

# Resistance and the Underlife: Informal Written Literacies and Their Relationship to Human Information Behavior

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**This article presents findings from a research study (Trace, 2004) that looked at a particular aspect of human information behavior: children's information creation in a classroom setting. In the portion of the study described here, naturalism and ethnomethodology are used as theoretical frameworks to investigate informal documents as an information genre. Although previous studies have considered the role of informal documents within the classroom, little sustained attention has been paid to pre-adolescents, particularly in terms of how they create unofficial or vernacular literacies both to navigate their growing awareness of the formal (albeit sometimes "hidden") curriculum and, on occasion, to subvert it, positing an alternative economy that itself can be "hidden" via surreptitious use of informal documents. Making explicit the ties that exist between these objects and the worlds in which they are embedded demonstrates that informal documents hold a particular relevance for children within this social context (Garfinkel & Bittner, 1999). Furthermore, this article demonstrates that an ethnomethodologically informed viewpoint of information creation brings a level of dignity and determination to an individual's human information behavior, allowing us to appreciate the human ability to recontextualize or reenvision sanctioned or official information genres to meet our own needs and purposes.**

## Introduction

Before written information is sought, organized, and used, it must be brought into existence. As a concept in human information behavior, "information creation" research (Trace, 2007) focuses on when, where, how, and why people create information in various domains (in everyday life or in the working world), examining the fundamental skills and knowledge that come into play in creating and using

information as well as the larger role that genres of information play in society. Information creation research is therefore an extension of human information behavior and information practice research—pushing the boundaries of exploration in the library and information science (LIS) field back to the place where people put pen to paper (or fingers to the keyboard) and set in motion the lifecycle of information. Studying the process of information creation is important as it allows us to understand the underlying purposes and intent that people bring to such a fundamental, everyday activity. Knowing how and why information is initially brought into being also provides an important context and framework in which to ground its subsequent organization, management, and use.

Previously published research on how children are socialized to create and use information has analyzed what a group of fifth-grade students were taught about the everyday documents (i.e., those information objects that teachers typically refer to as "paper" or "paperwork" and which consist of genres created and used as a by-product of the teaching and learning process) that they encountered in the classroom (Trace, 2007). This research described what knowledge teachers imparted to students about creating and using everyday documents and also described how social factors were manifested in the construction and form of the documents themselves. The findings indicated that teachers, as part of the school's hidden curriculum, socialized students to be good (in the sense of being competent) creators and users of documents. Part of the role of "being a student" involved learning the underlying social norms and values that existed in relation to document creation and use, as well as understanding other norms and values of the classroom that were captured or reflected by documents themselves. Furthermore, understanding the nature of a particular genre of information and how to create it was a fundamental part of student affiliation, and it moved the child from precompetence towards competence and established him or her as a member of the school community.

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Implicit, however, in any discussion of formal or hidden curricula in schools, and particularly as these curricula operate within the classroom, is some notion of resistance; namely, that students are capable of opposing or at least existing separately from aspects of a school's formal rules and norms. Researchers studying school environments have typically examined student resistance from either a functionalist or a neo-Marxist standpoint. Such discourse speaks to notions of control and alienation where students are either pitted against teachers or against each other, and where student needs are often seen as being subverted or controlled by society and/or the teachers' own agendas. This article, focusing on students' creation and use of informal documents (i.e., the documents that students create for themselves or each other without official sanction), draws on naturalistic and ethnomethodological notions about the existence and purposes behind the informal aspects of institutional life to describe and analyze what these fifth-grade students achieved of their own volition outside of the formal rules structure of the classroom. In doing so, information creation research is taken from the realm of how embedded social norms and realities are represented in both verbal and textual interactions related to everyday documents (Trace, 2007), to how familiarity with such understandings allows students not only to function within the rules but also outside them. This article demonstrates that an ethnomethodologically informed viewpoint of information creation brings a level of dignity and determination to an individual's human information behavior, allowing us to appreciate the human ability to recontextualize or reenvision sanctioned or official information genres to meet our own needs and purposes.

## Related Studies

My research study, while initially conceptualized and framed for an audience of archivists, has a place in a broader academic landscape. To date, what little research that has been done on the creation and use of informal documents (or so-called unofficial, nonacademic, or vernacular literacies) in a classroom setting has taken place outside the field of library and information science. Such research explicitly or implicitly acknowledges the particularities of this social domain, including the presence of an underlife [defined by Erickson & Shultz (1991, p. 470) as a classroom's "informal social organization"] in which informal documents function and flourish. As instances of research from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, education, sociology of education, sociolinguistics, and ethnography of communication, studies of informal documents in the classroom are looked at as part of an examination of the larger themes of written literacy and/or the accomplishment or reproduction of gender.

Literacy-centered research (Blair, 1998; Brown, 1997; Camitta, 1993; Finders, 1997; Hey, 1997; Hubbard, 1989; Shuman, 1986) has examined the role that informal documents—created within the realm of "unofficial literacy," "literacy events," (Hubbard, 1989) and a "literate underlife" (Finders, 1997); and called "unofficial writing,"

"non-academic writing" (Finders, 1997), "secret writings" (Hey, 1997), "secretive literate practices" (Finders, 1997), "non-curricular texts" (Blair, 1998), "invisible communication activities" (Hey, 1997), "youth genres" (Brown, 1997), "vernacular writing" (Camitta, 1993), and "unofficial and vernacular texts" (Brown, 1997)—play in school life. The goal of these studies is not only to understand the social construction and acquisition of formal and informal written literacies but also to aid educators in "constructing authentic literacy tasks in school" (Brown, 1997, p. 4). Research on the accomplishment or reproduction of gender in the classroom (Blair, 1998; Brown, 1997; Cahill, 2001; Canaan, 1990; Finders, 1997; Hey, 1997) looks at how informal literacies play into the construction of students' identity and of students' "relationship work" (Cahill, 2001). In these studies, boys' roles tend to be either dismissed or viewed in connection with a stronger presence of girls' written literacies.

This study's disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological framework, and its focus on preadolescents in a fifth-grade classroom, extend and revise much of this earlier work on informal documents. Rather than using gender, ethnicity, and/or literacy as the overt framework to investigate students' creation of informal documents, the intent was to look more specifically at information creation as a type of human information behavior, investigating informal documents as a genre and, in the process, highlighting what children gain and achieve in the local practice of document creation and use. In studying information creation from an LIS perspective, this study shares an intellectual heritage with, but also has some substantial differences from, specific prior human information behavior and information practice research. Such research includes: those taking a naturalistic and ethnomethodological approach; those focusing on human information behavior, particularly as it pertains to children and adolescents; and those which examine information practices (i.e., particular forms of literacy) in the context of everyday life activities.

However, before placing information creation research in the broader LIS landscape, it first must be established that these types of vernacular written literacies can be considered "information" (as defined and understood by the LIS community). At a most basic level, these unofficial texts are objects, instances of what Buckland (1991, p. 351) called "information-as-thing." More specifically, they fall into the category of documents, allowing students to represent information in a physical and tangible way; however, it is not merely the physicality of these texts that warrants their inclusion under the rubric of information. The documents in this study also meet Buckland's criteria by being both informative and evidential. The documents in this study are evidence or representations of aspects of everyday student life in the classroom, and they function as one of the means by which information is shared or communicated among students. As such, documents are an important way that students come to understand, and to partake in, the underground life in the classroom. Note that such a view does not mean that these documents are seen as objective entities. Documents

are understood to be located in a context, connected to their creators and their creators' purposes. Similar to Hjørland's (2007) view of information, an ethnomethodological view of information creation claims that there is no predefined or predetermined sense of what a document is. Instead, information is viewed as an accomplished phenomenon with meaning seen not as purely residing in the document itself but arising in the course or process of interaction (Trace, 2007, p. 159).

Over the past decade, an analysis of LIS research methods has shown that while quantitative research methods continue to predominate, the use of qualitative research methods is on the rise (Whipple & Nyce, 2007). Ethnography has attracted a small, but growing, number of researchers who are interested in studying people in their natural settings (see Chatman, 1992; McKechnie, 2000). Although also not yet widely utilized, the potential of the ethnomethodological approach for LIS research has been established (Powell, 1999). Ethnomethodology is seen as one of a number of theoretical approaches that fits "within the behavioral tradition in social and information sciences" (Nahl, 2001, p. 1). Information behavior research that takes a (social) constructivist approach is viewed as being sensitive to the ethnomethodological tradition, and Dervin's "sense making" theory, in particular, is said to fall into this category (Nahl, 2001). There is a deeper tradition of LIS research that focuses on the information behavior of children and adolescents. Of the three categories of research that are said to coalesce around this area (Todd, 2003, p. 34), my study has the most resonance with the focus on children's everyday information-seeking behaviors, although the information behavior studied in this article is not information seeking or use but their precursor, information creation. As such, my research answers the newly issued call to broaden this information behavior research agenda to include the study of young people's information production (Bernier, 2007). Finally, at least conceptually, the closest that prior LIS research gets to an information creation focus is in work by Mackey (2002), Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer (2005), and others, that looks at literacy and literacy events or practices in everyday life. Their specific focus is on how people engage with and process texts in the activity of reading, as well as the role and meaning of such texts in people's lives. Although similar in conception, the focus of my research is on writing activities, on what Rothbauer (2005, p. 123) called the "extension" or "flip side" of reading as a literacy practice. The focal point, therefore, is not on how people process text but on the very act of its writing and recording.

Despite these differences, viewing information creation as a type of human information behavior or information practice was important in that it facilitated a broader understanding of both who was looked at as a document creator and also the range and function of these documents within the classroom setting. In studying informal documents as both a form and as a representation of a school's underlife, I (in common with Hubbard, 1989, and to some extent, Brown, 1997) concluded that informal literacies were part of the social world of both genders, and that more genres and types of literacy events

were present in the classroom than some prior studies had indicated.

## Research Design

### *Theoretical Framework and Research Questions*

In this study, naturalism and ethnomethodology were chosen for their ability to shed light on the nature of information creation and on how students used information genres to navigate and be a part of school life. Naturalism, an approach that dates back at least to Robert Park and the Chicago School of field research, emphasizes the study and description of the social world. In taking a naturalistic perspective, the goal is to come to some kind of understanding of the social world from the perspective of those who share and participate in its lived experience (Denzin, 1973). In this study, naturalism was used to broadly ask and understand what was happening in the classroom with regard to students' document creation and, to a lesser extent, use. Pioneered by Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodology's goal is not to study or describe the social world as an objective reality. Instead, the focus is largely on studying how reality is created or "produced 'from within' by members of society" (Hester & Francis, 2000, p. 1). There are a number of recognized subfields in ethnomethodology (Maynard & Clayman, 1991). These include conversation analysis pioneered by, for example, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson; ethnomethodological studies of the local organization of institutional settings carried out by, for example, Don Howard Zimmerman, Aaron V. Cicourel, and Hugh Mehan; and the studies of specialized work domains and how work is accomplished within these settings by researchers such as Michael Lynch. The study described here fits into the subfield of ethnomethodological studies of institutional settings, particularly those that use ethnography as a method. More specifically, ethnomethodology was used here to examine the role that informal document creation plays in relation to ideas about school membership and resistance. In ethnomethodological terms, the concept of membership has a particular meaning. According to Coulon (2004),

[B]eing a member is a technical term meaning sharing the language of the group in question. It means sharing a common world, common perspectives, and ways of categorizing reality. It conveys the impression of living in a unified and uniform culture when its members are at ease in the following senses: they have naturalized and incorporated the innumerable details of daily life, including minute details of behavior, clothing, and talk that allow the members to recognize each other instantly. (p. 109)

In the context of this research study, membership comes into being through a process which acknowledges that students begin as novices. Every time a student changes grade level, and perhaps to a greater extent when a student changes schools or makes the leap from one stage of schooling to the next (e.g., from elementary school to middle school), this process of becoming an insider begins again. For students,

part of sharing this common world, one of the “innumerable details of daily life,” is knowing how to create and use everyday documents in the classroom context. As stated previously, the role that human information behavior plays as part of the process of how a student can move from novice status to that of membership is described in a prior article (Trace, 2007). Students’ construction and use of documents, of their own volition, is the subject of this article as it demonstrates that “learning the code” also means being able to “transpose the code to other situations, to innovate, to create new variations and significations” (Coulon, 2004, p. 116). Students’ ability to reenvision sanctioned or official information genres to meet our own needs and purposes is an important part of life in the classroom because after all, a member is “not only a person who breathes and who thinks but a person with a whole ensemble of processes, methods, activities, and know-how that enables [them] to invent adjusting devices to give sense to the surrounding world” (Coulon, 1995, p. 27).

### *Population*

The research participants were drawn from one fourth/fifth-grade classroom in a Southern California elementary school.<sup>1</sup> During the 2002–2003 academic school year, River Forest Elementary employed 33 teachers and 27 administrative staff members, and provided education to over 400 students ages 4 through 12. While criterion-based selection was used to identify a naturally bounded population, reputational-case selection was used to hone in on a specific instance of the population within the school (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In Rooms 5 and 6, Ms. Lyons, the language arts and social studies teacher, Ms. Carson, the math and science teacher, and Mr. Beckner, the math and Writer’s Workshop teacher, agreed to be observed and interviewed as part of the research process. Twenty-two (of a total of 29) fifth graders and their parents also agreed to participate in the study.<sup>2</sup>

### *In the Field: Data Collection and Analysis*

At the beginning of this almost 10-month ethnographic study, I spent on average 2 days a week in the classroom; however, it quickly became apparent that such time was insufficient. As Ms. Lyons commented, the more time I spent in

the classroom, the more the students (and the teachers) would come to accept my presence and interact with me. Being willing to put in “face time,” to help out and participate in some of the routine aspects of school life (e.g., going on a field trip and being there to fix the printer when it jammed), gave me a place and a role within the classroom. There are a number of roles that a researcher can adopt when working with children: supervisor (The researcher has no authority over the children under study and has no positive emotional relationship with them.); leader (The researcher has authority over the children in the study, but has positive contact with them.); observer (The researcher has no formal authority over the children and does not develop any type of relationship with those under study.); and finally, the “friend” category (The researcher becomes friends with their subjects without having an overt authority role.) (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). Practical circumstance and the initial structure and focus of the research study meant that at least initially, my role was that of a leader. Over time, I was able to break out of that role to cultivate more of a friendship with the students. I remember vividly a particular day in January when I felt that I had finally been accepted in the classroom. Arthur, one of the fifth graders who was not taking part in my research study, approached me during morning snack and initiated a short conversation about his vacation plans. Although assuredly a routine conversation for Arthur, for me it felt like the breakthrough moment after several months of being in the field. This encounter taught me the importance of time in developing rapport with people.

During my time in the field, I recorded what I had observed and heard. The data gathered during 9 months of fieldwork for the part of the study described here consisted of (a) ethnographic fieldnotes, written contemporaneously with the events or as soon after the events as possible and capturing aspects of life in “real-time” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 60); (b) a selective photographic record of daily life in these classrooms; and (c) examples of formal and informal documents generated in the classroom. Several hundred informal literacies were collected—mainly the actual documents themselves, with occasional photographic surrogates. Informal literacies were collected directly from students, teachers, and teachers’ aides from collection boxes set up in both classrooms and from a variety of scavenging activities (e.g., looking through the trash and cleaning out desks at the end of the school day). Such a multipronged approach to data collection ensured that a wide variety of document types were gathered, including formats (e.g., contracts, surveys, newspaper articles, questionnaires, fieldnotes, and seating charts) that were generally overlooked in prior studies of informal literacies; however, no guarantee existed that an in-depth sample of each type had been accrued. Some of the collection methods also meant that some documents could not be linked to specific individuals nor was the full context behind the creation of the document always known. In addition, on occasions, gathering documents was not possible because students asserted their right to privacy and refused requests for information about what they had written. As with

<sup>1</sup>River Forest Elementary is a pseudonym, as are the names of teachers and students described in this study.

<sup>2</sup>Of the 22 students, 12 are female (Elene, Alanna, Megan, Chloe, Sabine, Michaela, Eva, Jennifer, Sarah, Abbie, Fay, and Briony) and 10 are male (Nathan, Colin, Adam, Joshua, Kyle, Dylan, John, Ryan, Jamie, and Matt). Two students are African American, 12 are Caucasian, 5 are Asian or Asian American, and 3 are Latino. At the time of the study, 6 students came from families earning \$35,000 or less per year; 5 students came from families earning between \$35,000 and \$59,999 per year; 1 student came from a family earning between \$60,000 and \$89,999 per year; 1 student came from a family earning between \$90,000 and \$119,999 per year; 5 students came from families earning between \$120,000 and \$249,999 per year; and 4 students came from families earning \$250,000 or more per year. The students were born between October 1991 and March 1993.

TABLE 1. Functions of informal literacies.

Informal Literacies		
Function	Explanation/Use	Common Form
Commentaries and solicitations for information	Comments, often critical, about events or students and/or requests for information	Notes
Expressions of sentiment and attachment	Expressions of sentiment between classmates and others	Notes, drawings, declaration of friendships, cards
Teasing	Use of textual formats to tease others, usually girl/boy although not exclusively so	Notes, cards, writing on the blackboard, drawings, MASH
Communicating with adults	Use of textual forms to initiate contact with teachers in the classroom	Notes
Affirmations	Confirmation of one's presence at school: So and so is here.	Notes, drawings/inscriptions on folders
Greetings	Short "hello" or messages of greetings	Notes, drawings
Instructions/directions	Instructions to fellow students: meet me; read this	Notes
Keeping in touch	Texts that capture e-mail addresses/phone numbers/AOL screen name	Lists, notes
Reminders and memory aids	Documents used to capture a piece of information needed in the immediate future	Notes, drawings
Soliciting of group opinions	Solicitation of opinions from the student body	Surveys, bar charts, and polls
Boundary negotiations	Documents that reflect space issues in the classroom	Notes, seating charts, drawings
Expressions of hobbies/interests/games	Expressions of students' interests and sense of fun	Newspapers, trading cards, lyrics, jokes, jingles, word games, drawings
Expressions of self	Documents that reflect students opinions about themselves or own sense of self	Notes, drawings
Other	Other document types which were largely one-of-a-kind occurrences in the classroom	Fieldnotes, lines

prior studies cited in this article, digital forms of informal literacies were not examined, primarily because school rules made informal means of electronic communication largely unavailable to students within this particular classroom context. Prior research on informal literacies has used various classification schemes to facilitate extended analysis and comparison of informal documents based on the particular research questions under study. In this study, documents were categorized primarily in terms of their perceived function and use (see Table 1). This allowed subsequent comparison between the formal (i.e., teacher initiated) and informal (i.e., student initiated) documents created in the classroom.

## Findings

In Rooms 5 and 6, students' informal documents were mainly written and shared when competing school priorities meant that students could not directly talk to each other. The medium or substrate of these documents took many forms, utilizing the various affordances of paper. Writing took place on  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$  in. lined paper that was freely available for student use, on plain art paper from the teachers' supplies, on scraps of paper, note cards, or commercial notepaper from home, on homework sheets, and in students' Writer's Workshop journals. The text of these documents could be bold and expansive or small and discrete. These documents were distributed in a number of different ways: passed surreptitiously from hand to hand across desks, passed hand to hand behind students' backs, thrown or pushed across to students by foot, or simply left out in the open where they hid in plain sight. More commonly, documents were simply left under

a student's desk for the recipient to find. These documents' multiple functions are described in more detail below.

### *Commentaries and Solicitations for Information*

Informal documents often served as a way for students to comment on school life and as a method of soliciting information from others. This category of note has been described as "informational" or "silly" notes (Hubbard, 1989, pp. 300–301), "dialogue notes" (Camitta, 1993, p. 234), and "running notes" (Brown, 1997, p. 54). Commentaries included remarks on current events, such as a note conveying the information "You won Student Council!" They also looked back on students' experiences in school and, as such, functioned as a way to bring the past to life, acted as a form of remembrance, and facilitated a common connection between students. Such was the case with a note in which Eva reminisced about a former teacher who used to buy the students ice cream. Other notes also allowed students to express feelings, positive and negative, about events in class. These ranged from simple statements such as "I ♥ hands-on-equations" to commentaries about feeling bored in school. Other commentaries captured feelings (including frustrations) about other students, either addressed directly to the individual involved or to a third party. The shortest of these notes expressed sentiments such as "supid people ha! ha! ha!," "I hate you," and "I hate Eva." This note was accompanied by a drawing of a face with a tongue hanging out, demonstrating (literally) that at this age some of these notes were tongue-in-cheek and not meant to be taken seriously. Other notes were clearly antagonistic, such as the following note passed between Abbie and Eva.

[Fourth-grade girl] is stupid I know  
 she should see my [?]  
 she's trying to fit in and  
 be cool  
 I know but shes  
 Not!

Students also used notes to transmit or request information from other students. Examples of such solicitations included a note asking whether the recipient wanted to see a particular movie and a note asking what the recipient wanted the writer to buy her at a store. Another example of this type of activity included a sequence of notes that went back and forth over a 2-month period, commenting on what was happening in math class, asking questions about what the recipient was up to (either in class or outside of school), and asking that the correspondence continue.

As Camitta (1993) observed, these documents could be transformative (pp. 240–242). They altered the quality and the temporal nature of school life by allowing students to refocus their attention on events (past or present) which were of more interest to them personally than those which were occurring formally in the classroom. Therefore, these documents gave students a voice during times when they could not otherwise express themselves. Another key characteristic of these informal document types is that they generated a need or an expectation for an ongoing dialogue—what Shuman (1986) called a “question and response pattern” (p. 90)—between students. As Cahill noted (2001), documents therefore tested relational ties in that students were expressing a degree of trust in the act of creation itself. The documents therefore were moment-in-time evidences and representations of an ongoing student conversation in the classroom, a conversation that because of classroom norms could only be expressed surreptitiously in written format.

### *Expressions of Sentiment and Attachment*

Preadolescence is a time when children are “testing the boundaries of proper behavior, establishing close friendships, and developing a finely attuned sense of self-presentation” (Fine & Sandstrom, p. 49). Preadolescence also is defined as an “intensely social period” in which “one’s social standing with one’s same-sex peers has particular importance” (Fine & Sandstrom, p. 58). Informal literacies therefore also were overtly used as a way for some girls to establish and maintain close classroom friendships and intimacies. Cahill calls such instances of social bonding “bold declarations of friendships” (2001, p. 80). At River Forest Elementary, declaring and cementing relationships took place through the almost intertwined media of textual messages and drawings, including writing notes with drawings of love hearts, and messages such as “I ♥ U.” Other sentimental expressions between girls involved writing, and then decorating, a person’s name, and accompanying sentimental messages with decorative details (e.g., stars and butterflies). Although some of the notes were breezy and light in tone, these notes at times painfully demonstrated the emotional investment that girls

had in some relationships and their eagerness to hold onto friendships in times of changing preadolescent peer-group dynamics. I collected two particular examples of this type of document, the first being a Post-it note passed back and forth between Sarah and Fay (both across desks and kicked along the floor) during science class in Room 6.

♥ It's O.K. don't  
 worry. You were right  
 ♥ Love U, Sarfay ♥

Sorry you were  
 right

No U  
 were right  
 anyway!  
 From Fay      Write  
                               back!

To Faysar  
 I was right!!!?  
 Yahoo! I love  
 Love u

Another document, a moment-in-time snapshot of a tug-of-war over the friendship of a particular popular fourth grader, co-opted a more formal genre. This contract and its various draft iterations, drawn up by Jennifer and two fourth graders, contained the title and most importantly the names of the three girls who were a party to its contents. Jennifer, as instigator of this document (variously called a “Declaration of Friendship” and a “Declaration of our Independence”) utilized the contract genre to try and negotiate for a popular girl’s attention and status as best friend.

Cards, notes, and drawings also served to strengthen and record relationships and maintain girls’ status with each other. On the occasion of her transferring schools, Fay received a large, decorated card from her friends telling her that she would be missed and hoping that she would enjoy her new school and make new friends, but also keep her old ones. Students in Rooms 5 and 6 also sent cards (celebrating birthdays and holidays), notes, and drawings to the teachers and the classroom aides demonstrating that as preadolescents, they had not yet broken that strong bond with adult members of the classroom. While girls wrote most of the expressions of sentiment captured on paper, boys also drew pictures that they shared among themselves and gave to teachers and aides, although these documents were usually devoid of strong sentimental overtones.

### *Teasing*

Fifth graders’ age inevitably affected both the content and form of their informal documents. As stated previously, the separate social world of boys and girls only begins to break down in preadolescence, and themes of sexuality and orientation to an adult world play a limited role at this age (Fine & Sandstrom, pp. 59–60). Studies by Hubbard (1989) and Cahill (2001) of older students have described examples of “like” messages, attesting to budding romantic attachments in the

classroom (usually taking the form “who do you like?”) (Hubbard, 1989, p. 301). I collected only one such example: a note asking whether the recipient liked one of the fourth-grade boys. Rather than dealing with any deep-seated romantic attachments, the notes collected at River Forest Elementary usually teased the recipient. In Rooms 5 and 6, teasing happened among students of the same gender and between students of different genders.

Girls did tease other girls about boys. Briony wrote a note to Elene in which she drew Elene’s name and the name of a boy, and claimed that “Elene told me to write this!” An extra element of amusement was added with the instructions “now look up,” “now look down,” “funny! Ha! HA!” The text was accompanied by drawings of love hearts, which added a visual element to the teasing. On the back of the note was a comment from Nathan: “Elene I found this it is about you from Nathan PS its about Simon to.” Chloe and Abbie also teased Fay by writing in her notebook. The note said “Fay wanted something for X-mas take a PEEK to see what she wanted.” Underneath this text was a blue Post-it note with the word “PEEK” written on it. Underneath the Post-it was the word “kisses.” Abbie, while working on a group project with Alanna, wrote in Alanna’s notebook that Alanna liked Colin. Alanna countered with a note saying that Abbie liked Colin. Abbie also teased Kyle about Chloe by writing a note saying “Kyle and Chloe are doing something,” which Kyle ripped up when he received it. Teasing also happened among boys. Matt drew love hearts on a divider in his notebook with the words Chloe and Ryan written inside. Boys also teased other boys by using handheld spell checkers, typing in words such as “loser” and then quickly flashing it to the intended target.

Emerging attraction between the opposite sexes also was expressed through the elementary-school game MASH (Mansion-Apartment-Shack-House). During the course of the school year, boys and girls (including Chloe, Sabine, Nathan, and Michaela) played MASH on a number of occasions when they had unsupervised access to the blackboard as well as while on the school bus. As a form of teasing, evidenced in and around the categories that boys and girls chose for each other—especially in terms of whom they would marry—MASH also was proof of the enormous sense of fun that was characteristic of many student interactions in the classroom, but that generally did not leave a documentary trace.

Teasing between girls and boys also was documented in the sending and receiving of cards. Before Valentine’s Day, one of the fifth-grade boys received three unsigned cards, and these cards were a source of great mirth to the class and some perplexity to the recipient as to who had sent them. There seemed to be some consensus that the cards were sent by a group of girls as a joke. Girls also teased boys in several signed notes, including two from Sabine to Nathan written while ostensibly taking some paper from a basket in Room 5. The first note was addressed “A Letter to Nathan, I think that’s your name?” On the other side was a drawing of a woman with her hand on her hips accompanied by the title “when

camron deaz looks at you!” When Sabine gave this to Nathan he looked at it and then showed it to Colin. Sabine then gave him another note with a picture of a bride on either side. One picture said “u mairring Jlo” and the other “u mairring [the name of a girl from another class at River Forest Elementary].” Sabine showed this note to Nathan and then grabbed it back from him. A fifth-grade boy told me that Sabine’s notes were in response to Nathan’s previous document indicating that Sabine was married to one of the [unpopular] boys in class.

### *Communicating with Adults*

In her book on girls’ friendships, Hey (1997) noted that girls’ informal literacies “mimic the official writing and pedagogic practices of school,” and to illustrate her point, she gives the example of students creating multiple-choice documents (p. 20). At River Forest Elementary, although notes were predominantly surreptitiously written and passed among students, notes also were used to initiate contact with teachers, parents, and on more than one occasion, me. As Shuman (1986) remarked, there were different standards and expectations when students were writing for adults (pp. 96–97). Many of these notes existed somewhere between the nexus of the formal and the informal activities of the classroom, and indicated that students understood and internalized the nature of formal document genres to not only be a part of but also to negotiate life in the classroom. As in Hey’s study, the structure, content, and language of the notes at River Forest Elementary more or less successfully mimicked more formal (or more adult) conventions, having one or more of the following attributes: formal greetings, a more complete sign-off, and a date. Students also generally paid greater attention to punctuation and neatness, if not spelling.

Although notes were sometimes written at the behest of teachers, a small number, such as the following example from Fay and a fourth-grade friend to Ms. Carson, were written on the students’ own initiative:

Dear Ms. Carson,	could tell us that would be
We were wondering if	great. We dont know
we could wear sandals	if we should be asking
on sunny days, but for	your or [the principal].
P.E. we will bring	Please get back to us soon.
tennis shoes. If you →	from [a fourth grade girl]
	and Fay Kohl

The note was written on the front and back of a blue note card and left for Ms. Carson in Room 6. The formal opening and closing sentence as well as the full signing of their names (features atypical of the notes the students wrote to each other) show that the students understood that a more official style of writing was appropriate for an adult recipient. Phrases such as “that would be great” and “please get back to us soon” also are more deferential than that usually found in student-to-student notes.

A unique document type gathered during the school year was a note rescued from the trash. With this note (an example of what Shuman, 1986, pp. 83–86, called a “deceptive letter”),

a student attempted to forge a formal document for the writer to pass herself off as a parent.

GEORGIA IS GOING  
HOME WITH SAMANTHA  
NOLES  
SUSAN  
NOLES  
JUNE 20, THURSDAY

The content of the document shows good mimicry and understanding of the genre of parent notes. Parent notes, generally written to let the teachers know who was going home with whom at carpool, were commonly posted on the blackboard in Rooms 5 and 6. Parent notes, often somewhat hurriedly written, frequently omit some of the social niceties and writing conventions more typical of other kinds of letters. This note, written on an  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$  in. lined paper, fits the general category or genre of parent notes, succinctly delivering the common message (i.e., so and so student is going home with so and so student), giving the name of the parent, and the day's date. A number of features, however, revealed it as having been written by a student, most obviously that the writing was in all caps and looked childish, with the name of the parent also written in this style rather than signed. The date format, with the date written first followed by the day of the week, also was atypical of a parent note.

### *Affirmations*

Affirmations are defined as positive declarations and assertions of being, declaratory statements of being present, being a part of, or just being "here." These affirmations were very much like graffiti in the sense that they were unauthorized and somewhat casual or almost, but not quite, nondeliberate. A declaration of being that is so situated in the moment gives some inkling of the truly ephemeral nature of these particular types of notes. Two examples of affirmations written in the traditional note format of the classroom were gathered during my research study, both recovered from the trash. No doubt in tandem (The two notes were originally from the same sheet of paper.), Jennifer and a fourth-grade girl wrote the same inscription (the only difference being their names): "Jennifer Hatton is here!"

More common forms of affirmations included the inscriptions students wrote on and within their math and science folders (on the front and back, on the inside covers, and on the dividers that separated the subjects within the folders), which generally took the form of the student's name. Students obviously felt compelled to leave their mark, as they wrote on folders despite the teachers' requests that they not do so. There also was often an ornamental element associated with some of these inscriptions, particularly on the folders. These affirmations fit with Blair's (1998) characterization of them being both decoration and identification (p. 12). Their prevalence also strongly suggests that they functioned as one of the ways that students learned to pass the time and cope with boredom in the classroom.

### *Greetings*

Seven examples of greeting notes were gathered, and other instances of these documents also were observed in the classroom setting. These documents tended to be very ephemeral, perhaps because they were not substantive enough for students to want to keep or because they were simply the beginnings of something that never fully materialized—notes that may have turned into commentaries if they had been answered. Or perhaps the message itself did not have long-term consequence since its function was simply to make a connection with another student, no matter how brief, as in Michaela's note to Jennifer.

#### Jennifer!

Peek-a-boo, I see you.  
Guess who?  
Did you guess it yet?  
Hint: I sit at your desk!  
(that gave it away, huh?)

This note was the most detailed of the greeting notes and, in fact, better demonstrates the multifaceted nature and function of these student communications. At one level, it acted as a general "hi," but it also functioned as an example of notes that deal with boundary negotiations ("I sit at your desk") and existed as evidence of the students' sense of fun.

Greeting notes also were left for students under their desks. The examples I collected were written by girls on scraps of paper and addressed to the person who shared their desk. A typical example of these notes was one written on an  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$  in. piece of paper and left under the desk that Jennifer shared with a fourth-grade girl. It said simply: "Hey Nic." A second example, written on a small scrap of paper, was most likely from one of the fourth-grade girls and was addressed to Alanna, who shared a desk with her. While similar to the previous note, drawings and symbols were used to further personalize the document and make a connection with the recipient.

[drawing of a flower]  
Hey  
Alanna !!  
u

Among the smallest of the greetings notes, being about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cm in length, was one passed across the desk from Abbie to Eva and back again during a science class. This note said "Hi!" on one side, and on the other side, the rhyming words "Hi Bi Li Di Pi and Fi" covered the tiny space. Another example, found in the trash in Room 5, was written during afternoon class later that same day. It said "iH eolhc." The greeting note that Abbie and Eva exchanged as well as the note written to Chloe are examples of how documents could form part of the games that students played among themselves. As in this instance, documents were used in the classroom as a recording medium for various word games (where students often disguised the content of what they were inscribing by writing in code or writing backwards). A final example of a greeting note, one that I photographed, was scribbled on the



blackboard by one of the students in Room 5 at the end of a school day.

Hi! Hi! Bye

Notes like this one seem to function more for students' amusement and for the thrill of writing on the blackboard (an activity that is generally controlled by the teachers) rather than as a true communication medium with other students.

### *Instructions/Directions*

Students also used informal literacies to instruct or direct other students to do things and therefore gave students a greater element of control over their environment during times when they could not communicate orally. The tone and content of these notes generally reflected a sense of urgency or immediacy in the intended interactions with others. Eight examples of this type of document were gathered during the school year. One was written to a fourth-grade girl during class and instructed her in how she should write the date on a homework assignment sheet.<sup>3</sup>

Date

January 2003 ← Write it like that -

From,

Your nabour!

A second note asked the reader to listen to some song lyrics ("Listen to this song. . .") and is accompanied by the following words: "Yo I said, Yo you need, To speed and, feed on she." Another note directs the recipient to "look at my new pencil!" Another note ("pretend we hate each other") was evidence both of students' role-playing and the sometimes fragile or volatile nature of preadolescent friendships. Two other notes were evidence of student relationships as they existed outside of the classroom setting, directing the recipient to call the writers at home and giving their phone numbers. The remainder of these notes functioned to control the students' own environment while working within the confines of the classroom, containing instructions from one student to another to meet during the school day. One contained the words "keyboarding lab," evidently instructing where to meet during lunch time. The second note asked the recipient to meet in the bathroom in 60 s.

### *Keeping in Touch*

Just as the printed class roster was the parent bible to arrange play dates, car pool, birthday parties, and sleepovers, the students generally used notes, and occasionally

address books or day planners, to record friends' phone numbers and e-mail addresses to keep in touch after class and on the weekend. Such slips of paper [where a student recorded his or her phone number, e-mail address, and their real name accompanied by their America Online (AOL) screen name] documented a one-to-one relationship—the sharing of information between one student and another.

Some students also managed this information on a larger scale. At one point during the year, Kyle collected a list of students' e-mail addresses and AOL screen names. At intervals throughout the school year, Fay, Abbie, and Chloe also wrote lists of AOL screen names. Some of the screen names were an amalgamation of students' real names, others were amalgamations of pop-culture references, and others were succinct commentaries about how they saw themselves (e.g., cute, funny, sweet, etc.). The lists themselves were written on sheets of paper and, in at least one instance, in a Writer's Workshop journal. Once written, these lists of AOL screen names were then hand-copied in class to be distributed later. Abbie was the instigator (or perhaps just the recorder) of the three lists, of which I got copies. Fay, Abbie, and Chloe's lists of AOL buddies consisted of between 16 and 33 names—girls in their immediate circle of friends (including Sabine and Sarah), other selected classmates (including Nathan, Ryan, and Eva), and what appear to be names of students from other classes in the school. That there was exclusivity to these girls' lists (evidence, in this instance, of a clear demarcation of a preadolescent friendship group) is apparent both in the overlap of names and how these lists were controlled in class. One of the lists even had a cover sheet on it with the words "For Fay, From Abbie" and in larger print "Don't Touch." Another list, entitled "Rooms 5/6 interview" was drawn up by Abbie, Chloe, and another fifth-grade girl, and consisted of eight names and phone numbers of fifth graders from Rooms 5 and 6.

### *Reminders and Memory Aids*

Students also used documents to jog their memory and to remind them to do things such as to bring or get something for school. On at least one occasion, such a document also was used as an unofficial memory aid during a math test. I collected five other examples of reminder notes during the year, two of which were explicit reminders to bring in homework, specifically a math packet.

Dear My self

rimind my self to bring my

math packet on Tuesday, march, 11, 2003

Math packek

One was a reminder to get a "little note book" when the student got home and was accompanied by a drawing of a note book. It seems likely that the collected examples were unsuccessful reminders in the sense that they never made it home but were thrown in the trash, abandoned under desks, or placed in my boxes. A reason why these notes also could have been discarded may lie in the circumstances of their creation. These documents were more likely to be discarded because

<sup>3</sup>The writer, in helping their neighbor complete a task correctly, is providing what ethnomethodology calls an account of the rule for document construction, and in so doing is making their own knowledge of the rule visible to themselves and others. In this process, the student is drawing upon a historical notion of what the particular rule is, but meaning is constructed only when the rule is interpreted in the context and in the process of interaction.

the request to remember was being initiated by a teacher and not by the students themselves.

One and possibly two of the other reminder notes were written by students without adult input. The most clear-cut example referred to a strictly preadolescent concern. The note said "Get Mood Ring from Limited too." The other note, featuring a visual as well as a textual reminder, appears to be a reminder to find a book and had a drawing of a spine of a book on which the title was written "Hawaii, What to bring to Hawaii." Above the drawing of a book were the words "Remember to find."

### *Soliciting Group Opinions*

Both boys and girls co-opted formal document genres to informally solicit opinions from classmates about various topics. A feature of these types of documents was their more inclusive use within the classroom. Opinions were on occasion solicited from a wider spectrum of students in the class, regardless of grade level or particular friendship groups. The first example of this type of document, written by one of the fifth-grade girls during math class and subsequently left in my collection box in Room 6, was a list of what people wanted to be when they grew up. This document took shape as many of the students finished a math test early and were keeping themselves amused before they were dismissed for lunch. Another survey, albeit recorded in a different format, was created by fifth-grade girl, Chloe, on the same day as the other survey. This survey, entitled "Favorite Stores," was written during Writer's Workshop in Room 5. After talking to five others in the class, including me, Chloe drew a bar chart of people's favorite stores: Abercrombie & Fitch (the choice of two students), Fred Segal (the choice of two students), Rebelette (no votes), Ragg Tattoo (no votes), Roxy Quicksilver (no votes), Ross Dress 4 Less (no votes), and Mervyns (my choice). Like Ella's survey, this one was unfinished, demonstrating that these documents were used largely to occupy and amuse students and helped them pass the time in the classroom.

The most prolific of these types of documents were polls. I collected nine examples of polls from the classroom, all written one particular afternoon in Room 5 during Writer's Workshop. The polls were either created in Writer's Workshop journals or on lined pieces of classroom paper. Like the surveys, they consisted of solicitations of opinions on a variety of topics. Unlike the other two surveys, these documents circulated in class, allowing students to personally fill in the answers. Among the polls were "Do you like your hair?" (Abbie), "Do you pick your nose secretly?" (Abbie and Eva), "Do you like Broccoli?" (Kyle), and "Do you like the taste of your boogers?" (Sarah). Chloe also created her own polls that day. One of them was "Do you like chicken?" Another, created on the back of the last poll, asked, "Do you snowboard or ski?" A third Chloe poll was "Do you like b-ball or football or soccer?" Two other Chloe polls dealt with body issues, mirroring, but in a stronger sense, Abbie's question about whether people liked their hair: "How much do you

eat?" and "Have you had p.?" The first of these two polls was never circulated in class. The second poll was kept secret and was shared with just a few girls. When I asked to see it, I was told by Eva that it was private, just for girls.

These polls and surveys clearly co-opt traditional document genres. For students, they serve as a form of escapism from class, as a means to keep oneself and others busy, and as a means to keep oneself and others amused. They also offer a chance for students to communicate informally with others in the class, to broaden their social networks, however fleetingly. While some pander to elementary-school students' love of all that is gross and ridiculous, others give a window into students' passions and aspirations. Chloe's polls also hint at larger issues that students, particularly girls, faced with their emerging adolescence, including struggles with self-image and puberty.

### *Boundary Negotiations*

Looking at a type of document she termed "desk messages" and "signs," which served as public announcements from their student creators to the classroom as a whole, Hubbard (1989) found that informal literacies could be used as a tool to mark territorial boundaries in the classroom (pp. 296–298). Boys used these announcements to demarcate and control an area, revealing the "underground" definition of space as it existed for the students in the classroom. Hubbard called these literacies "an important tool for the boys in the class for establishing their turf, announcing their personalities, and declaring their allegiances" (p. 298).

In Rooms 5 and 6, both boys and girls created informal literacies marking territorial boundaries; however, these documents took a different form than the ones Hubbard observed. This was most likely due to the particular structure of the school day at River Forest Elementary, where students rotated between classrooms and therefore shared their desks with other students. However, negotiations around space still happened in the classroom. Students were interested in marking off territory as their own and also figuring out who was sharing space with them.

A number of notes, left under desks for the next occupier to find, sought to establish where people sat in the classroom. Two of these notes were quite straightforward. The first, written on a homework-assignment sheet, asked "WHO SITS HERE?" The second note had a similar message, but also identified the sender:

who are you    this is  
who sits here    Jennifer

Two other notes mimicked the official seating charts that Ms. Lyons and Ms. Carson kept to track where students sat in the classroom. In this instance, the students also were mimicking my behavior as they saw me creating these charts for Ms. Lyons as well as creating my own seating charts for my fieldnotes. One of these notes is a blank template with the desk setup of Room 5 drawn in. The reader is oriented to the layout of the classroom by the labeling of the blackboard at the top of the drawing. At the bottom of the template are

the words: "Write where you sit." The second example of a seating chart is more elaborate. The top half of the document contains the following text:

Curios Cat says,  
Who sits in this desk?  
I'm just being curios

Underneath this text is a drawing of a River Forest Elementary student-identification card, which has as its running title "Hello! My name is ?" The drawing of the ID card had blank lines for a student to fill in a date of birth and a signature. The bottom of the card contained the text "Rooms 5/6 visitor." Underneath the ID card was a drawing of the layout of Room 6. Each desk is numbered, and the name of the student who sits at that desk is written in. Orientation features, which are labeled in this seating chart, include the cubbies (where students kept their backpacks during the day) and the door to an adjoining room. On the back of this sheet are the words "To whoever sits here."

Four other examples of these notes demonstrate students' interest in claiming a direct ownership of particular spaces within the classroom. One note said "Do not take this table," and named the five boys (including Kyle and Ryan) who had reserved the table during lunchtime. Matt used the second document to stake out his space while working on a science project. Written on art paper, this message accompanied his rough drawing of a marine organism that he was creating for the class science mural:

Do Not Bother !! MATT . . . . .  
is working  
Here  
↓

Megan and her partner wrote a third document during math. On this occasion, Mr. Beckner had the students work on a hands-on math problem in class for which the students had to find out how many rooms it would take to make a million dots. The dots referred to the dots on the floor covering of Room 6. Students sectioned off portions of the floor as a way to figure out this problem. Megan and her partner sectioned off their own space, and on the floor wrote in large letters "Do Not Step Here!" These instructions were accompanied by the two students' names and a big smiley face with a tongue hanging out. Such decorations were a common way to "soften" the message that students wanted to impart to others, diffusing any negative feelings that the message—and its exclamation point—might invoke. Similarly, another note that asked the recipient to "Stop leaving stuff in the desk!" was accompanied by a drawing—this time of a flower.

#### *Expressions of Hobbies/Interests/Games*

Anyone who has seen a fourth- or fifth-grade student reading a *Guinness World Records* book, a joke book, comics, or a book of puzzles understands that having fun and finding ways to amuse oneself, and others, is part and parcel of elementary-school life. At this age, students also can demonstrate an inordinate passion (called a "ruling passion" by

Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 18) for hobbies and other outside interests. Some of these passions were captured in, or through, informal literacies. In Rooms 5 and 6, several girls (whom Ms. Carson dubbed the "Juicy" girls, after a brand of clothing) were devoted to fashion. Another group (whom I dubbed the "military boys") was fascinated with tanks, bombs, ships, and planes. Others collected or traded stuff (e.g., cards, coins, medals, and dolls) or were passionate about sports. Some students loved to write, some loved to draw, and some loved collecting images and creating secret files on the computer. I found that drawing seemed to be the common denominator in the classroom and, as Brown (1997) also noted, almost an obsession for some.

Megan and a girlfriend (with help from at least two other girls, including Michaela) started a class newspaper, of which at least two editions were "published." The first edition coincided with the canceling of the class whale-watching field trip because of bad weather. The seven-page newspaper (another example of the co-opting of adult genres for personal means) was peppered with articles and drawings of relevance to the students in Rooms 5 and 6, including an article about the canceled field trip, two weather pages which included a 4-day forecast, a notice about the classes' upcoming talent show, and an article about a local traffic accident which had made several students late for school. The pages of the second newspaper included an index of features (touting a "New Quiz Page!" a "New Sports Page," and "New Weather Reports!"), puzzle pages, and the following disclaimer: "Dear reader, this info is false and may not be used against our publications in the court of law."

As well as having a passion for drawing, Sabine sometimes accompanied the informal drawings she did at school with her own stories. One example was the beginning of an illustrated short story about a character, "snailerellie," who was not invited to an ocean ball. Chloe, Sabine, and another fifth-grade girl also composed songs, as evidenced by a sheet of lyrics that Ms. Carson found in the classroom and handed over to me. Students (e.g., Nathan and Eva) liked to trade jokes (including "your mama" jokes and "you're so dumb" jokes) in class. It is only in Nathan's *Writer's Workshop* journal that a textual trace of these survived.

In one note sequence, Sarah and Fay sent ditties and jingles to each other. As seen previously, Sarah's note addressed Fay with the special names they had for each other, an amalgamation of their first names.

To Faysar (Fayanna)  
Mama's got the magic  
Of CLOROX®  
By  
Sarah

Sarah's reply consisted of the lyrics of "People All Over the World" with the same inverted form of their names. Camitta (1993), who also described students' ability to mimic as well as play with conventions of popular culture, saw such information genres as both original and derivative, an example of "vernacular authoring techniques" by which "culture is

reorganized by the individual through the appropriation of its materials” (pp. 239–240). Such co-opting or reorganizing of popular culture in Rooms 5 and 6 also was shown in drawings of product logos and branded products, boys and girls’ drawings of cartoon characters (e.g., Sponge Bob SquarePants), and boys’ particular use and creation of stylized lettering. Joshua and another fifth-grade boy also created their own trading cards (a la Yu-Gi-Oh and Pokemon).

Word games and mazes also were a popular way of passing time in the classroom. Word games included alphabetical lists where students filled in names of objects matching that letter. Elene also used a system of writing for herself and her friends called “Pig Latin.” Taught to her by one of the fourth-grade girls, it consisted of various ways of encoding sentences so they were hard to decipher by anyone who did not know the key. The code included adding extra letters or inverting the letter order in sentences. Drawing mazes also was a common way of passing the time, especially with Joshua and Adam. Mazes were drawn in Writer’s Workshop journals and on pieces of paper, which had the advantage of being portable enough to be taken out during carpool and completed outside of the classroom.

### *Expressions of Self*

Only one of the textual documents that I collected from the classroom was a direct commentary about the self. “I love myself kiss kiss kiss” was a part of a series of comments that Abbie wrote in her Writer’s Workshop journal. However, expressions of self were actually quite prevalent in the classroom. They were generally articulated through other media such as drawings or were subsumed in types of documents that had other, more substantive or obvious functions. In a broad sense, all informal literacies—either overtly or more discretely—provide some evidence of how the students see themselves or the self in relation to the other; however, there was an occasion where such expressions strongly appeared in written form, even though I only got fleeting access to their content. Yearbooks appear to be an example of a documentary form where students feel freer to be more expressive in recording details about themselves and others, even if they do not necessarily feel as daring in showing these comments to all.

### *Other*

Two other documents represented instances where students co-opted genres for their own purposes. Chloe wrote lines not for any punishment but because she thought writing lines was fun and liked to write in cursive. Students in Hubbard’s (1989) study adapted genres in similarly interesting ways. In Hubbard’s case, lists were used as a mechanism to store and retrieve information that was meaningful to a student. At a more complex level, Hubbard witnessed students using lists both for categorization and as a research tool, including a group of girls keeping track of who used the bathroom; in the process, they demonstrated their ability to pick out patterns from that data (pp. 302–305).

The sophistication of this co-option of document genres in Hubbard’s (1989) study has its closest equivalency at River Forest Elementary in Michaela’s use of observation techniques and writing styles to record fragments of dialogue from the classroom in her Writer’s Workshop journal. Although one of the fourth graders told me that Michaela had written this dialogue after watching me take notes in the classroom, there is a distinct style present in Michaela’s fieldnotes that goes beyond mere mimicry of anything she had read or seen of mine. While the notion of fieldnotes as a documentary genre was introduced by my presence in the classroom, the structure Michaela used to record her fieldnotes and what she chose to record are uniquely hers. What was intriguing about her fieldnotes was how she reflected the complexity of the classroom setting by capturing a number of competing dialogues happening over and across each other. Rather than filter out any one set of competing dialogs (as I would have done), Michaela chose to represent exactly what she heard—an intermingling of conversations occurring at different points and among different people in the classroom.

The bulk of this dialogue (see Table 2) consisted of conversations that occurred among a group of students who were working on assignments at the middle table in Room 5. When working on their state report assignments, students chatted to each other and commented on what they were working on. Morgan, for example, asked whether they needed to color in the assignment. Jamie tried unsuccessfully to get some girls’ attention to ask or say something. Rowan and Grace started the “what” game—the object of the game was to use any means necessary to make another person say “what.” Michaela represented Megan’s frustration with something she was working on by documenting her reactions: textually, orally, and visually. The teachers’ occasional

TABLE 2. Example from Michaela’s fieldnotes.

Who Said It	Dialogue ← What They Said
Morgan	Do we color this in?
Kyle	No no me you Jack Ryan and Eva
Jamie	Madison
Jamie	Eva
Lindsey	Jamie
Jamie	Huh?
Rowan	Grace
Grace	Yeah?
Rowan	Now you have to make someone else say what
Rowan	Do it to Ms. trace, do it to her
Megan	Uhh!! ‘ (mad)
Rowan	Michaela
Ms. Lyons	3 2 1 if your talking you need to move
Ms. Lyons	Shh
Mr. Beckner	Austin sit down
Ms. Lyons	Okay, um Madison
Georgia	Um, never mind
Mr. Beckner	Kyle
Georgia	What are you writing about?
Grace	I thought that said parrot
Grace	It says person
Dylan	See my watch covers it up
Ms. Lyons	Rowan, move seats

words were interjections into students' conversation as they called students to talk to them or give instructions to the students working at their tables. Michaela's second fragment of dialogue (not reproduced here) was an amalgamation of events in Rooms 5 and 6 several days later. This piece of dialogue began in Room 6 with Mr. Beckner talking to a fourth-grade girl about a math puzzle that he wanted her to try. Captured, in tandem with this interaction, were students' side conversations about homework they were working on as well as Ms. Carson's instructions to the class about carrying out a group project. The dialogue from Room 5 began with Ms. Lyons' aide collecting folders from the students and then captured students' side conversations about who was lent a particular math puzzle. Ms. Lyons entered the dialogue at this point, admonishing a student for not being ready and for making noise, and giving directions in the classroom to wrap up the school day.

## Discussion

What then does all this tell us about children's human information behavior and, in particular, the fundamental skills and knowledge that come into play in creating and using information? It reminds us that documents (as an information genre) have both an immediate use and a larger purpose (Trace, 2002). Students used informal literacies to share a funny incident, to rag on another student, to apologize for a perceived wrongdoing, to tease a friend, to communicate with adults, to arrange to meet for lunch, to keep in touch after class, as reminders to bring things to school, to solicit the opinions of others, and as a means to demarcate personal space in class. These functions speak to the practicalities and immediacies of students carrying out their daily life within the underground culture of the classroom. However, the thread that runs through all the informal documents in this study is the underlying purposes that they serve, reflecting students' need for control and self-determination. Students use informal literacies for inspiration, to take charge, express themselves, let off steam, prevent boredom, and have fun, and as a creative outlet. Inherent in prior research on informal literacies is the notion that these documents not only help students maintain a sense of self and personal identity but also that they serve to form and establish social bonds. Jackson's (1968) commentary about the nature of classroom life highlights why the exigencies of classroom life heighten the importance of student communication in this context. He noted that there is "a social intimacy in schools that is unmatched anywhere in our society" (p. 8). The presence of established friendships, and the fact that students are not there by choice, also create a situation where, as Jackson stated, "the pull to communicate with others is likely somewhat stronger in the classroom than in other crowded situations" (p. 17). Furthermore, as Cahill (2001) noted, "the very activity of passing notes, quite apart from their content, establishes and cements social bonds" (p. 78). In Rooms 5 and 6, notes served as one of the ways that students could form, break, renegotiate, and strengthen connections with each other.

In the research on informal literacies, the role of notes as social entities is often tied to notions of gendered strategies. Hey (1997) saw these writings as "visible evidences of the extensive emotional labor invested by *girls* in their friendships" and as a "'pocket ethnography' of *girlfriend* work" (p. 51). Canaan (1990) stated that "note-passing is a key means by which *girls* in all groups expand their elementary school strategy of developing close intra-group relationships" (p. 224). At River Forest Elementary, these group connections or relationships were shown to be quite insular in some instances. At other times, students reached out beyond the boundaries of established friendship groups, even if only fleetingly. Although the creation and distribution of notes was predominantly controlled by girls, this was not always the case. These findings may have to do with the ages of the students in the study, when girls and boys had not yet cemented the separate roles of adolescence. Another reason may lie in the human information behavior approach of this study, where a broader definition of what constituted an informal literacy was possible. My research at River Forest Elementary shows that boys were involved in the creation and sharing of informal documents. Note that boys, and also some girls, used other types of informal literacies, particularly drawing, as a means to obtain control over their own lives and form social bonds with others. Dylan liked to draw fire trucks and military equipment, John liked to draw Godzilla and dinosaurs, Colin liked all things military, and Jamie drew basketball players. While some of the activity of drawing took place within the students' own world, much of it also was very social. Students swapped drawings and drew as a communal activity. Joshua, Matt, and Colin together drew tanks, ships, bombs, and guns as well as worked jointly on electronic projects, being part of a group largely, but not exclusively, of boys who traded and shared the contents of their electronic file folders. The contents of these file folders were sometimes elaborately protected from outside viewing, with passwords and dummy folders. The file folders themselves were repositories of images and video and sound clips. As such, they give insight into other student relevancies and priorities that deserve further study.

In the research on informal literacies, the role of notes as social entities often also is tied to notions of power and resistance. Canaan (1990) noted a variation in intent among informal literacies, seeing their role in terms of affirming bonds and expressing differences among girls but also attributing to them a goal of subverting the teacher's authority (p. 223). Hey (1997) also subscribed to this idea of notes being both subversive and underground. Canaan and Finders differed, however, in their interpretation of the power inherent in note passing. According to Canaan, passing notes is a way for girls to avoid face-to-face conflict and avoid challenging authority because it uses the "less powerful written form" (p. 227). Canaan's notion of resistance in girls is that they "more quietly interfere with the teacher by writing and passing notes to others in the same group" (pp. 215–216), reflecting girls' reluctance to take public risks. Canaan believed that for girls, passing notes is a feminine form that

is subversive yet nonthreatening. Additionally, as a disembodied form of communication, it is inherently less powerful than embodied interaction. Canaan stated:

Girls' primary usage of the less confrontational written form for note-passing places them beneath boys and hardly contests teacher power. They use it to construct a version of femininity that centers on appearance, which itself is used to explore and expand their understandings of emotions and to prepare them for intimate social relations. (p. 228)

Compare this with Finders's (1997) claim that a "new independence is afforded to adolescent females through literacy." Finders saw literacy as a "tangible means" by which girls' claim status, challenge authority, document social allegiances, and form strong bonds of solidarity (1997, p. 4). The current study at River Forest Elementary shows that informal literacies, as disembodied forms of communication, can be either more powerful or less powerful than embodied interaction, depending on the circumstance, on what is written, and on the individuals involved. I believe that in some instances, the written word has more power and authority because it lingers: What is inscribed can be referred back to. At other times it can be less powerful, as Shuman (1986) reminded us, because "writing permits the destruction of utterances," something that is "far more difficult in speech" (p. 120). Another way that the written word can be looked at as having less power is because it is simply a snapshot; that is, an event frozen in time rather than a document of an ongoing activity.

Another idea prevalent in the research on informal literacies is the premise that texts both constrain and define social roles. Canaan (1990) stated that "although teenagers formulate gendered identities as part of peer group strategies that seem to establish them as separate from and even 'rebellious against' adults, in fact in many ways they mirror their parents' social world" (p. 216). Cahill (2001) acknowledged that children are not passive receptacles of information from the adult world, having the ability to change and transform it to meet their own needs; however, he also noted that in so doing, children also contribute to the replication of an adult culture (pp. 92–94). Both Canaan and Cahill suggested that gendered identities are formed through gendered practices, including document creation and use. This argument suggests that student informal literacies, although trying to rebel against adult forms, also succeed in simply mirroring them; however, an alternative view is possible. Woods (1986) noted that

There are rituals; there are forces operating on schools and the people within them; but within the press of these forces, individuals possess an element of volition, and this permits us to take both an optimistic and a realistic stance. (p. 9)

To paraphrase Woods, such an approach holds out the prospect that students can negotiate a passage through these forces, if we recognize that they have their own self-interests and ways of achieving them (p. 9). At River Forest Elementary, students put to use what they had learned about document creation and use from the "hidden curriculum" in relation to their own repertoire of informal literacies.

As Shuman (1986) found, students had "acquired the rudimentary mechanical and social skills of . . . written communication to the extent that they can use these skills as tools for adolescent play" (p. 2). As part of the "hidden curriculum," formal documents were predominantly seen as structural, coherent, explicit, and accumulative. The students, however, as they learned the classroom "code," created their own innovations and variations while working outside the rules. In this scenario, informal documents and students' creation and use of these objects are seen as local, fluid, and tacit.

## Conclusion

This research documented a subset of human information behavior in a school environment. The study examined how students themselves use documents in their day-to-day life in school. The article contributes to a theoretical understanding of human information behavior by linking information creation to the suppositions, assumptions, and understandings that naturalism and ethnomethodology bring to the social world. Information creation research also is an extension of human information behavior and information practice research because it allows us to understand the underlying purposes and intent that people bring to the production of written knowledge. Knowing how and why information is initially brought into being provides us with a richer context and framework in which to ground its subsequent organization, management, and use.

This article supports the proposition that information creation is intertwined with both the creator and the social context in which this human information behavior occurs. Published findings from this research project (Trace, 2007) looked at human information behavior through the lens of how embedded social norms and realities of the classroom are represented in both verbal and textual interactions related to documents. Within the educational domain, knowledge of information creation was shown to play a vital role in students' membership of this community. In this article, students' familiarity with such understandings was shown to allow them not only to function within the rules but also outside them. The creation and use of informal written literacies is evidence, therefore, of students' ability to recontextualize or reenvision sanctioned or official information genres to meet their own needs and purposes. Informal writing in this context is therefore shown to be a creative practice that entails the "use, production and transformation" of information (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006, p. 6).

A logical next step to build upon the human information behavior research outlined here is to examine how and to what extent these information creation practices are exported to, seen, or influenced by what is happening in the social contexts of other domains. Researchers working in the field of new literacy studies have begun the work of understanding the connections between the literacy spaces of school and home. From a teaching perspective, new literacy studies have advocated for the idea of an actualized "third space" where students can connect their home and school literacy practices

(Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). In the context of human information behavior research, the adoption of a theory of the “third space” or a “third space” concept could provide a framework for the examination of other literacy domains and how information creation in these contexts influence and are influenced by students’ information creation practices at school.

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