

E-MAIL A VIKING: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW USING E-MAIL SHAPES CHILDREN'S WRITING

Pat Triggs, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol

Emma Scott Cook, Easton CoE Primary School, Bristol

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on an ongoing project whose overall aim is to examine the ways in which new technologies can be used in educational settings to enhance learning. It reports on an initiative in a primary Year 4 classroom which aimed to integrate history and literacy within a history unit of work on the Vikings through the use of e-mail. Children's e-mails to "Vikings" are analysed to discover their developing awareness of purpose and audience as factors which shape writing. Analysis suggests that the authentic communication activity and the models provided by each child's correspondent had a positive effect on their writing. However there were tensions between the literacy and the historical aims of the initiative and it raised important questions about classroom management and pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on an ongoing project whose overall aim is to examine the ways in which new technologies can be used in educational settings to enhance learning (www.interactiveeducation.ac.uk). At the centre of the research design is the concept of "subject design initiatives" which are developed and carried out by collaborative partnerships of teachers, teacher educators and researchers. Design is informed in an iterative way by theory, research-based evidence, teachers' craft knowledge and the research team's expertise. The research is embedded in socio cultural theory which suggests that learning has its origins in social life (Wertsch 1991) and that language and communication are crucially involved in this process (Vygotsky 1978)

PRELIMINARY MOVES

Seven subject areas are included in the project and this paper reports one initiative undertaken within the English Team¹. The English Team first met in Summer 2001. Since then there have been a number of full and half day meetings to share and develop skills and understanding in ICT and in research. The aim has been for the group to develop into a community of inquiry. A series of mini design initiatives in the autumn

¹ The English subject team consists of six teachers from three primary schools, seven teachers from four secondary schools, one teacher from an FE college, two researchers (both ex-teachers and one also an ex teacher-educator) and one teacher educator/researcher.

opened up a number of areas including creating multimodal texts, writing with the wordprocessor, exploring language structures. In that term we began to think about selecting a focus for the first design initiative scheduled for 2002.

CONCEPTUALISING THE DESIGN

This case study focuses on the work of a primary school teacher, Emma Scott-Cook, and an English design initiative involving the use of e-mail². Emma teaches a Year 4 class in an inner city multiethnic school which is part of an Education Action Zone. English was her main subject in the four year B.Ed course she followed. This is Emma's second school. She is in her eighth year of teaching there. Interviewed about herself, it is clear that her commitment to the school and the pupils is very strong. She feels she has "respect in the local area and the neighbourhood...I've put in a lot of spade work, built up a lot of relationships with parents". It is important to her with her pupils "to treat everyone as individuals..to really care about everybody...to try to be fair." She is also a great believer in assessment and in tracking. She regularly assesses children against NC Levels and notes if they go up or down. Because of this she has less time for formative assessments and giving children feedback.

Emma is Drama Co-ordinator and shadows the Literacy Co-ordinator. She is also a poet and works with children in many countries during the holidays. In connection with ICT, she recognised its motivational power for the children but her own confidence level was not high and she exhibited little enthusiasm for the networked computer room equipped with an interactive white board which the school acquired in 2000. "It's a completely new area for me...I'm quite scared by ICT. It's not a strong subject for me." She felt she needed the support of the ICT co-ordinator. "I can't do without his experience in telling me how to do it right." In particular she was reluctant to engage with a whole class in the computer room on anything more than structured teaching of ICT skills. The idea of building a design initiative around the one internet-connected classroom computer was attractive, as was the thought of integrating ICT and Literacy with another subject in a cross-curricular activity. The decision to build the initiative around e-mail was thus in part pedagogically principled and in part by what Emma felt able to cope with. This focus was also related to a desire to focus the work firmly within fundamental literacy concerns in this case, writing development.

² Emma's colleague, Andrew Biggs who is the ICT co-ordinator in the school, is also a member of the English team and in the summer term also embarked on a short e-mail initiative with a group in his Year 3/4 class. Analysis of this initiative is ongoing. Andrew has been involved in the review of Emma's initiative and provided technical support for Emma and the project generally in the school.

We spent some time sharing our ideas about and experience of e-mail and discussing how its particular affordances might contribute to pupils' learning. Emma is a prolific user of e-mail and has an international range of correspondents. She saw e-mail in two ways: as something on her class's ICT curriculum which had to be "taught", and as a form that allowed spontaneous interpersonal communication (a sort of relaxed written chat) where a concern with rules and surface accuracy was inappropriate and counter-productive. She was unsure how this would contribute to improving her pupils ability to write letters, a curriculum requirement that she hoped might also be served by this initiative. We agreed that the cultural conventions surrounding ICT text are more fluid and open-ended than those around letters. Study of a relatively large sample of e-mail texts (Petrie 1999) showed that there was considerable variation of register in e-mail and that this was mainly in response to context. If we think of e-mail as a channel which allows a variety of stylistic variations, involving children in an e-mail correspondence would allow us to address and discuss how audience and purpose shapes writing.. In addition, the to and fro of messages over time would enable this to be kept in focus more consistently than usual. As significantly, we would be organising for authentic written communication and meaningful writing (Vygotsky 1978:117), something which is notoriously difficult to achieve in the classroom. This also served one of Emma's strongest aims in teaching: "I'm trying to help the children, on paper, to have the most efficient voice possible. I want them to have a clear voice that people will listen to." The literacy aim of the initiative therefore became to increase understanding of the role of audience and purpose in shaping writing. In this sense the initiative was located firmly within extensive literature on writing process and linguistics (Halliday 1975; Burgess et al 1973; Britton et al 1975; Kress 1982; Graves 1983). It was also essentially a variation on letter-writing projects such as the one described by Donald Graves (1983:39) which started within the school and snowballed into the community. In our initiative the research aim was to see what impact using e-mail as a channel would have on individuals' writing. In particular we were interested in the ways in which some e-mail writing appears to strive to blur the boundaries between the two discrete models of language: speech and writing. How would the children negotiate this? What effect would their understanding of the social setting that constitutes e-mail have on the syntactical and textual structures they employed?

DEVELOPING THE DESIGN

We could find no specific reference to audience and purpose in the NLS framework prescribed by the local Literacy Centre for Year 4, Term 2 but

decided we could take these as “big ideas” which were consistently to be developed. However one NLS aim set down was “to prepare for factual research by reviewing what is known, what is needed, what is available and where one might search”. The whole activity therefore was embedded in the children’s history work on The Vikings and incorporated this aim. The purpose was defined as “finding out about the Vikings”.

To facilitate data collection (and ensure security) the children’s e-mails were received and responded to at the University. We decided to construct the children’s co-correspondent so that the context would suggest use of the more formal end of the style continuum, at least in the early stages. Two e-mail addresses were set up for Thor, a Danish jarl who had fought with Guthrum against King Alfred of Wessex and was now settled in the Dane Law, and for Freya, a fifteen year old daughter of a Viking soldier, who had come to England with her family to settle. The Vikings were writing from the year 880. Although both Vikings had well developed back stories, these were not shared with the children in advance. This was conceived as a “long, thin initiative” which would run over several months. A group of pupils (chosen to include a spread of attainment in English) were interviewed and reviewed their correspondence with a researcher at intervals throughout the project. Video-recordings were made of children working individually, in pairs and groups and in whole-class lessons.

In class pupils were told that there were two Vikings, Thor and Freya, who would be happy to answer their questions about Vikings; they could choose which one they wanted to e-mail. The children had no problems sustaining the time-slip fiction that this entailed; in fact their willingness to suspend disbelief was for some stronger as the correspondence developed. However in the interviews, it was evident that they knew they were playing a game of “let’s pretend.”

Pupils mainly used the classroom computer to send and receive their e-mails; time was allocated for this at the beginning of the morning and afternoon. In addition groups of pupils were from time to time allowed to use computers in the school’s ICT suite for this.. They had individual e-mail addresses and a class password. The aim, in advance of the initiative, was for all pupils to have had basic instruction in e-mailing all to have sent at least one e-mail to another person in the class. In the event this did not happen and because there was some uncertainty about the general level of confidence, specially trained e-mail helpers were appointed for the first weeks and given the job of helping everyone to log on and send/receive a message. The focus of the initiative was deliberately on the use of e-mail; the assumption (a valid one in the event) was that pupils would gain skill and understanding in operating e-mail in

the process of genuine communication. Two whole-class lessons took place two weeks and four weeks into the project. In both sessions e-mails sent and received were shared (with pupils' permission). The focus was both on sharing information and on how writer-reader interactions were being negotiated, for example by looking at the different ways people had opened and closed their messages and by asking the class to speculate about how someone might have felt when they received a particular message.

ANALYSIS OF THE OUTCOMES

From the many insights the data have provided we have chosen to focus on two:

- factors affecting children's commitment to and involvement in e-mailing
- evidence of the effect of a sense of audience on children's writing in particular the strategies they employed in negotiating a relationship with their reader.

Involvement as measured by the number of e-mails sent was varied. Procedures to maintain a degree of equity in access to the computer were in place but it is clear that some children were more motivated to pursue the correspondence than others and by various means managed to gain access to a computer to do this. The initial excitement and novelty were affected by technical difficulties which meant that feedback was not as fast as planned. Wrong addresses and an over-zealous filter which held up messages like "Why did you kill so many people?" or referred to Alfred of Wessex, (the filter works on syllables) meant that many children were kept waiting a long time for a reply. We learned the hard way to check Emma's in-box regularly for detained mail awaiting clearance. Nevertheless a quarter of the class sustained a commitment to the correspondence beyond two exchanges. The drive to "write back" was not associated with attainment. The children who wrote frequently, even when they had not received a response, spoke in interviews about their initial interest in the subject or the activity. In addition their e-mails showed a developing sense of the person at the other end. The correspondence was sustained most successfully where this was most evident. We can illustrate this with examples from two children in this group.

Ben's Story

Ben told us he had a Viking game at home and he was interested in the subject. More important though was his commitment to his teacher: "I wanted to show Miss that I learned a lot from the computers and the

Vikings.” At this point he saw “The Viking” as a useful information source. When (for technical reasons) Thor’s response to Ben’s questions was delayed, Ben wrote to complain:

Date: 5 Mar 2002

Subject: complaint

were is my e-mail

cus i’m getting fed up of looking at the blank messages

from ben

p.s hurry

In two previously unanswered e-mails he had moved from simply listing four questions to starting “hello thor” and signing off “from ben p.s e.mail me qaic pleas baybay se you”. Now he omits an opening and plunges straight to his grievance. Weeks later Ben re-read this e-mail when he was interviewed and reviewed his correspondence so far. He recalled the lesson in which Emma had raised the question of the ways we address people and how they might respond. He had received a reply. Thor had told him he was not sure he liked being told to hurry up. It was at this point it seems that Thor became a person for Ben, rather than a disembodied source. “I thought, “hurry up?”..I thought I’d better not write it to a Viking but to a human being.”. After this lesson Ben went into the computer room to respond to Thor..Thor’s e-mail had also answered his question: “how do you bend the metle?”

“You ask a good question about bending metal. Our metal workers are very skilled in making all sorts of things - they bend the metal by heating it and hammering it into curves. Sometimes they mould things round a shape. I will leave your question about making boats for the moment as I do not have much time and there are a lot of people waiting for mail.”

We video recorded Ben composing a response to Thor. He was allowed considerable time (40 minutes) on the computer for this and remained totally absorbed and on task throughout. He had a printout of Thor’s message beside him and referred to it frequently.

Date:14 Mar 2002

Subject:Vikings

Greeting Thor

thencyou for your mesij

I loved reading it.

I like reding the bit a

bawt the bending hot metal
cus I wanid to now abut it.
As I was saing the qashon's
I like't the bit abat the metal
wark's
And yes and wen are you give me the
bit abet the bout's
Nise towking to you biebie
ben

Re-reading his e-mail later, he reconstructed in some detail the processes of shaping his writing. The video shows some delay before he starts to write. He is looking around and reading Thor's message. He says he was thinking about how to address Thor. (Selecting openings had also been a feature of the whole-class session) "I thought I might have writ 'hello'...I might have done 'dear Thor'" Eventually he chose "Greeting", mirroring Thor's habitual opening to him. "That's the Viking way. I thought if I was writing to a Viking and I wrote 'hello' they might not have made up that word yet so I thought I'd write 'greetings'". The effect of Thor as a model was also evident in Ben's drive to write at some length, even though he was hampered (as were most of the children) by the slow speed of his typing. "I was trying to make it as long as his. I done that (gestures to half way) and then I thought what else can I write? So I read the messages through again (mimes quick reading)." His sense of the interaction as in some way spoken rather than written is clear in his signing off "nice talking to you." He explained this by referring to the speed of the communication: "Well you write it and then it goes straight to them."

As the e-mail exchange developed Ben, like many of the children, began to include information about himself. His commentary on his writing shows that he is well aware of the importance of reciprocity in this relationship and that Thor was becoming real for him. "If I just ask him questions he'll get a bit bored...Otherwise I'll know everything about him and he wont even know how old I am."

Neither Ben, Annette whom we now consider, nor any of the children in the class were accustomed to sustaining written communication with another individual in any form. Even those (few) with access to e-mail at home did not use it. As we have seen with Ben, the e-mail activity combined with reflection and review, meant that some children very rapidly developed strategies for this kind of writing.

Annette's story

Annette like the rest of the class began the correspondence with four bare questions.

Date: 20 Feb 2002

Subject: Everyday

what clothes did you wear?

how old are you

what weapon's do you use to fight with?

what food do you eat?

WRITE BACK SOON

FROM ANNETTE

The range of her interest in this Viking encompasses the personal as well as the historical. Unlike many in the class she added a request for a reply and signed the message. She also used capitals which, interviews with her revealed, she deployed consistently and meaningfully to convey emphasis and importance. For technical reasons Freya did not receive this message and while things were being sorted out Emma suggested that the children write via Thor. Annette's commentary on her next message also shows how much she was learning about the nature of communication from her participation even though she had had no replies.

Dear Freya

I know you have had trouble getting in

so I put this in Thor's e-mail. We were

only allowed one question , here it is.

Why did you kill animal's to make your

clothe's. I wrote last week, but

never got a replie. WRITE BACK SOON!

FROM ANNETTE. W

4/SC

She said that she had addressed Freya at the beginning not simply because this is conventional but because she was writing to Freya *via* Thor and did not want any mix-ups. Similarly she had signed herself (in capitals) with her initials and her class name because "there's another Annette in the school and I didn't want it to go to the wrong person." Although she doesn't mention it we can see Annette taking on the e-mail

discourse which had become a feature of the classroom as she writes of having trouble “getting in”. The technical problems the project was encountering were teaching Annette to be very careful. Unfortunately she did not know about what happens in a filtered system when you use inflammatory words such as “kill” and her second message was also delayed, as was Freya’s answer

However Annette proved to be a determined and enthusiastic communicator. The delays appear to have made Freya more real for her. On the next Tuesday she wrote to Freya, again using Thor’s e-mail address - “I heard about your problems...I have a complaint here...please write back by Friday or I will be angry.” In the subject space she wrote COMPLAINT. The opening was DEAR FREYA. She did not sign the message. All these, she said, were deliberate choices “I did it on purpose. I was angry and I was like shouting at her.”

On Friday of the same week, still without a reply, Annette wrote.

Subject: Are you o.k

dear Freya

I am looking forward to your replie.

I hope you have no more problem’s.

LOVE ANNETTE!

Reviewing this Annette recalled:” I just calmed down a bit and I thought if I don’t keep shouting at her she might be a little bit OK and start writing back.”

Coincidentally with this message we released Freya’s delayed e-mail from the system. Annette, like Ben, was given extended time on the computer to write her reply. She also appreciated the time to write. “I was pleased with it. Sometimes other people go on before me and I only get a little time to write. When its my turn sometimes I don’t finish....” In this instance she was able to compose a long reply.

Dear Freya

Thank you for the letter. I thought it was nice of you to replie to me after you had so many letter’s.

Well I don’t know if you have had this question, but tell me if you have.

Here it is, if you are married please can you tell me your husband’s name?

Are you disappointed that it's not a clothes question,
if you are here is one: what colour is the wool mainly to make your
clothes?

GOOD WISHES

ANNETTE!

It is interesting that from this moment Annette consistently in her writing referred to the e-mails as letters and used the conventional opening, Dear Freya. She also continued to use strategies, such as signalling her questions with phrases like "here it is", to assist the absent recipient of her message. She also takes account of what Freya might be experiencing and expecting. Here she is empathising with Freya having to deal with so many messages. She was also drawing on classroom activity where the pupils had been put in groups, pooled information and been given topics to focus on. Annette was in the "clothes" group and, not unnaturally, assuming that on some level Freya and her teacher were colluding she alluded to this obliquely and provided an appropriate school-based question. Her own concerns, though, were again not historical but personal.

Video of Annette composing this reply shows her constantly re-reading the message she is replying to. It is a commonplace of non-verbal communication that participants mirror each other's stance and body language. Here Annette, like Ben, was mirroring the written language of the "Vikings". Mirroring Freya's closing, she wrote GOOD WISHES, ANNETTE!. "I was shouting that bit. I was so pleased she sent a reply." Later in the correspondence she mirrors Freya's subject heading, "Your messages - apologies" in her own heading "reply - answer question". When Freya writes "I love the month of May", Annette replies, "I also like the month of May."

As the initiative progressed Freya became very real for Annette. "When I gets an e-mail back it's like she's talking to me...I put that bit 'I don't know if you have had this question' cos loads of people could have been asking her about whether she was married and I don't want to keep asking the same questions." After Easter she wrote: "If you are wondering why no one wrote to you for two weeks we had a school holiday." In July, long after the class had finished studying Vikings some of the children were still writing. Annette, perhaps significantly departing from her usual "Dear Freya", wrote

Greetings Freya

I would like to make an offer for you to find out about me. My school are having a holiday in 2 weeks

for 6 or 5 weeks, I fear that I will not be able to write to you. You can ask me anything you want.
good wishes
from Annette

Freya asked what Annette liked best at school and what she would do in the holidays. Annette replied:

Dear Freya

Thanks for writing back so soon. I will answer your questions as best as I

can. The best thing I like in school is when we have a singing competition.

I have a good voice. What I do in the holidays is a secret

from Annette

There is a clear sense of equality in the correspondence at this stage which has emerged from the tensions evident throughout between the school-prescribed “history task” and the urge to communicate with another (at first unknown) person. Annette and Ben (and others in the class) had come to understand and take on the concept of reciprocity that underpins interpersonal communication. Annette talked about this: “She’s telling me loads of things - I’ll tell her things back. I did tell her yesterday - if she was wondering why no-one wrote to her for two weeks that we’ve been on holiday.” From this she has developed other strategies. “Yesterday I read all the e-mails I had and I wrote a reply back and when I went home after school I went up to my bedroom and I started writing everything that she told me on a piece of paper...everything I knew and everything I asked her so I don’t have to keep asking her again.” In a self-directed out-of-school activity she was organising information (now using effectively a procedure that had been attempted with limited success in group work in class many weeks before), with the aim of being a more effective correspondent.

DISCUSSION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

What facilitated, in Vygotskian terms scaffolded, Annette and Ben’s learning? It is probable that the e-mail format provided a supportive framework for the writing. Our interviews and analysis of the e-mails suggest that discussion and reflection on the writing in whole-class, group and individual activity had an impact. However, we suggest that this

learning is essentially grounded in the authentic context, the relatively sustained interaction of reader and writer that e-mail as a channel provided.

They also appeared to be using the near-speech mode that e-mail affords to shape their writing; using, as Britton (1975:39) suggests “the most available mode of expression”. This feature of e-mail may account for the lack of any inhibition in all the children as they wrote their first messages. Of course, this may also have been a by-product of their willing co-operation in assigned tasks (especially novel ones) and the relatively low sense of audience they exhibited at this stage. Over time, and with the addition of reflection, discussion and the modelling in the e-mails they received, we can see in pupils like Ben and Annette an increase in their awareness of a reader for their writing and to adjusting form and style to take account of this.

REWORKING THE DESIGN

Our analysis is still ongoing but the review and evaluation of this initiative so far has made us feel that this is worth pursuing. It has also presented us with a number of tensions and questions. How do we address (should we address?) the tension between the cross-curricular inspired “school-requirement” to collect information from a source and the inclination for more personal interaction which is evident in the writing. How can we find ways to maximise this learning for more of the class? There are pedagogic and managerial issues to be faced. What exactly is the role of the teacher? What is the best form of intervention in what become essentially interpersonal communication? We made a decision that Emma would not read or approve the children’s messages before sending and that permission was to be asked before any e-mail, sent or received, was made public in class. We feel that by-passing teacher approval was appropriate in that the interactions were controlled and monitored by the way the research was being carried out. Emma received copies of all that was sent and received; her problem was finding time to access and review it all in order to plan her next move. “Things are very, very busy in school...I very rarely have long educational conversations.” She also accepts that her relative disinclination to embrace the technology was a factor but time was the over-riding issue. We hope that her continued involvement in the project will have an impact on this situation.

In classroom management terms we need to find ways to accommodate an increased pace and flow of interactions. If one of the features of e-mail is rapid response how can we ensure that every child in the class can experience this? This raises issues of time available and, computer

access. Only a limited number of children can have access to the class computer at the beginning of each morning and afternoon. Is organised weekly access an answer? Or will we lose an essential element if we manage in this way? Could we incorporate class or group e-mails? How much of the learning experienced by Ben and Annette was dependent on the individual nature of the interactions? The question of the balance between the social construction of knowledge in one-to-one exchange and the supporting role of a teacher-led community of inquiry is one we are addressing. How can we maintain the sense of individual ownership of the correspondence while refining the social and collaborative dimension in which children share the information they have gained and reflect on ways of shaping their writing?

And what should be our attitude to the surface features of the writing which we have so far ignored?

The extensive discussion in this paper of the literacy element of the initiative is in part a reflection of the limited success in connection with History. We had not thought through enough how this might contribute to the History unit and in the event it became a parallel activity not fully integrated. We can only speculate about how far this influenced the balance between information gathering and personal concerns. It is something we are addressing as we look ahead to repeating the initiative in 2003.

Long-term and to explore how this kind of work might be continued outside a research project, we are also considering how to incorporate more correspondents who are as controllable as the researcher. (At this stage we feel the children are unlikely to sustain a correspondence with outside agencies, though we are considering one-off e-mails to, for example, favourite football clubs) Other teacher colleagues are getting interested; there are students, retired people, family members who could serve as real or fictional sources of information and interaction. After some local dissemination of our early findings other teacher thought they would try this out and we plan to form a network to exchange our experiences. All this forms part of the iterative process which will inform the new initiative next year.

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