

“Write Me!”: A Multi-Generation Analysis of Junior High Girls and Their Notes

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In this article, Robinson identifies the similarities between the notes she exchanged with friends as an adolescent and the notes written and shared decades later by her daughter and her daughter’s friends. A genre analysis of these notes passed between friends at school using the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) reveals some important socialization occurring alongside the production and distribution choices the girls make in their writing.

When I was in junior high and even into the first couple years of high school back in the 1980s, communicating with my best friends was way more important to me than what I was assigned to write about in my classes. Often, my friends and I would pass notes to each other throughout the day, starting at our lockers before first hour when we’d surreptitiously tuck an intricately folded note into each other’s hands while anticipating all the clever inside jokes and snarky complaining that was soon to be revealed.

We would slide follow-up notes to each other during passing periods in the crowded halls, asking for clarification or adding questions below the original note. Sometimes one sheet of paper would be passed back and forth throughout the entire day, and the written conversation would drift and build until every open space was covered. At times, we’d even use the folded notes as part of a game during study hall, “punting” them back and forth across a couple aisles of seats with the note as the triangulated “football.” We’d end the day with the command, “Write me!” as we looked forward to more of the same the next day.

The great pleasure I got from these written communications with friends came flooding back to me at the start of last school year when I noticed that

my oldest daughter's backpack (she was in 7th grade at the time) had several folded notes crammed into the mesh side pockets. Part of being a parent is helping my kids try to develop organizational skills, so we've gotten into the routine of going through backpacks and folders together, evaluating the importance of each stray piece of paper and deciding together what needs to be kept for either academic or personal reasons. School papers get ordered and put into the appropriate binders. Unneeded forms and old work goes into the recycle bin, while papers with more personal appeal (a beautifully drawn picture, a hard-fought-for A on a test) get put into a memory box in the closet.

When I grabbed a handful of the folded notes and waved them toward my daughter, asking her the usual "Recycle or keep?" question, she took them and hugged them all to her chest saying, "Keep! These are my notes from [my friends]!" I told her I had written the same kinds of notes when I was her age—a revelation that totally amused her—and that I had saved many of the ones given to me, too. It wasn't too many days later that she asked me to tell her more about the notes my friends and I had passed when we were in school. She showed me sections of her notes that she was particularly proud of because they were funny or had cute accompanying pictures, and I dug through my old bedroom closet at my folks' to find the folder of notes written thirty years ago in order to share some of my work with her.

With two folders of notes saved from my own adolescent note-writing phase and a daughter willing to share her own experiences with passing notes, I thought about all the ways that we could explore the similarities and differences between our writing experiences. Looking at notes passed in school is important because by writing these fun notes to friends, a girl is also, in a way, writing herself: she is performing the almost incantatory process of discerning her identity by making her thoughts and feelings concrete on the page. The genre of notes passed between girlfriends in school strengthens a teen girl's connection with other girls her age as she moves further away from home and enters the world of intense adolescent experiences and friendships.

It may seem unusual to consider notes passed between adolescent girlfriends to be "work," but composing and sharing the notes with each other takes effort and a great deal of thought; the resulting texts comprise a genre that—like any other text—can be analyzed by taking a cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) approach. CHAT offers a theoretical model of written communication which takes into account the production, reception, representation, ecology, activity, socialization, and distribution of a text (Walker 74–76). School friends who pass notes engage in complex social choices as they interact with each other in writing. Those texts also become a tool by which a girl can test out her emerging adult personality on others and comment on the world around her. The rhetorical activity of note passing

even helps an adolescent to question conventions and challenge authority as she and her friends engage in subversive (non-school-related) writing activities. A critical analysis of the characteristics of both my notes and my daughter’s notes shows conventions of the genre that span both generations.

My daughter’s and her friends’ notes are remarkably similar to those my teenaged self wrote and received. The appearance of the notes and the processes involved in their production are alike, no matter whether the notes were produced in the 1980s or the first decade of the 21st century. CHAT analysis asks us to consider the production of a text—the circumstances under which a text is created, the particular context and situation which demands that a text take the form it does. Because our notes were created in school, yet at our individual desks, they had to be handwritten, and because both my daughter and I attended school before any sort of handheld electronic devices were a part of the curriculum, the notes we produced for our friends are more intimate than any word processed text. They are scribbled in pencil on lined paper ripped from a spiral, but those pencils and the lined paper are considered in a CHAT analysis to comprise the technology of the text: they are the tools that we used to compose the notes we passed during school.

An analysis of a text using CHAT requires us to think about the many forces that shape the creation, distribution, and reception of a text. No text—not even a seemingly inconsequential junior high note passed in the hall at school—is without its own complex history. The term *reception* in CHAT analysis refers to the intended audience of a text and the awareness of how a text will be received and used. The notes I read, both mine and my daughter’s, show writers who exhibit a clear awareness of their audience and who narrate all the mundane details of their surroundings, using a tone meant to portray their contempt and boredom for the restrictions of the classroom (see Figure 1). The girls include in their notes crude drawings of people (usually a teacher) with various body parts insultingly labeled; describe an outfit being planned for the next day; suggest activities for the upcoming weekend; and allude in teasing, cryptic ways to the object of a crush.

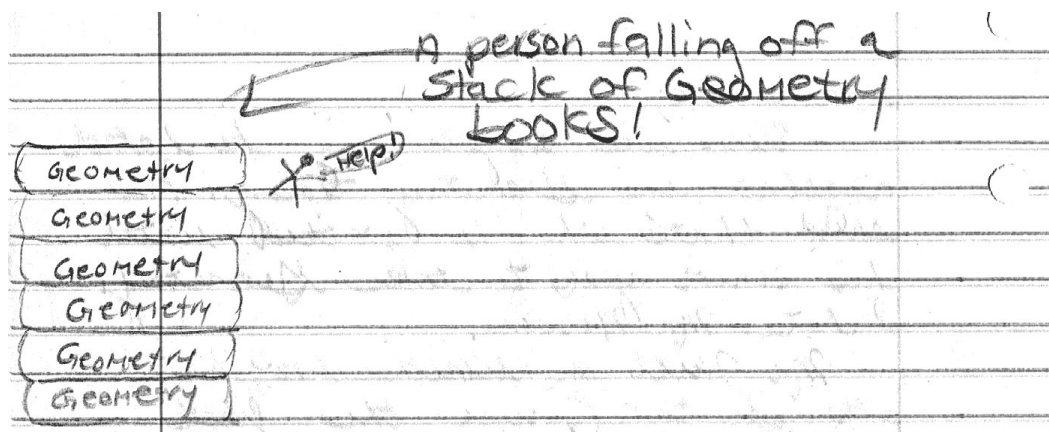


Figure 1: Stick Figure Falling Off Giant Pile of Geometry Books (1982)

From a September 1982 note: “G. G. [shorthand for Gorgeous Guy] was just scribbling with his pen on a piece of paper and it echoed throughout the room. Someone’s stomach just growled. I hate 5th hour. As a matter of fact, I hate hours 2-10.” The writer of this note knows that her reader will recognize the shorthand reference to another student, and she builds upon a shared history with the reader. Likewise, the writer knows her reader will sympathize with the writer’s unhappiness. The narrative is intended to bond further the writer and the reader and strengthen their social connections. Most details in these informal communications are meant to help the intended audience imagine being physically present with her girlfriend who writes the note.

This socialization is one reason that the notes passed between my girlfriends and me when we were in school were so important to us. They helped us feel like we were together the whole day, seeing the same things and hearing the same conversations even if we were at the opposite end of the school building from where those conversations were happening. We traveled in a pack, dressing alike, wanting the same albums, going to the same movies (usually at the same time), and writing about it offered a way to feel accepted and to be reassured that we were fitting in. The text’s creation and reception worked both to define what was socially acceptable and to reassure us that we were following the unspoken rules of our culture.

As an adult and a parent, I can recognize in hindsight that much of our adolescent note writing was cruel. While it might have been important for the process of our socialization, often the words we put on the page brought us closer by criticizing others. One undated note from my best friend adds a tiny postscript at the bottom complaining about a girl whom we found constantly irritating: “Krissy always asks if I’m going to Youth Group. What’s wrong with her? I’ve never gone.” Another time, she writes disparagingly about “a guy’s mom [who] walked in [to the class] and then walked out again,” followed by her fear that her own mom would come into the school and embarrass her by being there. The socialization aspect of CHAT analysis questions how a text continues the interaction between the users of that text and also how the text portrays the culture of the users. The culture of junior high and high school is such that most students try to fit in while, paradoxically, they try to form their individual identity, and as they do so, they immaturely disparage others in order to make themselves look better.

Seeing my old notes prompted me to think about all the many ways writing has been important to me over the years, even forms of writing that are not privileged as being academic or considered worthwhile—writing which may even have earned me a detention for having been produced during school when I was supposed to be working on what my teachers would deem more important projects. A CHAT analysis shows that these written artifacts of friendship and identity formation are texts that are produced within the constraints of the

school setting and its ecology. *Ecology* used in terms of a CHAT analysis refers to the physical environment of the production of a text. When we produced our notes, they were shaped by the setting in which the notes were created and used. Examining the ecology of the notes requires me to think about the constraints of the school environment. Our daily schedules, our use of pencil and paper, or our access to a mechanical means of production (a typewriter in the 1980s or a computer lab in the present) all comprise part of the ecology of the texts. Once a text is created, the way the texts are moved between creator and audience also needs to be examined. CHAT analysis looks at the distribution of a text, how the text is passed between writer and reader. In our case, the notes were distributed hand-to-hand to maintain secrecy and a sense of special exclusivity.

The characteristics of all the notes are very similar. My friends and I never consciously set about creating rules or guidelines for our texts; the similarities between them all evolved organically, it seems. This lack of formal planning yet naturally evolved similarity in content and construction of the passed notes falls into the category of *representation* in a CHAT analysis: the text comes into being based on the planning and conceptualization of its creators. For instance, both my notes and my daughter’s contain code names which disguise the identity of whomever we write about, showing a rudimentary plan to shroud our communication should the notes be confiscated or lost (see Figure 2). This awareness of the need for protection and use of code names is part of the representation of the communicated text.

My friend warns me in one note to “be careful not to loose [sic]” the note or let anyone else read it. She writes about “Otto,” a code name for a boy in her class, and she uses the abbreviation “YNW” for “you know who”—text talk that predates texting by a couple decades. My friends and I shared written stories back and forth about Dudley, Pizza, Señor, and Yoda—all pseudonyms that (to us) were hilarious yet also hid who we were gossiping about just in case somebody found one of the notes and read it. We created our texts solely for each other, yet we understood that an unintended audience might come across our missives, and we protected ourselves accordingly.

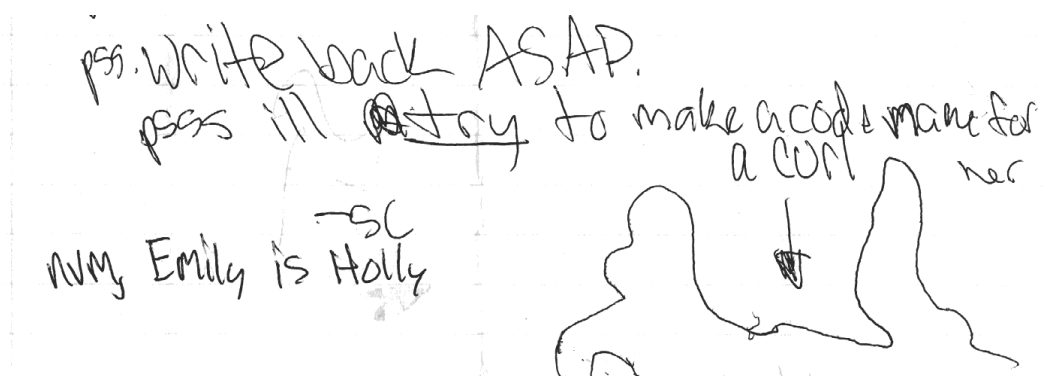


Figure 2: A Curl (September 2012)

Considering an intended audience's ease of comprehension is usually how a student is urged to revise his text. In our case, we sought to speak only to our friends and to confound any others with our own special jargon. One of my daughter's friends claims that the best part of writing notes to a friend is, "No one else knows what's on it or anything, so it's exciting." This element of having insider knowledge which connects a girl to a tribe of others is an important bonding experience and increases the excitement of passing notes in school.

Another similarity between all the notes, no matter which generation created the text, is the presence of drawings included within the text (see Figures 1-4). Sometimes my daughter's friends draw cartoon figures and pictures of cute animals to accompany their notes. Adding actual physical proof on the paper of the writer's presence happens in both my older notes and my daughter's notes.

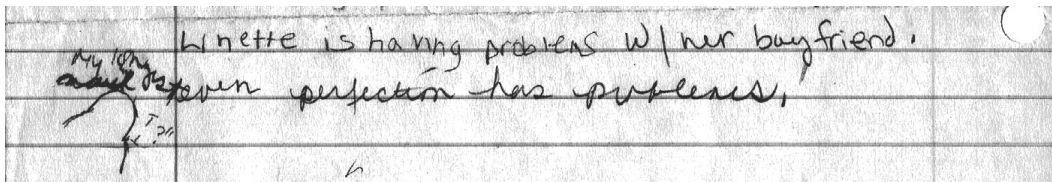


Figure 3: The Fingernail (April 1984)

For instance, my friend traced her long fingernail (see Figure 3) as proof that she was growing her nails out long enough to paint while one of my daughter's friends kissed her paper to show off her "Baby Lips Kiss," and another traced a lock of her curly hair (see Figures 2 and 4). It is not surprising that there is so much fascination with any physical aspect of their appearance that is the most stereotypically feminine: curly hair, long nails, painted lips.

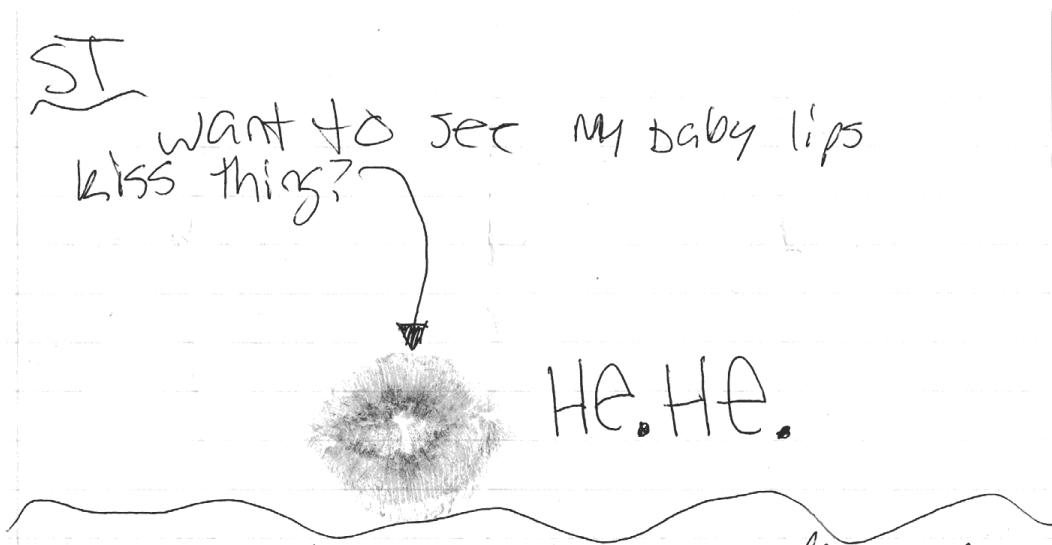


Figure 4: Baby Lips Kiss (September 2012)

These writers are busy trying to grow into what they perceive as cultural norms and expectations in order to be considered pretty and likable to others. One note shows a drawing of the writer alongside her crush, and below the figures she has written her name with his last name over and over. Then she tries linking his first name with her last name once, and immediately writes, “lol im kidding, boys don’t change their last name.” Defying gender stereotypes seems beyond the girls at this age. They are too fragile in their own emerging identity to risk drawing the negative attention of others, and they understand (even at their young age) that anyone considered different or unconventional is suspect.

Whether a note was written 30 years ago or last week, the content of the conversations is typically more about social concerns than anything related to academics. The girls write about other people, complain about school and teachers, and they all write about people they have crushes on and what they’ve noticed about those people. Notes from both generations have smatterings of rudimentary Spanish in some of them because junior high is when the girls begin learning a foreign language, most often Spanish, so they insert newly learned vocabulary words such as *escuela* and *mañana*. Often the writer of a note will wish for school to be over. One of my daughter’s friends emphasizes her wish for school to be over NOW in much larger letters, and my friend’s notes to me complain about her dislike of school and regularly relate her plans to ignore whatever the teacher is asking the class to do.

This challenging of the authority of the school environment is observed by Margaret Finders in her year-long ethnographic study of four adolescent girls and their circle of friends. Finders observes that “these girls had limited ways in which to assert identity or seek power,” and as a result, the girls found various ways to subvert their teachers’ expectations with their literacy practices (93). The girls who were considered by the teachers to be “good girls” and who were always dependable used their notes to each other to write about how much they hated these authority figures while girls who were identified as not being capable of earning good grades or focusing on school would reveal in their private writing a much deeper understanding of the material than they were willing to show publicly. In most ways, the literacy practices of the girls in Finders’ study, including their note-passing, subverted expectations while they also used “literacy as an act of self-presentation and as a ritual of exclusion” (121).

School is an environment in which students are expected to write a great deal, even more so today than when I was young. However, there are serious repercussions for not following the prescriptive nature of the school’s writing situations. My daughter’s school handbook includes passing notes under the Level I offenses, punishable by, among other things, “withdrawal

of privileges” (“Shabbona” 38). Interestingly, writing on one’s own body, according to my daughter, is considered a much more serious Level II offense, punishable by a detention and a parent conference, among other possible punishments (39).

In addition, a friend of mine who teaches elementary school says she’s taken notes away from students, and the experience of having the teacher read the note (silently to herself) was always punishment enough. One friend of mine vividly recalls the embarrassment of having to write, “I will not pass notes” as a punishment when she was caught doing so. However, she says it did absolutely nothing to stop her from continuing to pass notes to her friend on a daily basis because she felt like the notes were a vital part of her friendships despite what the teachers said. CHAT theory has us question, in part, the power relationships that exist before, during, and after the production of a text, and junior high students are most definitely constrained in their behavior, gestures, dress, and speech while at school. By writing their notes, the students are transgressing the expectation that the adult teachers are in control and that the children must follow the school’s rules.

My notes and my daughter’s notes passed at school during some of the most tumultuous years of development are evidence of how much a girl’s literacy practices help to shape her identity. Passing notes is both clandestine and dangerous as the girls defy administration and teacher expectations, yet passing notes remains a relatively safe way to test the boundaries of relationships and allow the girls to try to stretch and fit unfamiliar roles. Writing and passing notes, the action and process of putting thoughts and feelings on paper, is a way to investigate cultural norms and play around with fitting in by imitating the writing of others. The back-and-forth nature of note passing cements the girls’ peer groups until each girl feels more secure in her own identity. The activity of passing notes strengthens friendships by reiterating shared experiences and deepening the secret language of a friendship, and it allows each girl to explore interests outside her family. Additionally, passing notes allows a girl to develop her own creative style in the way she folds, decorates, plays with, and draws upon the note while she seeks support from others by soliciting opinions on social situations and interactions. Finally, passing notes allows young writers to subvert the expectations of those in authority who may unconsciously insult the girls’ emerging identities by (mis)labeling them and underestimating the importance and value of their written expression. Cultural-historical activity theory allows us to examine the important rhetorical choices made within the genre of notes passed between friends at school and to recognize the complex socialization happening as adolescents produce, distribute, and receive clandestine school notes.

Works Cited

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Delores Robinson is married and raising her daughters along with working full-time, leaving her little time for fun pastimes such as reading, writing, and taking graduate English classes. One of her favorite things is to receive a handwritten letter in the mail from a friend or loved one, and she thinks any card or note is improved with the addition of sparkly stickers on it.