villagers conceive of their own agency. Take, for example, a letter written by Shila Devi to Vajra Bahadur in July 1990 at the start of their courtship:

> Some people say that if it's their lot in life, whatever it is, they'll do it. But it seems to me that it's up to each person's own wishes… I say this, but I don't know anything. If you were to speak on this subject, then you would be much more knowledgeable.

Attempting to reassure her and possibly to attenuate the hierarchical relationship he saw developing between them, Vajra Bahadur responded in his next letter:

> You probably know more than I do about some things, and, likewise, I probably know more than you do about others. We must learn from each other. Who's big and who's small? We're all the same.

Additional insights into gender and knowledge emerge when we compare these sentiments to those expressed by Bir Bahadur to Sarita in a letter dated July 1992:

> I intend to marry boldly on my own. But if your father and mother propose to give you to a rich, handsome boy and you don't consult me, you'll commit a great crime. Remember this well. These days a marriage certainly won't take place without conversation between the boy and girl. Conditions used to be such that when a daughter's father and mother gave her away in marriage, she was forced to go. But under today's conditions, the law doesn't allow this, and it's against the law. These things you know well because you're not uneducated. If you have a strong wish, no one can interfere contrary to it.

Junigau love letters thus illuminate changing conceptions of personhood, gender relations, knowledge, and power.

Among the 200+ love letters my Junigau friends, former students, and fictive kin have generously shared with me, very little attention is given to specifying the

reasons for the writer's feelings. Love itself is usually the main subject, not the person loved. For the most part, the letters are either practical in orientation, or else they contain endless abstractions about the immortality of "true love." Vajra Bahadur, for example, writes the following remarks and poetry to Shila Devi:

> I hope that, just as an old year is followed by a new year and new conversations and new hopes make old ones into history, so the path of our love will bring with this new year new hopes and the start of new things. Even if we die before the end of eternity, our love will forever be immortal.
>
> If you became a rose,
> I'd become a bumblebee and come to you.
> If you became the full moon,
> I'd become the brightness and be with you.

Issues of trust, jealousy, and future expectations appear and reappear. Bir Bahadur writes in one of his first letters to Sarita:

> Sarita, trust me, I'm not loving you in order to make an amusement out of your life. In my life this is the first time I have ever loved, and it's with you. So, I don't know many things. Yes, in your feelings that kind of hesitation may exist, thinking that I might deceive you, no…?

In a later letter, he writes,

> Trust me, Sarita, this is only the first time in my life that I have loved anyone, and it's you alone. I certainly want it to get better and better. In the end, if you don't make an effort to forget me or to deceive me, you alone will be my "Life friend." I will definitely marry you if you agree to do so. Yes, I also trust that you won't deceive me, but what's in your heart/mind depends on you alone.

Despite their frequently abstract or formulaic tone, these letters often express and evoke poignant or impassioned emotions not often expressed verbally between women and men in Junigau, thereby both mirroring and furthering the changes that are already occurring in gender relations. Shila Devi, for example, bares her soul in this letter from early on in her courtship with Vajra Bahadur:

> Mother's Brother's Son, why have 'we' started to love and love each other, have such affection for each other? I can't figure out why. Why, oh, why? If I don't see you, this heart/mind of mine starts to worry even more: where will I see you? Where will I meet you?

And Vajra Bahadur responds with similar ardour:

> Shila Devi, why do you love me so much? Your love is really making me insane. It feels like you've cast a spell on me; I don't want to be apart from you even for a moment.

Very often the love letters reflect and shape young villagers' changing conceptions of their own personhood. Thus, Bir Bahadur asks plaintively in one letter, "Sarita, why have I changed so quickly that my own soul can't even explain it?"

In addition to romantic love, another common theme in the letters is "progress," particularly as it is associated with development. Some of the phrases and concepts appearing in love letters are even written out in English (the language associated most with development in Nepal), one popular expression being "life success." "Love is such a thing that between two lovers "life success" occurs," Bir Bahadur writes. In a later letter, he composes the following poem for Sarita:

> Let's not endure a dark life
> But always lengthen our steps in the direction of brightness.
> Let's follow whatever path
> By which we can obtain success.

And in reference to his own life as a student, Bir Bahadur writes,

> I'm immersed only in my studies, and I seek to obtain success. If some humans have already produced such complicated, complicated things in this world, then we are also humans, so why wouldn't we be able to succeed at our worthless, ordinary education?

Users of this "development talk" generally advocate westernisation or modernisation in the form of education, health, and irrigation projects, citing the need to raise up "small" groups such as untouchables, women, and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups like the Magars, Sherpas, and Gurungs. In fact, rural women's development projects are proliferating widely throughout the country and are featured in many Radio Nepal broadcasts. In my ethnography of Junigau love letters, therefore, I draw on and contribute to the literature on the anthropology of development, the study of gendered meanings of romantic love, the causes and effects of incipient literacy, and other sociocultural and economic transformations.

This chapter offers only a small taste of the richness of Junigau love letters and probably raises more questions than it answers. Still, it is my hope that at the very least I have convinced you that Bir Bahadur was correct when he wrote,

> Sarita, love letters, even without the give and take of conversation, remain in the form of a true trace until the end of life.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 24th Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin, 21 October 1995.
2. The words in quotation marks were written in English. The remainder of this excerpt and all of those that follow are my translations of love letter texts or tape recorded interviews.

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CHAPTER 12

Teaching Letters

The Recontextualisation of Letter-Writing Practices in Literacy Classes for Unschooled Adults in South Africa

Catherine Kell

Introduction

The title of this chapter is a play on the term letters in all its meanings; in the alphabetical sense as the basics required for code-breaking; in the communicative sense as printed messages linking people and in the cultural sense of being learned, of belonging to literary culture. Two accounts from the early 1990s, written by student-teachers of literacy lessons in school classrooms in Australia seem to capture for Bill Green (1993: 196) a sense of what he calls "the insistence of the letter". "Both involve teaching to the letter, literally; or rather an insistence **on** the letter. Teaching and learning here are presented as organised around a particular version of alphabetic literacy, and already the seeds are sown for the discursive construction of a distinctive school subjectivity".

The accounts show how the teacher elicits ideas from the children, works on the 'correct form' of the letter and then gives out writing tasks drawing on this form. What I found striking in these observations was the similarity between these accounts of a primary school classroom on the other side of the world, and an account of a literacy lesson I observed in a back room in an industrial complex in the winelands of the Western Cape in South Africa. The learners were not small children but burly, adult, male labourers, some with decades of experience in South Africa's notorious migrant labour system, and the focus was not on the writing of the individual letters of the alphabet but on writing personal letters. But the pedagogy was not too different, in fact, if a different signified

is substituted for the same signifier, (personal letter-writing for the individual alphabetic letters that Green's students observed) the accounts become almost indistinguishable. Another form of the insistence of the letter.

The migrant labour system was one of the cornerstones of South Africa's economy during the long years of colonialism and apartheid. Black men left their homes and their families in the rural areas to work on the goldmines, in the factories and the fields of what was then 'white South Africa'. They returned to the rural areas once a year for three weeks, sometimes on other occasions to bury a relative, or sort out a domestic matter. The vast majority of these men had no schooling or had spent perhaps a few years in primary school before putting their thumb print to their first *ijoyini*, the contract that allowed them to move to the 'white areas'. Such movement was tightly regulated, and any black person in a 'white area' without a pass or a contract could immediately be thrown into jail.

The regulation and prohibitions have now gone, but many thousands of men and women working in the cities still have a house, livestock, family members and their buried umbilical cord linking them to the land of their ancestors, that small part of South Africa from where they came. Many of them still use their thumb print, and that is why they have been, and still are, the target of the various literacy programmes that have operated since the early part of the century.

The reading and writing of personal letters has always been an important part of the curriculum of such literacy programmes, which have taken many different forms, the majority of which, however, constructed the "learner" in similar ways. Prinsloo (1995) quotes Wilson who wrote a history of the Cape African Night Schools from 1945 to 1967:

> Illiterate, poverty-stricken migrants, cut off from family life and confused in a new urban, worker society found a warm, responsive environment in the night schools. Here they learnt to read and write their own language and write letters home, to speak, read and write the new language used in their daily working lives and to develop greater fluency in language skills(1991:89).

During the anti-apartheid years, such literacy programmes commanded tremendous moral authority. Literacy discourses were deeply embedded in the narrative of the struggle against apartheid, and constructed literacy as different forms of 'good'; as 'power' or 'empowerment' in the radical approach; as 'adaptation' in the functional approach and as 'salvation' in the missionary approach (Lyster 1992). Associated with each of these versions of 'good' were differentiated pedagogies, involving the inscription of particular identities for literacy learners, and traces of these can still be seen in the literacy teaching that is currently going on.

In post-apartheid policy development for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) these three versions of 'good' have been subsumed into the overarching

framework of 'outcomes-based education'. Adult literacy work has become rapidly systematised and formalised, and is seen as the foundation for entering onto the lowest rungs of a ladder of lifelong learning, captured in the grid-like images of the new National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Within this framework, adult literacy is part of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), having equivalence with the levels and standards set for children in formal schooling. Literacy is seen as developing incrementally, within a framework of outcomes specified for a learning area called "Language Communications".

Literacy therefore is discursively constructed as 'individual skill'; in the sense of attributes which are possessed by individuals and in the sense of increased productivity for economic growth through human resources development. Both Street's "autonomous model" of literacy (1984, 1995) and Reder's (1994) "individual skills paradigm" are therefore operating in the version of literacy that is being promoted in post-apartheid South Africa. Both of these are tied into a "modernist discourse of educational reform" (Green 1993:197).

Attempts to systematise and resource adult literacy provision are crucially important in South Africa;[1] however, underlying this reform are serious tensions and contradictions. In the field of adult literacy work, I have drawn attention to two key problems (Kell 1997):

Firstly, the conception of literacy evident within current policy discourse has serious flaws and can be challenged on many of its basic assumptions, drawing on evidence from contemporary national and international research in the area which has come to be called the 'new literacy studies' (Street 1995; Barton 1994; Gee 1990; Prinsloo & Breier 1996). These are:

– The understanding of unschooled people as necessarily marginalised and 'silenced' because of their 'illiteracy' is a misconception.
– The assumption that literacy instruction to adults is something of a redemptive activity, described in health, religious or liberatory terms as a 'bringing to the light' of those trapped in the dark is not an appropriate metaphorical understanding of the process.
– The common understanding of literacy, influenced by school teaching practices and understandings, is that literacy is an individualised capacity and a solitary activity. In practice, particularly amongst people with a limited exposure to schooling, literacy is often a collective and shared event, with multiple social actors performing different social roles, depending on their skills and location. Rather than the model of knowledge and skills residing in individuals the more contemporary metaphor of the 'distributive system' is appropriate, where effective performance does not require the

> equal skilling of all its parts but the effective performance of the system as a whole (Dept. of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies 1997).

Secondly, the attempt to construct a system of provision of adult literacy on the basis of outcomes-based approaches may be doomed to failure in a country like South Africa where few of the inputs necessary to reach such outcomes are in place. One such key input is the expertise of teachers. Without this expertise, outcomes can become emptied-out procedures, used for the purposes of certification rather than for social purposes, for exchange value rather than use value.

These two lines of argument provide the basis on which the letter-writing practices of migrant workers and their recontextualisation by literacy teachers into literacy lessons, are explored, forming the focus of this chapter. The contradictions that emerge may help to throw light on emerging policy debates around the "modernist discourse of educational reform" in South Africa. The first part of the chapter discusses pedagogical issues in the teaching of letter-writing to unschooled adults. The second part of the chapter explores aspects of the personal letter-writing practices which have developed amongst largely unschooled isiXhosa-speaking families and communities, where family members are in a constant cycle of movement between urban and rural areas.[2] The final part analyses the distinctiveness of letter-writing in the classroom and of letter-writing in the community, drawing on Bernstein's concept of recontextualisation (1996), and pointing to the broader processes of social change and stratification in which the recontextualisation is embedded.

Letter-writing in the classroom

The observation of 'teaching letters' in a literacy class provides the starting point for the analysis of the classroom-based letter-writing. The literacy class was held with eight learners in a large industrial complex (the learners were middle-aged, isiXhosa-speaking, male migrant labourers, at Level 1 and 2 which are the lowest levels on the National Qualifications Framework, where learners are called 'beginners'), and the focus was on writing letters. The whole class was conducted in isiXhosa.

The teacher, Nomfundo, asked the learners what elements are needed in a letter:

> "What is the first thing we need in a letter?"
> "Then what do we need?"
> "OK, so we need the greeting", and so on.

These were all written on the board in the form of a letter, with an "address", and a "greeting". The class as a whole then proceeded to construct a first paragraph of a fictional letter to a 'wife' in the rural areas, but were then reminded that they had forgotten to write the date. There was a lively discussion about this and the teacher insisted that this was a very important omission. Then there was a section enquiring about the health of the family, followed by a section about money which was being sent by the 'writer' to this family. These parts were called the "body" of the letter. Then there was the "final greeting" and the "acknowledgement". (All of these terms were also listed on an adjacent sheet of newsprint as the "elements" of the letter.)

A very animated discussion broke out about the issue of the 'final greeting'. There was much embarrassed laughter, and the issue of *hlonipha* was discussed.[3] The teacher let the discussion proceed for some time, but then insisted that the format of the letter must be complied with, and that they close the letter with an acknowledgement like "Your dear husband, Sipho". It seemed that the learners were embarrassed by and resisting using words so intimate. But the teacher (a black, isiXhosa-speaking woman from the same area as the learners) was adamant that this was necessary.

The learners were then instructed in two groups to write letters. The teacher was pleased with their attempts, but the second group had forgotten something. After a few moments of trying to elicit the 'mistake', the teacher showed them that they had forgotten the 'final greeting and acknowledgement'. They laughed embarrassedly at themselves, and spent much time rubbing out their pencilled lines and painstakingly putting them right. No doubt, what they wrote was something like 'With love from your dear husband, Sipho' (Kell 1996a).

I was intrigued by what seemed to me to be a fetishisation of the letter format and its "elements", in the face of initial resistance by the learners and their later accommodation to the format. In discussions around this issue, an isiXhosa-speaking student, Mzukisi, told me that when you are at school you are taught to use the following terms in writing letters: *Tata othandekayo* (Dearly loved father) and *Owakho umntana endimthandayo* (Your dear child). But as soon as you go out of school you use different terms like *Dear Tata* (English, even though you are writing the letter in isiXhosa) and *Mna Mzukisi* (I am Mzukisi). The conversation between myself and Mzukisi continued in the following way:

CK: But then when do you use the terms that you are taught at school?
MM: You only use those formal terms when they are required of you in school, and you understand that you must use them there otherwise you will fail.

CK: But why would a literacy teacher demand that 'beginner' learners do it in this schooled way when they do not have exams to pass?

MM: Well, I could say that it's the standard. They have to know the right thing… if she didn't teach them that then maybe they will feel misled. And then when they go home and show their children that they are learning the informal way then their children will say to them that their teacher is not teaching them the right way, and then they will complain to the teacher.

This approach was echoed by literacy teachers whom I observed, two of whom were later interviewed in more detail. Many of them had used one of the most popular and widely-used literacy packages in their classes, which has been produced by an educational agency (ABE Development Services Trust, undated). The package is called "*Fundani*" and has been designed to comply with the levels established by the NQF, and has been translated into a range of different languages. The main section of the *Fundani* package (at ABET Level 1) deals with letter-writing. In the introductory lesson in the teacher handbook, the teacher is told to explain that "one of the aims of *Fundani* [2] is for each learner to read and write their own letters". This section is called "How we communicate" and the third instruction to literacy teachers goes as follows:

3. Discuss how we communicate

Page 5: Work as a class. Explain: The pictures on this page tell the story of Ntombekaya Ntsika. She left her home and family in the Ciskei to look for work in the city. She cannot read and write.

Ask: What are these pictures about?

Discuss:
*How do you think Ntombekaya communicates with her family if she cannot read and write?
*Are these good ways of communicating? Why do you say so?
*How do you send money or messages to your families who live far away?
*Would you prefer to write a letter? Why?

Pages 6 and 7: Work as a class. Explain: This story is about a worker, Phumzile Mbiwa who cannot read and write.

Read the story to the group. Encourage learners to follow in their books. Allow learners time to read the story on their own.

Discuss:
*When Phumzile went home his son asked for a dictionary. What are the different ways that Phumzile could send the dictionary from the city? Is Phumzile able to post this dictionary himself? Does he need help?

> *Phumzile's son is in Standard Six. Phumzile has never been to school. How do you think Phumzile feels about not having been to school? How do you think Phumzile's son feels about his father not having been to school?
>
> Sum-up: Remind learners what they have said about not being able to read and write letters.

In a later lesson, the cost of sending messages by phone, post or telegram is compared, and the discussion questions focus on which is the cheapest, quickest and most private. Another focuses on the problems the postman has when letters are not properly addressed.

A later lesson is called "Letters have different parts", and it goes through each of the "elements" of the letter. They are:

> the address
> the date
> the greeting
> the main body of the letter
> the end greeting.

Each element is to be pointed out by the teacher, and the question asked of each, why is it important to write the address/date/end greeting and so on?

The influence of the *Fundani* package was confirmed in an interview with a literacy teacher who said:

> First of all I just tell them the format of the letter and its importance, starting from the address you know, and, um, ja, …the months. But I teach them the months in English, you know, and… I teach them the greeting, and tell them different, tell them why they should put a certain…for instance, when they write to a certain person, they should put "Dear *endimthandayo*" (loved one), "Dear *othandekayo*". And teach them the opening sentences, but I always tell them to write "Dear" it's very common in IsiXhosa… "Dear *Mzala*" (cousin), … um… they go through the body of the letter… I ask them what do they want to write about, what, what is it they want to say to the people ? That is very important, what they want to say to the people. Then I teach them sort-of the plan, this is how to open, this is the opening sentence, and then teach them the conclusion, the closing sentence… ja, for example, *salani kakuhle* (stay well).

Exactly the same structure for a lesson was described by the other teacher, and given the widespread popularity of the *Fundani* materials this seems to indicate that a particular orthodoxy has been introduced with regard to the teaching of letter-writing, and teachers are following the *Fundani* Handbook 'to the letter' as it were.

The picture of the learners that is created is not too different from that of Wilson quoted above in a different era, "of the average learner as an isolated, culturally blank dependent. The perception of the learners is from that of teachers confident in the worth and value of the cultural resources they hold and are prepared to share" (Prinsloo 1995).

Letter-writing within the family

The data collected on the letter-writing practices of unschooled adult migrant workers revealed a very different picture from that painted by the literacy teachers, a picture of resourceful people who did not seem to see stigma in their individual lack of literacy skill, drawing on complex, interlocking social networks at different levels to accomplish communication between urban and rural areas. Letter-writing played a central role in this, even amongst those who had never been to school, for whom at least four letters passed back and forth between family members per month. This suggests a substantial volume of correspondence. Very little of this volume of correspondence enters into the formal South African Postal Service. The workers explained that they preferred to send the letters with the buses that travelled weekly between Cape Town and their homes in the rural areas of Transkei and Ciskei, up to a thousand kilometres away:

CK: Seeing that your letters don't have stamps on them, how do you send them back to Cofimvaba?

MK: No, since the emergence of these buses that go home, we were posting before, but now we send them through the buses. They become our posts.

A complex social network exists with what are seen as far greater benefits for letter-writers than could be offered by the postal service. This contrasts strongly with the picture that is portrayed in the *Fundani* Workbook, which suggests that the postal service is the best option for communicating through letters with distant families.

The main problem, the workers explained, was that the post simply took too long. With the postal service it could take three to four weeks for their letters to get home. With the buses, a letter could be sent **and** a reply received within one week. I found it interesting that it was the literacy teacher, not the workers, who explained that in parts of the rural areas there were no proper addresses, so the post could not be delivered door-to-door. Again, the problems the postman has when addresses were not correct, were presented in the *Fundani* materials; but

were not an issue in this form of correspondence which, on the whole did not need addresses.

All those interviewed described the Langa bus station as the central point to which letters would be taken.[4] One person (who needed to take three mini-bus taxi trips to reach Langa) explained that he would give his letters to the "bus organiser" (a kind of conductor), while others said that they gave them to the bus driver. Money could also be sent in this way, the usual amounts being between R300 and R1000, a substantial portion of a railway worker's monthly wage. By these means, the difficult and alienating processes of filling in forms at Post Offices with often hostile clerks could be circumvented, and the process of sending the text itself could be negotiated orally, drawing on the knowledge of family, clan and neighbourhood networks.

In certain cases, the bus would pass directly through the writer's village and drop the letter or money off at a specified place, in other cases the relative in the rural area would meet the bus at the station and collect the letters. One person mentioned that the "bus organiser" had a list:

DS: If we are seven (people) and then we give one person a certain amount of money to send it to Transkei, then what they do they just take a paper and take your name and write it, and then say R500 to so-and-so, or maybe R700 to… Then take that paper, photocopy it and keep it here in Cape Town, and then the other paper we give it to the bus organiser and then on Friday when she comes back to Cape Town we look at that paper and see if everything went right and then we keep that photocopy paper.

CK: And when they get to the other side and they hand the money over —

DS: they look at that paper and then they tick it, before handing the money or the letter especially the money, you don't just go to the house and give the letter to that person, you call the neighbour of that person or family member of that person, as the organiser you have to go with someone you trust and then four or five people will see that you have handed that over…

CK: — so it is witnessed?

DS: — it is witnessed, yes.

The buses leave Cape Town on Saturday, and arrive in the rural areas on Monday. The letters are then collected, and replies written, which are sent back to Cape Town on the same bus which does the return trip, leaving on Thursday and arriving on Saturday. In Cape Town, the letters are either collected by the original writer, or someone sent by him, or are left in a specified house:

CK: So does your wife also wait for the same person who delivered the money to send the reply?

MS: No, the wife gives it to anyone who is working in the bus that time, because they all know where to leave letters here in Langa. There is a central house in the Langa hostels where they leave them. We, the citizens, know where to look for our letters.

Many of the letters shown to me had only the name of the recipient written on the envelope, few had written addresses. Some of the letters had not been put in envelopes, but simply consisted of a piece of paper torn out of an exercise book, folded over and stuck together with the recipient's name written on the front. In some cases the recipient lived in a completely different area from the one in which the bus station was situated, sometimes many kilometres away. Fetching letters at the station or the drop-off house, and delivering them to a neighbour, family or clan member, or co-worker, was mentioned a number of times.

CK: I see here that they have written your room number and Zone 23 here (on the envelope) but on K's letters there are no room numbers or addresses. So does it go just by name or what?

MS: The room number helps in that if my friend is checking for their mail, say I haven't been to check and they see my letter while they do not know exactly where I stay, they can take my letter to my room, it becomes easy like that.

CK: So letters get passed on like that?

MS: Yes.

CK: So people are always trusting each other. I'm so impressed by this level of trust.

MS: You can say you completely trust people, but they don't do any robbery, since these letters from home are not expected to have any valuables.

Only one person said that he had heard of problems with this system:

> Sometimes the problem is that the money does not get home. But the wife will write and ask why you send no money. You see, sometimes the driver he used your money, but he always repays it back if he used your money. But I'm only talking for what I saw happening on (with) others, on my side no such thing has ever happened, no, never to me.

Another linked social network was drawn on for the purposes of writing and reading letters. Some of the workers interviewed read and wrote their own letters, others drew on a person "well-known to them" to do it for them. All spoke about having been involved in reading and writing letters together with others, either as children within the family, or as adults upon entering the

migrant labour system. In these accounts, the tensions, humiliation and misunderstandings which are invariably presented by literacy practitioners as being an important reason for 'teaching letters' were not very evident. The role of the literacy mediator or scribe, has been explored by a number of writers (Wagner 1986; Baynham in Street 1993; Prinsloo & Breier 1996). In particular, Malan (in Prinsloo & Breier 1996, 1997) has explored the issue in greater depth with regard to code- and mode- switching (Baynham 1982), as well as with regard to mediation required between standard or "high" versions of the code, and non-standard or "low" versions. In all of the accounts of mediation presented by the workers, the switch from oral to written language was the crucial one, but it was not marked by a switch from non-standard to standard language.

MK: (who had only had three years of schooling roughly fifty years previously) I was given experience by those who could not read and write by their insistence that I write for them.
CK: Were these people your family members or members of your clan?
MK: No, some were here (in the hostel) in Cape Town.
CK: How did you find doing this, was it hard or easy?
MK: It was hard but I was enjoying it, I felt important to do that. A person used to leave me to write his letter during his absence and then return when I'm finished.
CK: How would you know what to say then?
MK: No, the person just say that I should respond to the letter. And I do it. I was the one who had read the letter to him anyway, so this person was trusting me.

A more complex picture emerged of the difficulties of reading and writing letters which contained sensitive news or messages. A younger literacy teacher explained that he used to be asked to write love letters for older men, and he found that very difficult. However, the older migrant worker continued by explaining about reading bad news:

MK: Yes, that has happened, but I used to be tactful, skip the bad message until I call other people there, then tell, that is if you know something is not well, then you read it as it is in front of people who can help me to ease the situation.
CK: Have you ever been nervous or scared to do that?
MK: No, even when it is my own similar situation that experience on (of) others strengthen me for my situation.

I explored whether there was any particular kind of reciprocity going on where skills or resources in other areas besides literacy were exchanged (Fingeret 1982), but this did not seem to be the case. S said that he had sometimes been

told that he must supply money for liquor if he approached a person to read a letter, so he had found other people who were well-known to him.

Although the data was not clear cut, it seemed that a person could draw on a number of networks, besides immediate family members and close friends, and that these networks stretched across the thousand kilometres between urban and rural areas. The first network was the extended family where, for example, an uncle's brother would be called on to play the role of literacy mediator. The second seemed to be members of the clan. The third was comprised of neighbours, and a wider grouping of people who came from the "home" area. An additional network would exist in the hostels in the urban areas based on people living and working together, and sometimes this overlapped with kinship networks. This network, however, was not always reliable or trustworthy.

The family itself was the primary network within which literacy was managed as a social process, with literacy skills not being individual attributes but distributed across the network. The relationship between parents and their children around this distribution of skills is presented by literacy practitioners as one fraught with tension, conflict and stigma. This was not the case in the interviews with workers and the data collected from university students. The only time a problem was mentioned was by a literacy teacher who said that he used to get bored reading and writing letters for his father because it took too long. The university students described feeling valued and important in the family when asked by 'illiterate' family members to do reading and writing. The workers seemed to see the gradual assumption of responsibility for literacy tasks as a 'natural' part of their growing up, completely embedded in the ongoing life of the family as a whole, rather like looking after the livestock or doing washing.

CK: Did you feel why can't he (your father) write his own letters?

DS: In those times elders never bothered to get schooled, so, myself knowing that I can read and write, I found no problem knowing that my father can't write, and as I can write I am being schooled by him.

CK: Did you say that you were paying him back?

DS: No, not exactly that, I'm doing it for my father who has a right to ask or to send me for any other thing.

In the interpersonal exchange of oral and written language necessary for letter-writing to occur, children would become knowledgeable about customary ways of addressing members of the family and about family matters. One university student when thinking back to a powerful childhood experience involving literacy explained how she was called on to write a letter on behalf of her grandmother to her mother who was living in an urban area:

> As she dictated, I wrote the conclusion the way she said the words to indicate from whom the letter was. At the end she asked me to write "*Ndim* Mildred Bawo" (I am Mildred Bawo), I wrote the words and thereafter had to read the letter for her so that she could see her data was there. I was very disappointed when she shouted at me, asking that at that stage I should have known that "Bawo" stands for the surname that she was not supposed to mention, according to customs and traditions. From that time I learned that there were such things as customs and traditions.

In letters shown to me by one of the migrant workers, a letter from his wife was attached to another letter written by a child, but using exactly the same opening words: "Dear with easy words I am fine." The worker explained that "the children are just copying from her letters since they also do the reading for my wife's letters."

Besnier (in Street 1993) has researched the encoding of affect in letter-writing, showing that in Nukulaelae Pacific Atoll letters rank higher than any other spoken or written register in terms of affective-involvement markers. From the learners' reactions in the observation of the literacy class in which the issue of *hlonipha* arose in relation to the final greeting, it seemed that there was a very different and distant encoding of affect, although this seemed to pertain specifically to letters between husbands and wives. Whether this is a result of centuries of immersion into the oral custom of *hlonipha*, which has transferred into writing; or whether it is a result of the fact that letter-writers can never be assured that their letters are read privately, is not clear and needs further research.

The workers had different perspectives on whether the teacher was right to insist on a particular type of "end greeting", as did the literacy teachers.

> I don't think it is right to enforce a certain way like that. There are many things that can be written and someone may feel that they need not write them, it therefore won't be right to be compelled to write especially such things. It won't be right. For instance if one writes a letter to someone at home, someone who can't read for herself, someone will then read for her all those kinds of things, it won't work for me… There are things you can't say in a letter until you meet face-to-face.

> I would say that the teacher was right as their teacher. I also started at school from Grade A, B and then Class 1 where we were taught the same thing. They should learn whatever they are taught, they can then choose not to use it when they are doing their own writings at home.

Despite the literacy teacher's insistence in the observation that the address, date, initial greeting, acknowledgement and the end greeting were correctly written by the

literacy learners, none of the letters shown me by the workers had any such elements, and there was a strong rationale for why those elements were not necessary.

Firstly, eleven out of twelve letters began with "Dear" followed immediately with "we are fine" or "I am fine except for the fever" etc. Only one letter included the person's name at the beginning "Dear Radebe", and this one also had an address written at the top of the page, while none of the others did. None of the letters was dated.

The *Fundani* package suggests that an opening sentence like "Thank you very much for the money you sent". However, most of the letters shown to me dealt with money that had been sent, but not one of these said "Thank you", indicating that financial exchanges are not socially controlled through the expression of affect.

The "acknowledgements" took many forms, none of which were suggested by the literacy teacher, or by the *Fundani* materials. The majority of writers ended by saying "*Obebhala*" (the one who writes) followed by the person's name in full; or "*Ndim*" (I am) followed by the person's name in full, while some letters had no name at all at the end. Only one differed strikingly in the form of affect: "I don't have too much to say my sweetheart, my darling, my chocolate. I must stop now with my greetings". In some cases the acknowledgement was preceded by "My letter is coming to an end" or "I'm stopping here". The final greetings mainly took two forms, but sometimes there were none at all: "*Enkosi*" (Thank You); "Greetings from all of us". There were "opening sentences"; "we are fine and nothing wrong"; "with easy words we are fine"; "we are fine except for the pains I have in my eyes".

When asked whether the lack of a name at the beginning or end of the letter was a problem, the workers indicated that this had never been a problem because they always knew from the content of the letter who it was from. Dates were not necessary since it was rather the days of the week that needed to be considered in relation to when the bus had come and gone.

When asked whether terms such as "*othandekayo*" or "*endimthandayo*" ("loved") had been transferred from the domain of schooling to everyday practice, the workers seemed to feel that it may be nice to know those terms but that they would not use them: Yes, those are formalities, but we adults sometimes find it less useful, for example your child can say "*Dear Tata endimthandayo*" it just doesn't matter, you know it's your child anyway.

Only one of the letters was divided into paragraphs; most of the letters were written as continuous strings with no capital letters, punctuation, or line breaks. Younger writers tended to use some capital letters and full stops.

Letters usually started with an account of the state of health of the house-

hold, followed by a description of what had been done with the money that had been sent, some news about family, or clan members and neighbours, and requests for items to be sent from the city. In one or two cases family problems were discussed, or problems with children were mentioned. The following letter uses the word "brother" although it is written from a wife to her husband:

> Dear with easy words I'm fine. I've received your letter and I heard all you are saying in the letter. Others are also fine, the children are happy and the cow is recovering, only the calf that is having problem. We don't milk the calf but I don't know what is wrong with it. You must be ready, my brother, the sheep are not expensive anymore in Cofimvaba at Mqamelo's place. You can ask Nongwane to show you the place. We are going to have ritual ceremony on Thursday. It's dry here, there is only cold and snow.
>
> I am stopping here
> I greet you
> NK

The overall picture that emerged in the process of data collection was one of competent letter-writers using literacy skills distributed across a range of complex social networks to communicate purposefully. Encoded within these practices were deeply etched cultural and historical patterns, some of which may have emerged over the past two hundred years, and which have formed part of the repertoire of skills and resources which have ensured survival under the harsh conditions set by conquest, colonialism and apartheid. How are these practices, processes and structures to be viewed in the new and liberated South Africa?

The recontextualisation of letter-writing

Malan (1997) quotes a literacy learner, Rietjie, who is an 80-year old woman who attends literacy classes, and who, despite never attending school manages daily tasks which require literacy. When Malan asked her how, she replied:

> I don't know — I just managed. The teacher does not know that I can write letters. I can read the Bible, I can read my psalm books. I don't want the teacher to know about it. I want her to teach me beginning from the beginning. I was say Std 1, now the teacher should have taken me from there, then I would have read well by now. I don't want her to know. I read the book the teacher says, but I can write myself, see! (shows me how she wrote at the back of a book).

Malan suggests that the literacy class became for Rietjie a substitute for schooling;

she wanted to think of it as a space in which her identity as an 'illiterate' would be transformed through her initiation into the shared social identity of 'schooled' people.

Before discussing the response of Rietjie, two letters will be analysed in more detail. One (fig. 1) is drawn from an examination paper set by the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) for first-language literacy learners at ABET Level 1. The other (fig. 2: letter and envelope) was shown to me by one of the railway workers whom I interviewed. Fairclough's framework (1992) for analysing specific instances of discourse is useful for this type of analysis in that it draws links between text, social process and social practice, and the analyses of the letters attempts to do this.

The text, the letter in fig. 1, is produced for assessment purposes amongst learners at Level 1 (the most basic level of literacy learning). Although the educator's intention with the letter is to 'use' the letter for vocabulary testing purposes, the intention of exposing learners to different text genres is prioritised by the IEB — the focus on the format of personal letters is therefore important. It has all the "elements" discussed above, and each element is separated by a paragraph break. The word "love" appears twice. It is written in standard language. The letter is typed, and is accompanied by a picture of a solitary writer, with a rather pensive look on his face. The content is purely news-related.

While supposedly representing the type of letter that occurs in everyday life, the letter has been constructed within the context of the educational institution, and then 'moved' from at least one context to another (the curriculum developer's office to the literacy classroom). It has been extracted from an imagined social process (personal letter-writing in the family context) and inserted into another social process with its own rules of interaction and processes of mediation (the literacy lesson).

The second text, the letter and envelope in figure 2, was produced as part of an ongoing and regular flow of correspondence between S and his wife. S's wife wrote this letter in order to let him know that she had received R700 from him, and inform him about what she had spent it on, and what other household needs there were. It is hand-written in ball-point pen on a small piece of writing paper, and enclosed in a pink envelope, which does not have an address on it, but says "Handpost". The letter does have some of its own "elements", some of which are set slightly apart from others, and all of which are different from the ones in fig. 1. Otherwise it is written in a continuous string, without punctuation. The content focuses on the expenses of the family and health matters.

It was not too clear whether Nobongile wrote the letter herself, but given other information about the family, it is very likely that she relied on a child or

D. Fill in the missing words

Read this letter and fill in the gaps with words from the box.

write	love	driver
you	everybody	job

P O Box 213
Pietersburg
3200

1 August 1995

Dear Sipho

How are _____ ? I am missing you and the family. I am still waiting for your letter. When are you going to _____ to me?

I am fine, but I am still looking for a _____ here in Pietersburg. My friend Thabo has got a car, and he is teaching me how to drive. I am going to do my driving test next month, and I hope I can get a job as a _____ soon.

Give my love to _____ at home.

With _____ from

Your brother, Ben

Fig. 1. A page from an examination text on letter writing.

Fig. 2. A letter written by a railway worker.

other family member to do so, on her dictation. The format of her other letters to her husband is almost identical. The letter was then taken to the bus and dropped off in Langa (approximately 800 kilometres away), where S picked it up, or asked someone else to get it for him. He, himself, stays in another township, about fifteen kilometres away from Langa. After receiving the letter, S would have taken it to the person who did his reading and writing for him. At the moment, it is his eldest son who lives nearby in Cape Town. S explained that this son would also write the reply based on what S would dictate to him. He said that his son was very happy to do this for him, and was starting to play a bigger role in the affairs of the family. Five or six people at minimum are interacting during the production and interpretation of this letter.

From the data presented above and the analyses of these two letters, two parallel systems of letter-writing are going on, and they are fairly well insulated from each other. Yet, the pedagogic letter-writing makes claims that it "empowers" learners to deal more effectively with everyday demands in their lives. So the literacy providers would not recognise that the systems are parallel but would have it that learners take a loop out of everyday life within the institution of the family and into pedagogical life within the institution of education. After that they will go back into everyday life and the family, supposedly as more effective family members; the "modernist discourse of educational reform" is here at play. They will go back with a changed subjectivity, but whether it can be called "empowered" is highly questionable.

Bernstein's description of the formation of pedagogic discourse (1996:47) is pertinent here and is quoted in some detail:

> …in this process of delocating a discourse, that is, taking a discourse from its original site of effectiveness and moving it to a pedagogic site, a gap or rather a space is created. As the discourse moves from its original site to its new positioning as pedagogic discourse, a transformation takes place. The transformation takes place because every time a discourse moves from one position to another, there is a space in which ideology can play… As this discourse moves it is not the same discourse any longer…It is transformed from an actual discourse, from an unmediated discourse to an imaginary discourse. As pedagogic discourse appropriates various discourses, unmediated discourses are transformed into mediated, virtual or imaginary discourses. From this point of view, pedagogic discourse selectively creates imaginary subjects.

And:

> Pedagogic discourse is constructed by a recontextualising principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order.

If Bernstein's description holds within the recontextualisation of the everyday practices of letter-writing into the pedagogic domain, a "space" is created "in which ideology can play". In the field of adult literacy teaching in South Africa, what space is created and what play of ideology occurs within it? What imaginary discourses and subjects are created? With what effects?

I suggest that the ideology at play in this space is an ideology of modernism, tempered by a discourse of relevance. This is evident in this passage from an interview with a literacy teacher who was asked why the teacher in the literacy lesson insisted on the standardised and schooled acknowledgements and end-greetings:

> ZM: Ja, I would say that it is correct, for me I wouldn't see anything wrong, because, although we are teaching them the new ways of writing letters. I mean, what I mean, is that we will try to move them from traditional thinking when we write, …that also to change their traditional way of saying… for instance, a woman cannot call her husband by his name, but in writing it's like a must, it must happen, because these are the rules of the letter as such, we are emphasising they are the rules of the letter.
>
> CK: Where do these rules come from?…
>
> ZM: Well, we tell them these are education system rules, it should be written like this because if you are writing exams for example, you will be expected to write this way and if you don't write all of the name then you will fail.
>
> CK: Yes, I understand that a lot of it comes from the schooling system, to learn to write that way so that you can pass —
>
> ZM: — so that you can pass (laughs) —
>
> CK: — but that was the old system, that was Bantu Education, but now you're teaching adults without that system, that education system, you're working in a different system now. Is there still the same pressure that they must follow the rules of the letter?
>
> ZM: Well, I wouldn't say that it's a pressure, but for them they have to unlearn some of the things in the process, this is what really is central to the whole teaching system, we are not abandoning the adult education rules, but we are trying to sort of change, to effect change in their ways…

Clearly one of these changes is that the learners are asked to put their trust in one of what Giddens (1992) has called the faceless institutions of modernity — the postal service. This is not to deny that one of the key challenges in post-apartheid South Africa is the incorporation of the masses of black people who were systematically denied access to such institutions. The problem is that the

postal service is presented as if it is benevolent and accessible, when the data shows quite the opposite, and the face-to-face methods of the migrant workers have developed as a result of decades of frustration and denial.

This teacher explained that his approach was not to impose but to discuss everything with the learners. Other teachers may be different:

ZM: [These more traditional teachers at S. Night School] will say that the learners must use *umyeni wakho*, your husband.
CK: But they wouldn't necessarily say 'With love from your dear husband' or something like that?
ZM: No — not really —
CK: — and if the learners had a tradition of writing '*Ndim* Jack' (I am Jack)? Would they say that was right or wrong… the teachers at S?
ZM: They would say that it is wrong.
CK: Why?
ZM: Because they would say that it should be clear that who is writing is your husband, it is not just an ordinary Jack, it is your husband, that woman should know that it should be stated and clear that it comes from my husband.

Something similar is suggested in the attitudes of literacy teachers to the community and family-based processes of literacy mediation, and their insistence on the individualised production and interpretation of text. A different literacy teacher said when asked about the role of literacy mediators: Yes, that is one of the things that is blocking the learners from coming to classes, there are always these people. And yet another said:

MP: It is better to encourage the (adult) learners not to ask their children for help with their homework, they must do it by themselves!
PS: Yes, this is something that is blocking their progress.

It would seem that what is at stake here is the "discursive construction of a distinctive schooled subjectivity" (Green 1993). Learners, previously denied access to the cultural capital of schooling, may be all too willing to subject themselves to this construction, if the example of Rietjie is anything to go by. But part of that stake may be held by the literacy teachers who are aspiring to a new status in a rapidly stratifying society, in an emerging but under-resourced and fragile sector of work. In interviews with trainee literacy teachers this became very clear, as they spoke about their difficulties with studying:

> With no profession you are definitely somebody who is collecting a gloomy life…Even the very husbands of ours, they do compete with the books. It's as if you care more for that book than…because they are illiterate themselves. It

> seems as if once we succeed, we will leave him — go for the better ones now…for the professional ones (quoted in Kell 1996a).

The extent to which the "traditional ways" are really an impediment to development is not clear. However, there is probably a very legitimate desire to do away with customs that are oppressive to women (like *hlonipha*). Gender will pay a big role in the way such issues get taken up.

In the difficult period of South Africa's reconstruction, the traditional concept of "Ubuntu" — well expressed in the formulation "*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through other people) is gaining great currency. The various networks and processes described in this chapter seem well fitted to this concept. Yet the worry is that as adult educators proceed with their work, their learners may become separated from the very networks which have always formed the substratum of "*ubuntu*". The "insistence on the letter" within the ideology of modernism may play its part. On the other hand, new networks may just be built and oppressive customs and traditions whittled away. But that depends on a combination of far greater forces which may eventually reduce the urban/rural divide, increase the standard of living and reduce exploitation in the workplace.

Notes

1. Numbers for 'illiterate' adults in South Africa are highly contested, with major policies being drawn up on the basis of a figure of 15 million (NEPI 1993). Later research (Harley et al; 1996) works on a figure of 7.5 million adults in a total population of 40.7 million.
2. The chapter draws on data which was collected in a number of projects. Firstly, the Social Uses of Literacy Research Project (SoUL) based at the University of Cape Town and University of the Western Cape during 1994 and 1995, resulting in M. Prinsloo and M. Breier (1996). Secondly, research done as part of an evaluation of a literacy teachers training course, including interviews and observations; (Kell 1996a, 1997). Thirdly, additional data collected specifically for this chapter consisting of discussions with IsiXhosa-speaking university students; interviews with four migrant workers and two literacy teachers. I am grateful to firstly, Mziwandile Nongalaza; Sampson Ngangalaza; Boyfriend Mlitwa and Mveleli Somtsewu; and secondly Nikisi Siyazi; Dalikhaya Sotolashe; Nombeti Kolofane and RR, whose letters I quote with their permission. These are all IsiXhosa-speaking men.
3. The custom of *hlonipha* (amongst the Nguni) has been described in a number of ways. In its broadest sense Kropf and Godfrey (in Finlayson 1995:140) describe it as to "be bashful, respect, keep at a distance through reverence and to shun approach". They add "*hlonipha* describes a custom between relations-in-law, and is generally but not exclusively applies to the female sex, who, when married are not allowed to pronounce or use words which have for their principle syllable any part of syllable of the names of their chief's or their husband's relations, especially their father-in-law; they must keep at a distance from the latter." *Ukuhlonipha* has been studied as a specific socio-linguistic phenomenon (Dowling 1988; Herbert 1990).

4. Langa is one of the oldest 'townships' in Cape Town and contains a number of notorious hostels for migrant workers, many of which are now being converted to family homes. The station at Langa is the place where the buses arrive from the rural areas, on a regular basis. Langa is about ten kilometres from the next black township, and at least twenty kilometres from the largest black area in Cape Town.

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CHAPTER 13

Computer-Mediated Communication

The Future of the letter?

Simeon J. Yates
The Open University

Introduction

"I'll send you a hard copy by snail mail…" — a comment that I now so often 'write'. This comment could only have occurred within an Electronic Mail message or some other form of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). It is only with the rise of CMC media that one can contrast electronic delivery of a document with the slower, hence the reference to snails, physical delivery of the same text. The estimated total number of electronic mail messages exchanged in 1997 was 2.7 Trillion, that is 2.7 Million Million. By the year 2000 this is estimated to rise to about 7 Trillion (Nua Internet Surveys — http://www.nua.ie/surveys/). CMC and Electronic Mail in particular have been described as 'a new stage in the history of letter writing'. This argument has been made in a number of ways. For example Poster (Poster 1990) has claimed that Electronic Mail and CMC are the outcome of the long term development of communications technologies:

> If computer writing substitutes for the printed word, computer communications substitutes for the postal system, the telephone, and more radically for face-to-face meetings … [i]n this sense they extend the domain of writing to face-to-face interactions, mail and the telephone. (Poster 1990, pp. 115–116)

The development of computer based communications technologies has therefore 'textualised sociality' (Zuboff 1988). In this argument CMC is both a development of existing technologies as well as a 'radicalisation' of the use of 'writing'.

Danet (Danet 1997) on the other hand has argued that Electronic Mail and CMC reflect an interaction between technologies and the cultural representations and practices around books letters and documents. As with many other commentators on

CMC Danet focuses upon the lack of 'materiality' in electronic communication:

> In contrast to most previous forms of writing, CMC is more intangible and ephemeral, with somewhat different consequences for letter-writing and for author-based modes, which have assumed a non-interactive reader … [h]ard copies of email messages are optional, as is electronic storage of them … Millions of us routinely write-and-send, and read-and-delete dozens of messages. (Danet 1997, pp. 8–9)

In fact Danet goes on to note how this lack of a material trace might itself affect the researching of letters themselves, especially as historical evidence:

> Since few e-mail messages will be printed out or saved by correspondents, future researchers will have far fewer letters as source materials than in the past. To some degree then, we may be returning to the pattern of oral cultures: much digitally expressed cultural activity will leave no record. (Danet 1997, p. 19)

To one extent or another the arguments made by Danet and Poster assume that CMC in some manner has 'replaced' materially based writing as well as expanded the range of written communication. This chapter is an exploration of this claim and the questions it raises about old and new media alike. Such questions include: Are Electronic Mail and CMC simply new versions of established media such as letters? Are Electronic Mail and CMC new media with their own forms distinct from letters and other media? How are Electronic Mail and CMC affecting the contemporary use of letters and other media? As Danet notes, asking such questions also provides an opportunity to reflect on the institutional, cultural, technological and linguistic basis of current communicative genres:

> In perhaps 50 years' time, our understanding of the nature of literacy and of the social functions of texts will have so radically changed that few will be alive to attest to 'how things were' at the close of the 20th century. It is therefore vital to carry out research into attitudes and literate practices in late print culture whilst it is still possible to do so … (Danet 1997), p. 7

To begin the discussion let us re-examine the opening statement. It contains both a derisory comment — physical mail delivery is slow and some how un-technological, it is snail like — yet it also implies that material versions of the text are more authentic/original. Yet it would be wrong to consider 'snail mail' as an un-technological communicative process. On the contrary the range of technologies required to support all the different parts of the process of physically transporting a text from one location to the other is probably far greater than that needed to send an Electronic Mail message. Not only is the text likely to have been produced using a computer and printer, or through the use of pen, pencil and paper whose contemporary production is highly technological (Bolter 1989;

Bolter 1991; Petroski 1991), and then to be transported by hand, van, rail, and plane, to be sorted by computer controlled machines until it is delivered by hand to the destination. The sending of snail mail is by its very material basis a slower complex social and technological endeavour. CMC on the other hand relies upon a set of related technologies to transmit a text at a significant fraction of the speed of light around the globe, possibly never once requiring the intervention of a human being.

The claim that Electronic Mail is the next step in the history of letter writing assumes that it is an historical development of both the social-technological process of sending mail and the contemporary cultural practice of letter writing. The chapter will first take a look at letter writing from the perspective of the CMC researcher and attempt to apply their terminology and perspectives to the communicative act of sending a letter. The chapter then moves on to consider the technological and cultural development of CMC and questions the extent to which CMC is a new stage in the history of letter writing.

Computer-mediated communication technologies

Letters as CMC

The focus of this chapter is upon those forms of CMC that are most clearly similar to 'letters'. Selecting such interactions is the first problem. CMC technologies themselves cover a wide range of different implementations. Each of these technologies supports a range of interactions. These types of interaction depend upon a complex mix of technological affordances (Norman 1988) provided by the technology and the types of social and communicative context. There are two key dimensions upon which CMC systems have been categorised. First there is the extent to which the interactions are synchronous. Synchronous communication, as exemplified by speech, requires both parties to be present for the interaction to take place. It is also a feature of highly synchronous CMC systems that the rate of message exchange also tends to be high. Such systems often consist of short one-line messages exchanged as fast as the participants can type. Other CMC systems such as Electronic Mail do not require participants to be both present. Electronic mail messages are sent asynchronously, that is in delayed time, in the same manner as letters. We expect a delay between sending a letter and receiving a reply. A stylised version of this point is made in Figure 1. Different genres of speech and writing are tied to greater or lesser expectations of interaction and speed of reply. Second, CMC can be categorised

by the social structure of the interaction. This can be one-to-one, one-to-many or group communication. Letters tend to fall in the one-to-one and one-to-many categories. Though it is possible to hold a group discussion by letter the social and technological organisation of this too difficult in most cases. The technology of letter production and transmission does not provide the 'affordances' (Norman 1988) needed to make such forms of communication easy. Letters also come in a wide range of genres dependent upon the context of the communication which provide the basis for great variation in content, typographic presentation and so forth. Letters could therefore be classed as an asynchronous material medium primarily designed for one-to-one and one-to-many communication which supports a wide ranges of generic forms.

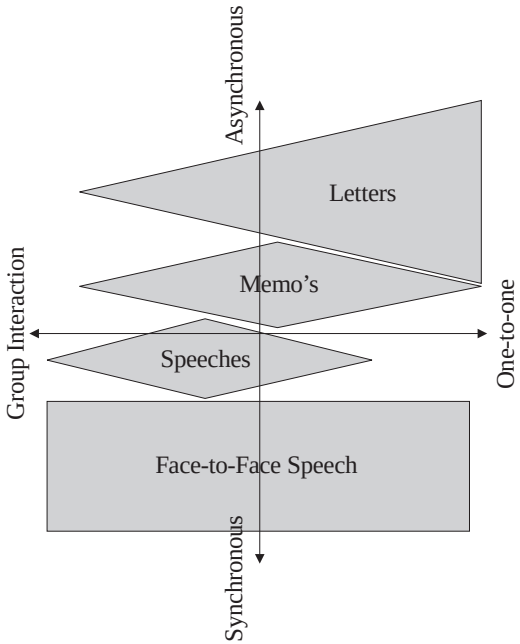

Fig. 1. Letters, speech and synchronicity.

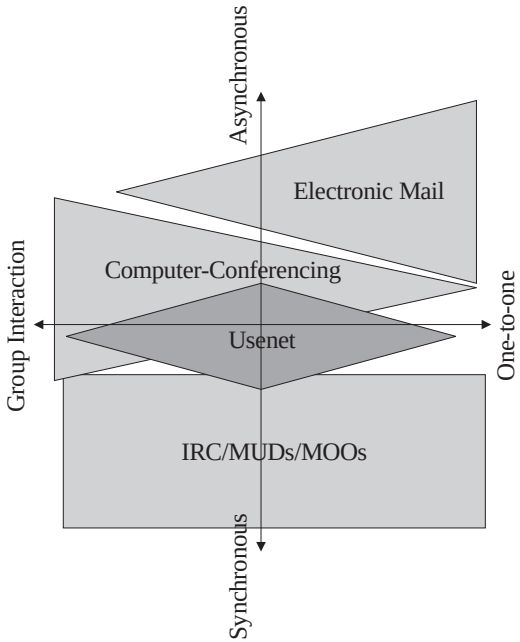

Fig. 2. CMC and synchronicity.

Types of computer-mediated communication

By using the same criteria we can categorise the various types of CMC. At the synchronous end of the scale are technologies such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) where the interacting parties must be 'co-present' at their respective computers at the same time. Given this direct virtual co-presence the interactions tend to consist of short single-line turns. This is a product of the interaction of the affordances provided by the technology and the synchronous context of the interaction. At the other end of the scale are technologies such as Electronic Mail and Computer Conferencing. In this case the medium is designed to be asynchronous with users sending and receiving messages under the assumption that the others are not virtually co-present. In between these extremes are CMC media that support varying degrees of synchronicity/asynchronicity, these include such things as Multi-User-Domains/Multi-User-Domains-Object-Orientated (MUD's/MOO's) and Usenet. In the case of Electronic Mail and Computer Conferencing the technological affordances provided by the media allow for considerable degrees

of freedom. The focus of this chapter is upon those interactions, and the media which support them, which tend to cluster towards the asynchronous end of this scale. Figure 1 is an idealised representation of the types of synchronicity/asynchronicity that CMC systems support. Second, each technology supports a mixture of one-to-one, one-to-many and group communication. In most cases CMC systems can technologically support all three forms of interaction though any one specific case will fall into one of the above categories. Letters on the other hand are rarely a form of truly interactive group communication and are predominantly used for one-to-one and one-to-many communication.

Examples of computer-mediated communication messages

Comparing Figures 1 and 2 it is clear that there are two types of CMC which support interactions which are most akin to letters — Electronic Mail and Computer Conferencing. The main difference between these two media lies in the types of technological affordance they provide for group interaction. Electronic Mail is primarily designed to support one-to-one interaction though it can be used effectively in one-to-many and group interaction. Computer Conferencing on the other hand is designed to support group interaction though it does provide support for one-to-one and one-to-many communication. As previous research has demonstrated (Yates 1993) Computer Conferencing can in general support a broader range of CMC genres than Electronic Mail, with many conference interactions resembling IRC or Usernet. Example 1 is an Electronic Mail message. Later in the chapter we will explore how the format of Electronic Mail messages developed; here though we can note some important features. First there is the 'header'. This is the text at the top of the message which is akin to the header part of many memo's. The body of the text is below this. Example 2 is a computer conferencing message. Again there is a memo like header but also information on the position of the message within an on-going discussion. This additional information is one of the affordances provided by computer conferencing in order to support interactive group communication.

```
Date: Mon, 21 Jul 1997 12:38:48 +0100
To: t.sumner@open.ac.uk
From: s.j.yates@open.ac.uk (Simeon J. Yates)
Subject: Interviews
Cc:
Bcc:
X-Attachments:

Tried to get you all day but your phone is always engaged! I have the
examples of written work. I'll look at them tonight and then pass them
on. Are you free for a drink tonight? We could do an evening drink in
the sun and swap papers.

Sim.
```

Example 1. Electronic mail message.

```
==========================
dt200-forum/turing #209, sj_yates, 573 chars,  6-Apr-93 08:51
This is a comment to message 208
There is/are comment(s) on this message
There are additional comments to message 208
--------------------------
I recently had to compse a short concise text (an
abstract) on paper withou access to my machine.  It
was almost impossible.  With paper you get commited
to versions of your sentences and can only change
them with scriblings out etc.  But it was more than
this.  I type what I think and revise it as I go
often going over sentences again and again, crafting
them and redrafting them interactively.  These
abilities that the Word Processor provides are now
central aspects of my 'literacy practices'.  That
is how I write, pen and paper are now the more alien
medium.

Sim.
```

Example 2. A computer conferencing message.

A brief history of the Internet

The basis of CMC systems is their use of networked computer systems. In most cases this is now a form of networking based upon Internet standards for communication. Systems such as the Internet are the equivalent of the postal system. Like the postal system the Internet delivers ‘packages’ from one address to another. Unlike the postal system, the packages being delivered are packets of data, each of which is only part of the whole data file being transmitted. Each packet of data carries the addresses of the sender and the intended recipient as well as information as to what part of the whole message the packet is. Such a system is very flexible as it allows the data to be sent by any available route between the senders and receivers computers. Some commentators have claimed

that it is this lack of centralisation and high level of flexibility that forms the basis of the rapid expansion of the Internet. This flexibility also reflects the original goals of the designers of the basic technology. It was the need in the 1970's to develop a computer communications technology that could withstand a nuclear attack which led US computer scientists to develop the idea of a decentralised network with multiple possible routes and packaged and addressed data. In the event of an attack on one part of the network, data would still be able to travel to and from the undamaged systems (Diamond & Bates 1995).

Though the growth of the Internet has outstripped all possible predictions the spread of this technology has been far from even. The dominance of the Internet by US/European concerns is reflected in all aspects of the Internet. First, most of the Internet host computers are based in the US/Europe (See Table 1). Second, though the Internet is often portrayed as being owner-less this is far from the case. Though the software and hardware standards upon which the Internet is based are non-proprietorial most of the software and hardware which support Internet access and use is produced by a limited set of western companies. Third, the physical telecommunications networks upon which the Internet relies are also owned by a distributed mix of different companies of various sizes, most of which are also US and European based.

Table 1. Distribution of Internet Host Computers.

Area	Total Number of Hosts
North America	10359042
European Union	4125660
International (mostly US/EU based)	2165539
South East Asia and Japan	1232000
Australia and New Zealand	863289
Former Eastern Block	323235
South America	242734
Africa	121495
Middle East	71652
Asia including India and China	31761
Other areas	3918
Grand Total	19540325

As with all the new media that preceded it, such as radio and television, the spread of the Internet has reflected existing national and global patterns of inequality (Yates 1996). The ability to engage in CMC activities therefore reflects two major factors. First, material access to the technology. Second,

access to the computer literacies required to understand and use the technology. As a consequence of this much of the research on CMC has, so far, relied upon data derived from predominantly US/European cases. There has been some discussion of broader issues and the possible impacts of the expansion of Internet use (Yates 1996) but most discussions have taken this English Language cultural context as a given. As previous research into the use of Letters in other cultural contexts has demonstrated (Besnier 1988, 1990, 1991) one should be wary of generalising practices from one cultural context to another. The discussion that follows must therefore be viewed as a reflection of CMC practices within a US/European English Language context.

These inequalities of access and bias in previous research also raise another issue. The claim that CMC is a development of letter writing is itself based upon a number of assumptions about letters and letter writing which reflect existing US and European assumptions about the form, content and purpose of letters. At the same time the vast majority of research into CMC has focused upon English language, US and European users of the medium. It may be no coincidence therefore that the forms of literacy practice taking place via CMC share the same conventional forms, genres, as existing US and European written media. In this argument it is not the technology which determines the form and content of CMC but the set of cultural/literacy practices which the users bring to the medium. We therefore need to separate out and explore the technological and cultural bases of CMC interactions if we are to come to a full understanding of the relationship of CMC, especially Electronic Mail, to letters and letter writing. The first step is to consider the material basis of both letter writing and CMC.

Digital and print economies of writing

As the above brief discussion pointed out CMC is not one technology but a whole set of communications technologies brought together in a specific manner. This is also true of other forms of written communication. As Bolter has argued:

> … in the case of writing as elsewhere, it is not possible to put away the technology. Writing with pen and paper is no more natural, no less technological than writing at the computer screen. It is true that the computer is a more complicated and fragile device than a pen. But we cannot isolate ourselves from the technology by reverting to older forms of writing. The production of today's pens and paper also requires a sophisticated manufacture. (Bolter 1991, p. 37)

As Finnegan (Finnegan 1988) notes this is also true of many forms of oral communication:

> Oral communication looks at first sight to be unproblematic and 'natural'. But, like literacy, or indeed computer technology, its use rests on social and cultural conventions and on a man-made system of communication — in this case the remarkable system of human speech… a technology which we take for granted … (Finnegan 1988), p. 4

All communication is 'human made' — based upon some form of technology. It is not that some forms of communication are free from technology but rather that all modes of communication are based upon a complex relationship between the current cultural practices and the material resources necessary to support the technology. Bolter describes this relation of writers to the texts they produce as 'economies of writing', claiming that:

> Each culture and each age has its own economy of writing. There is a dynamic relationship between the materials and the techniques of writing and a less obvious but no less important relationship between materials and techniques on the one hand and the genres and usage of writing on the other. (Bolter 1991, p. 37)

CMC relies upon such an economy of writing, this economy of writing is based upon digital media rather than the paper and ink of previous economies of writing. This digital economy of writing covers a far greater range of technologies and institutions than any which has gone before. It also, following Bolter's point above, supports an ever-growing range of uses and genres. The relationship of CMC to this new digital economy of writing is analogous to the relationship of letters to print based economies of writing. It is not that CMC simply developed out of letters but that CMC has developed as part of an overall process in which the digital economy of writing has come into being. The Internet is therefore just one important part of the overall digital economy of writing which encompasses most aspects of contemporary computer hardware and software production. This new economy of writing has made many previously inaccessible and controlled aspects of writing and print available to all users of the technology. A well configured computer and printer can now produce high quality documents that previously would have required a large organisational effort. The Internet with its support of CMC and World Wide Web (WWW) technologies makes the presentation and transmission of such documents to a large audience easier. Therefore we need to explore the ways in which technologies, cultural practices, cultural contexts and genres of communication are interconnected within this new digital economy of writing.

CMC genres

To place CMC messages within the contemporary digital economy of writing we need to consider their social, cultural and historical development. Looking at the example messages above one can see very specific typographic structures which are paralleled in a specific genre of written or printed text — namely the memo. Yates and Orlikowski (1992) have argued quite strongly that Electronic Mail is the outcome of a long history of reflexive social and institutional developments which began with the business letter genre. The model provided by Yates and Orlikowski draws upon a combination rhetorical theory and structurational sociology (Giddens 1984). In this model genres represent a form of social institution which provides the basis for decisions about rhetorical form and substance within a specific text and social context. In this way Yates and Orlikowski argue that the historical institutional development, or genealogy, of electronic mail can be traced back to the business letter genre. In their model genres of business communication have moved through periods of 'maintenance' in which institutional structures and technologies are deployed to uphold current norms, and periods of 'emergence' in which institutional structures and technologies combine to produce new genres (See Table 2).

Table 2. Institutional practices and developments. (Developed from Yates & Orlikowski 1992)

Institutional Practices/Developments	Date	Arena
Maintenance of the Business Letter Genre	Mid 1800's to Present	Public
Emergence of Memo Genre for Internal Communication	1870's to 1920's	Private
Maintenance of Memo Genre	1920's to Present	Private
Emergence of Memo Genre in Electronic Mail	1970's to 1990's	Public and Private

The appearance of Date, To, From, Subject and other similar headers in Electronic Mail is explained by Yates and Orlikowski in the following manner:

> …computers rather than people routed the messages, so the fields of the memo heading were designed to be readable by computers (as well as humans). A typical memo layout was not required, so its widespread adoption shows that designers (whether implicitly or explicitly) retained elements of an existing and familiar genre in moving to a new medium… (Yates & Orlikowski 1992, p. 316)

In this argument Electronic Mail and similar forms of CMC are part of a wide spectrum of literate forms supported by a range of literacy practices which form a linked but not wholly linear history. It is clear from Table 2 that Yates and Orlikowski see forms of the business letters and memo as continuing through to the present from their initial inception. This argument provides a good explanation for many of the typographic features of CMC which are imposed by the technology. It also provides an explanation for some of the organisational genres of CMC that have been identified in recent work (Yates 1993; Yates & Sumner 1997). The conventions, genres and practices which are part of the digital economy of writing have not simply been wished into existence. On the contrary in order to make use of the new media users require meaningful markers of context which allow them to orientate themselves with respect to the content of the message. Electronic mail looks like a memo because the nearest print equivalent which the designers had to hand was the memo.

Yates and Sumner (Yates & Sumner 1997) have expanded the argument put forward by Yates and Orlikowski. Yates and Sumner have argued that genres of communication are the product of an interaction between four key elements which are drawn upon by a reflexive actor in the production of a communicative text. These four elements are: the affordances provided by the technology, the social context of the communication, the social practices tied to the context and the technology, and the existing genres of communication tied to the context and the technology. Both the Yates and Orlikowski and Yates and Sumner arguments are focused upon the process of change and development in communicative genres. Though CMC can be historically related to a previous form of written document, the memo, the development of CMC over the last 20 years has seen a continuous set of changes. First, the range of CMC technologies has grown far wider than Electronic Mail and Usenet. Second, the contexts in which CMC is used has expanded far beyond the academic-organisational uses for which it was first designed. Third, the range of users is also constantly changing and expanding. All of these factors have led to the development of a large range of CMC genres.

Yates conducted a socio-linguistic analysis of a large corpus of CMC messages (approximately 2 Million words) collected from a computer-conferencing system used by a distance education university. First, an attempt was made to statistically place CMC messages into existing genres of written communication through the use of a range of linguistic measures. This proved quite difficult and the results carried little statistical reliability. Therefore the conclusion was that CMC messages were probably grouped in genres which reflected both their position within a different economy of writing than previous genres, but also that the genres would reflect the practices, contexts and goals of the users of

CMC systems. A second analysis using both quantitative and qualitative methods was therefore conducted. The results indicated that the different social contexts, combined with different applications of the technology and shared social practices, had led to the development of a number of generic forms. The genres discovered in Yates' data are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Five types of generic forms found in four different social contexts.

Social Contexts	Genres Found
'Chat' contexts	Focused interactive interpersonal discussion Open interactive interpersonal communication
'Academic' contexts	Academic's discussion
'Teaching' contexts	Student/Tutor discussions
'Administrative' contexts	Non-Academic discussion

In the case of the social context of interpersonal chat (as defined by the users of the conferencing system) two genres of communication were apparent. First, there was ' Open interactive interpersonal communication' (see Example 3). Interactions of this kind will contain several thousand messages by the time they close. Much of the conversation is of the kind to be found in any informal interpersonal situation. Messages are seldom more than a few lines long and are more often than not directed specifically towards the group or to a specific individual. The content is often, as is the case in the following examples, of a social and personal nature. Much use is also made of various typographic tricks in order to convey social and emotional information such as the 'CMC smiley' (e.g. :-)).

```
==========================
dt200-forum/chat £48, [discussant 5], 95 chars,  3-Apr-93 00:51
This is a comment to message 47
There is/are comment(s) on this message.
--------------------------
But only when asked, Mike - I wouldn't dream of inflicting it
on the unsuspecting!   :-)

==========================
dt200-debate/chat £107,[discussant 6], 80 chars, 13-Apr-93 13:23
This is a comment to message 103
There is/are comment(s) on this message.
There are additional comments to message 103.
--------------------------
A point in favour of I.T. helping women, I think.
Keep it up Hilda! :-)
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Example 3. Interactive chat.

Such messages are clearly not letter nor memo like. In fact the study found that few CMC messages were truly equivalent to letters or memos except where their social purpose meshed almost exactly with those of memos or letters within the group or organisation making use of the CMC system. In many cases such messages were in fact 'copies' of letters and memos sent via 'snail mail' which were of relevance to the discussion. This is not to say that CMC as a form of written communication is unrelated to other written communications media. The discussion so far has made two important points. First, that CMC is dependent upon an economy of writing that is a development of and related to previous economies of writing. Second, that the genres of CMC, though different from those of other forms of written communication, are developments of and related to previous written genres. In both cases this argument only goes so far. The interaction of social practices, social contexts, technological affordances and existing written genres has led to new forms of writing and new CMC based genres of written communication. We need to address one more issue before making any final conclusions about the relationship between CMC and letter writing. What does CMC tell us of our own cultural assumptions about, media, letters and letter writing?

CMC letter writing

The various genres of CMC therefore greatly reflect the social context of the communication. In all but a few cases the register (Halliday 1985) of CMC messages is one in which the tenor of the text is strongly interactive and personal. Though the processes of the presentation of self may differ from face-to-face and written interactions (Yates & Graddol 1996) most CMC messages contain a large 'socio-emotional' (Rice & Love 1987) element. For a broad range of reasons (see Yates & Graddol 1996 and Spears & Lea 1992) this 'socio-emotional' content has been and continues to re-appear as, a key focus of CMC research. This concern with socio-emotional content has a number of sources though it seems likely that it is based upon researchers 'cultural expectations' of both computers, as information orientated and formal work devices, and written communication.

In contrast to much CMC, even that designed for public presentation, most forms of public letters — those letters written for formal, business and other non-personal purposes — are written in a very formal register. This literacy practice of making letters formally structured and personally detached reflects a specific set of both cultural and technological contexts. The continued prevalence

of such practices has led many writers (e.g. Chafe & Danielewicz 1987; Chafe 1982) to view these as products of the communicative technology, that is literate, as opposed to oral communication. In other words the formality is seen to be a product of the technological affordances, especially the possibility of re-drafting, provided by writing. Besnier (Besnier 1988; Besnier 1990; Besnier 1991) has criticised this position:

> These scholars maintain that, while the immediacy of an audience allows speakers to invoke more personal elements in spoken discourse, writers can afford to do considerably less, because of the lack of a visible audience … While the salience of affect is an important distinguishing factor in some written genres, it is not useful in explaining the differences between all spoken and written genres. (Besnier 1991, p. 64)

Besnier's conclusions are based on the examination of a corpus of letters from members of the Nukulaelae community. In these analyses Besnier makes it clear that Nukulaelae letters function in multiple ways such as accompanying a gift, indicating some economic transaction or giving moral advice (Besnier 1991, p. 67–70). Underlying all of these interactions is an expression of affect. Besnier argues that:

> … even when affect is not the primary focus, it always lurks immediately below the surface of the discourse. It is conspicuous in discussions of economic transactions, in news updates and in the very fabric of the frame of letters. (Besnier 1991, p. 68)

Besnier makes clear in his analyses that the heavily affect laden nature of the discourse of Nukulaelae letters is tied to the social situations in which they are produced and the social function that they serve. Nukulaelae letters represent social contact with family and community members no longer on the island. Besnier notes that this distancing produces considerable social and psychological distress to the separated parties within Nukulaelae culture. Besnier further notes that opportunities to send and receive letters, such as the arrival and departure of ships, lead to the writing of numerous letters and to their emotional reception. Besnier states:

> Reading and writing practices surrounding Nukulaelae letters lend further support to an analysis of letters as affect laden texts. … Late on the night before the ship day, women and men of all ages can be seen feverishly filling pages of writing, sometimes with tears rolling down their cheeks, concentrating on a handwriting that becomes looser disorganised and lyrical. … Similarly, letters are carefully and more or less laboriously read, and tears often accompany this decoding process; when pictures are enclosed, this effect is further increased. (Besnier 1991, pp. 574–575)

Such a discussion may seem a long way from CMC and the industrial culture that surrounds much of its contemporary use, but there are some important parallels to draw. One of the over discussed aspects of CMC communication is the so called phenomenon of flaming. Flaming can be described in simple terms as the expressing of strong emotional or socially oriented opinion via CMC. This issue has been raised and discussed in too many papers on CMC to warrant reference to them all and a more useful and interesting analysis has been put forward by Lea et al. (Lea, O'Shea, Fung & Spears 1992).

They have noted that flaming has had several definitions from swearing, through impolite statements, to the use of positive exclamations both in general and towards others to most of the types of behaviour that Rice and Love (Rice & Love 1987) in their analysis of CMC consider 'socio-emotional'. Lea et al. in their opening paragraph describe flaming as "the hostile expression of strong emotions and feelings". This mixed bag of definitions brings us to the important issue of why such things as socio-emotional content or flaming have become important areas of study. Lea et al. consider this, arguing that such studies:

> … challenged the view that CMC was a 'cool' medium in which interpersonal 'noise' and social influence were minimised because of the narrow communication bandwidth, while the exchange of information was maximised by virtue of the enhanced capabilities for information exchange that computers offered. (Lea et al. 1992, p. 90)

It is interesting in itself that the discovery of social and emotional communication in CMC discourse was considered surprising. Rice and Love (Rice & Love 1987) in a statistical analysis of a set of CMC messages found that:

> Nearly 30% of the total message content was socio-eomotional [SE]. This is a generous amount in the light of suggestions that CMC systems are low in "social presence" or could be seen as "information poor" media, especially considering the professional orientation of the conference members, and is in line with prior studies of SE content of CMC. (Rice & Love 1987, 1987, p. 99)

Rice and Love (Rice & Love 1987) also found that there was some statistical correlation between higher usage and higher levels of emotional content. Such discussions raise the issue of users' and researchers' cultural expectations of the medium but concentrate upon the fact that the communication is via computer for its basis, the implication being that computers are, essentially, a non-emotional medium. Such an argument, though valid in some respects, misses the central point that the communication is taking place via short and typographically basic texts. In the main such arguments reflect assumptions about communicative practices and the nature of individual media. It is these assumed attributes or

literate practices which provide the basis for defining such activities as flaming as problematic.

CMC is clearly a medium in which the expression of affect takes place, something one does not expect from written texts in most US/European cultural contexts. Where it does takes place, for instance in love letters this is regarded as a 'specific circumstance' or exception from the general rule. This may seem a bit of an over generalisation but so are the assumptions that lie behind many of the academic studies of 'socio-emotional' or affective aspects of CMC. Any theoretical model of CMC as a medium must be able to take on board both its technological aspect, that is its situation as a form of 'literacy', and the fact that it is tied to communicative practices, the expression of affect, that are normally theorised as oral communicative behaviour. Once again some explanations of this mix make reference to the affordances of the technology. Danet (1997) notes that during part of the Victorian era in London the frequency of the postal service was such that letters could take on some of the immediacy, the synchronicity, that we experience with Electronic Mail to day. Danet argues that this immediacy provided the basis for greater intimacy, socio-emotional content, in the communication. At the same time Danet notes the important cultural role of such communication in the lives of the wealthy and educated urban Victorian population. Once again a set of cultural contexts, cultural practices and technological affordances provided the basis for a specific genre of written communication to emerge.

Conclusion

There are a number of important conclusions to be drawn from the above argument. First, though there are both technological and cultural connections between CMC and letter writing these connections are not as direct and obvious as they at first might seem. Second, CMC is part of a larger change to the technologies and practices of writing. It is part of a new digital economy of writing that relies upon computers, computer software, computer networks and digital telecommunications. This digital economy of writing has provided not only new written media but new contexts in which written communication can take place. Third, following the argument of Yates and Orlikowski we are currently in an era where genres of communication are undergoing change. One possible outcome of this will be the development of new digital genres of communication whose range will cover some of those social and cultural activities currently conducted through the use of letters. This is quite different from claiming that

CMC is a new stage in the history of letter writing. Such models imply an historically direct technological or cultural connection between letter writing under a print economy of writing to CMC under a digital economy of writing. As this chapter has argued the relationships are much more convoluted than this, involving a complex back and forth interplay between developing technologies, existing genres and practices and changing social and cultural needs.

Returning to the opening quote, what about the issue of permanency and authenticity — sending a hard copy — which is implied? As Danet noted earlier, CMC lacks the permanence of written material which has an affordance provided by the technology of ink and paper — its material 'fixity' (Bolter 1989; Bolter 1991; Yates & Orlikowski 1992). Though there are now many examples of CMC interactions having been archived for posterity (for example all the White House electronic mail from the Bush Presidency has been archived), the affordances of CMC technology are orientated towards speed of communication and not to permanency. Though CMC may, for those with access, replace letters as a means of rapid personal communication this lack of material fixity ensures a continued role for letters. By making a physical mark in the process of communication, letters for the moment support a number of social practices and conventions where authorship, authenticity and originality need to be ensured (e.g. in legal or business interactions). As the technologies that allow for control of digital authenticity through encryption, digital 'watermarks' and 'signatures' and similar ideas develop, this reliance upon the material basis of letters may also be eroded. In this case we may look back on letters, like we look on clay tablets, as a quaint historical method of written communication — fancy having to wait a day for your post! A snail could deliver it quicker…

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Author biographies

Laura M. Ahearn
Laura M. Ahearn received her Ph.D in anthropology from the University of Michigan in 1994. She currently teaches linguistics and cultural anthropology at the University of South Carolina. She has recently complete a book titled *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change*.

Frances Austin
Dr Frances Austin, sometime lecturer in English Language at the University of Liverpool, has also been a librarian. She now devotes her time to writing and, besides *The Clift Family Correspondence*, has published *The Letters of William Home Clift 1803–1832* (Meldon House) and an account, incorporating his letters, of Clift's sailor brother, *Robert Clift of Bodmin Able Seaman* (Meldon House). She has written *The Language of Wordsworth and Coleridge* (Macmillan) and *The Language of the Metaphysical Poets* (Macmillan).

David Barton
David Barton is Professor of Language and Literacy in the Department of Linguistics at Lancaster University and is interested in the everyday uses of reading and writing. He is the author of *Literacy: an introduction to the ecology of written language* (Blackwell) and co-author, with Mary Hamilton, of *Local literacies: reading and writing in one community* (Routledge).

Charles Bazerman
Charles Bazerman is Professor of English and Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is interested in the social dynamics of writing, rhetorical theory and the rhetoric of knowledge production and use. His most recent book is *The languages of Edison's light*. Previous books include *Shaping written knowledge* and *Textual dynamics of the professions*.

Leslie Crawford
Leslie Crawford is a professor and Dean of the John H. Lounsbury School of Education, Georgia College and State University. His professional work is in the area of language and literacy and he is a graduate of the University of California. He has been a Visiting Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Konstantin Dierks
Konstantin Dierks is a Ph.D candidate in the History Department of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA. He is currently completing a dissertation titled, *Letter writing, gender and class in America, 1750–1800*.

Tony Fairman
Tony Fairman was trained in linguistics and English language teaching at Leeds and Lancaster Universities and is a teacher of English to speakers of other languages. He's especially interested in dialect writing of the early eighteen hundreds and the recent development of Schooled English.

Nigel Hall
Nigel Hall is Professor of Literacy Education in the Institute of Education at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has authored, co-authored or edited nineteen books within the field of language and literacy education, and authored over thirty chapters in other books. His special interest is in writing from a social, historical and developmental perspective.

Catherine Kell
Catherine Kell works in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Cape Town.

Janet Maybin
Janet Maybin is a Lecturer in the School of Education at the Open University. She trained as a social anthropologist, has published articles about children's informal language practices, and edited books about socially-oriented research into language and literacy.

Anne Robinson
Anne Robinson is Senior Lecturer in the Intitute of Education at Manchester Metropolitan University where she specialises in literacy in the early years. She has authored and edited a range of books on literacy education. She is Co-Director of *The Punctuation Project*.

Lucille M. Schultz
Lucille M. Schultz is Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati where she teaches rhetoric and composition. Her first book *The Young Composers: Composition's beginning in 19th Century United States Schools* appeared in 1999 in the *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series* from Southern Illinois University Press. Her essays appear in journals including *College Composition, Communication, Rhetoric Review, Written Communication,* and *Assessing Writing*.

Anita Wilson
Anita Wilson is based in Lancaster and relies on the cooperation and good nature of members of the prison community in order to research the relevance and significance of various literacies in the day to day life of men in prison. A mutual addiction to letter writing has sustained and enriched her work and made her chapter possible.

Simeon Yates
Simeon Yates is a Lecturer in Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University and has conducted research into various aspects of new communications and technologies. This research has covered social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of Computer-mediated Communication, the impacts of new technology on TV news production, and the cultural impacts of digital texts.

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