Learning by correspondence revisited
A report on the Socrates Mailbox Project

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Abstract
With increased access to electronic mail, communication by correspondence has a new and important role in distance education. The paper focuses on children as learners, and considers the effects of electronic correspondence on their learning. It will focus particularly on interpersonal communication skills, group dynamics, intercultural communication, expression skills, integration strategies, the relation of learning to time and place. It will draw conclusions relevant to the integration of new learning technologies into the classrooms of tomorrow.

The paper is based on the preliminary findings of the Socrates MAILBOX observatory project. The project is examining the use in schools of electronic mail, computer conferencing, electronic forums, Internet and the World Wide Web. It covers schools in 6 countries. The paper will report on preliminary findings from one country, the United Kingdom, but will be supplemented through oral reporting at the Conference. By then, it should be possible to provide an initial comparison of results from the six countries.

Electronic mail has given new life to learning by correspondence. It has a new and important role in schools. The Socrates MAILBOX project is studying its use in school environments in several European countries. MAILBOX is funded as an *Observatory Project* under the European Commission's Socrates sub-programme on Open and Distance Learning. It began in September 1996, with support for one year initially.

Our focus of interest is learning. How are electronic communication technologies used in school and classroom? In what ways do they impact on learning? How can teachers best deploy them to support classroom delivery? How can they be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning? How can the use of interactive communications technologies counteract the potential impersonality of learning from a remote source? How far could these technologies contribute to developing children's social and communication skills? What other learning competencies might children acquire through their use? The project focuses in particular on implicit learning - interpersonal communication skills, group dynamics, intercultural communication, expression skills, integration strategies, the relation of learning to place and time. Results from six participating countries - Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, UK - are being compared to identify common factors and differences.

This paper reports on our preliminary findings, concentrating on one school. Early comparison of results in each participating country indicates that there is much experience in common across cultures, ages, countries. These experiences can be read as signposts towards the schools of the future, learning environments where the constraints of time and space are loosened and open and distance learning techniques integrated in the normal fabric of teaching and learning.

For a glimpse of the future, using today's technology, we will watch three children learning by correspondence - receiving an email letter and writing a reply.

Receiving a letter

We are in a primary school in London. Three children, Harriet, Claire and Becky, and a teacher sit in front of a computer. The computer is linked to the Internet through a modem and dial up connection. The teacher starts the session with a question:

T: What are we going to do?
H: We're going to ask the computer some questions
T: Well….
H: We're going to answer some letters
T: Harriet knows what to do, she helped me yesterday…*Harriet takes the mouse and starts clicking to log on* What are we going to do?
All: We will ask other computers to answer some questions
Harriet succeeds in dialling up with a little help from the teacher
T: What's it doing now?
C: Making a telephone call to other computers
T: What do we do next? *Becky now takes the mouse and gets on to Netscape*
T: How do we ask if there are any letters?
All: Click on the envelope.
A letter from America has arrived! The children read it aloud, in unison. The teacher helps by scrolling it up the screen. The letter is too long to see it all at once.
T: What can we do to make it easier to read?
All: *Some discussion then all shout* Print!
Discussion follows about the cost of long phone calls. The children agree the next thing to do is:
All: Tell the computer to turn off the phone!
T: How do we do that?
Becky points at the icon of a door Go out the door.
T: Try that… What does it tell you?
All read: "One or more connections still active. Do you want to disconnect?"
All shout: Yes!

The three children are aged between 5 and 7. Already they are acquiring the IT skills they will need for life in the information age. They are new to using email but have used computers in class regularly since they started school and are quick to understand the process involved in electronic correspondence.

Planning the reply

The letter gives some information about the weather in America and asks questions about the weather in England. The first stage in replying is discussion. Questions about weather become the vehicle for discussion about energy, temperature and climatic difference:

The letter talks about "record cold weather" in America when the children were allowed to stay home from school.
T: What does that mean?
C: I think they recorded the sound of the weather.
Teacher explains it was so cold that they wrote it all down, and what they wrote down is a record.
C: *thinks about very cold weather, hugs herself and shivers* Wuwuwuwuwu!
T: *Commenting on letter* Have we missed school in bad weather?
All: No!
T: The letter asked, "how do we heat our houses?"
B: Gas
C: We have a box on the wall
T: ?
C: Well it has a round thing and you turn it to 30 when it's freezing and 20 when its hot
Children work out this makes it hotter or colder
C: We have radiators.
T: How do they work?
C: You plug them in.
T: Where?

Silence
T: Do you plug them in the tap?
All: No!
T: Do you plug them in the drain?
All: *Louder* No!
C: You plug them in the wall… a hole in the wall
T: What comes out of the hole?
More questioning. Children sent to look at electricity socket in wall behind computer. Eventually come up with the answer Heat *then* Electricity!

Writing the reply

The children set themselves very high standards of expression and presentation. Each word is carefully selected and discussed, its accuracy checked, the whole is polished.

T: How do we start a letter?
B: Dear..
Becky starts typing "Dear Elizabeth" She names each letter as she finds the key. She makes a mistake.
T: How do we rub out?
Becky does a backspace.
T: Look, we've got two Elizabeths. Can we say "Dear Elizabeths"?
B: *Very firmly* No - it's not very polite
Each child types a name. Then there's more discussion on what goes in the letter. The children dictate, the teacher types because it's faster. The children watch for mistakes. Teacher types "a nd" for "and".
B: Look I spot it look! *She jumps to her feet so she can almost touch the screen and points - instantly spots "toheat" - a lot of laughing*

The result is this letter:

Dear Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Beverley,
Most children use radiators electric and gas to heat our houses in London.
From Becky, Harriet and Claire
Age 7, 7 and 5

The learning

Much impressed me as I watched these children learn. First, the team work. The correspondence was a completely shared process, children and teacher working together. So much so, that it was natural to all laugh together at typing mistakes. And learning was fun, such fun that time flew. The session went on for an hour, far longer than the normal attention span of children that age in school. The children were actively learning throughout.

Excitement extended the children. They read well, attempted long words, and asked when they didn't understand. They thought hard about replies. They worked carefully - even typing email addresses without an error. Later, problems occurred - the connection went down, material was lost - the usual frustrations of communications technology. Did they mind? Not at all.

I asked them what they liked about using computers. They told me they liked writing on computers better. Why? "Well it's difficult doing rubbing out, you have to hold the rubber, it's easy with the computer." They liked the neat writing they could do on the computer. They didn't mind having to do some of the writing again when they lost some of the text. "It's fun using your hands".

They went on to compare the free-standing computers used in normal class work with the one connected to Internet. Claire liked the Internet one best. Becky liked both, couldn't decide. Harriet reserved judgement. Eventually they agreed the Internet one was best, more fun. "It's fun when you write letters."

What was the worst thing? "You can get stuck. You don't know what to do." But I noted how well the children coped when something went wrong. Working on line is unpredictable. At first the children greeted the unexpected with horrified gasps - the normal world of school is one of complete certainty - but very quickly turned to solving problems for themselves.

In a few hours, over a few days, I watched these children learn so much about learning. They became confident in handling the electronic mail application. And as they became more confident they were able to start searching for information on the Internet. Only a small group of children could use the single school Internet computer at any one time, but the letters they wrote and the material they identified were fed into general classroom work.

Towards a new school learning environment

It was illuminating to see such very young children acquiring such competence so fast. And more exciting still to discover similar experiences across countries, levels, ages. Already, our research is showing that communications technology is a powerful a tool - a Trojan horse, even - for enhancing and changing learning.

Correspondence is taken very seriously by most children. We do not yet know why. In the London school, letter writing was a starting point for curiosity about other cultures. A large map on the classroom wall showed all the places letters had come from. When the teacher asked the girls what they would like to find out about on the World Wide Web, the answer was instant and unanimous - "Other countries!".

Writing letters appears to be more productive of learning than receiving them. The essentially collaborative nature of the writing process was striking. It is often assumed that learning using a computer is a solitary pursuit. The MAILBOX team has found that children in school often use computers as a means of sharing learning. In some cases children deliberately help each other - for example a fast typist inputs and a good speller dictates and checks spelling. Letter writing was in effect the trigger for much learning beyond the formal curriculum: team work, social skills, problem solving, coping with uncertainty, understanding and managing processes.

The teacher's role was to guide the children within a purposeful framework. With the teachers guidance, letter writing could easily be related to core curriculum areas at the same time as the children gained competence in handling IT applications. We have come across a few cases where the experience of electronic correspondence is apparently of less value, and believe that this may be closely related to teacher involvement. One output of MAILBOX is to be guidelines for teachers, to help them make the best of the opportunities offered by communications technologies.

In one incident, a group of children attended the same meeting as their long-time electronic correspondents. But, strangely, they did not engage in face-to-face conversation. Why? On the face of it, we might say that the teacher, who was with the children at the time, missed an opportunity, and could have made sure that the relationship moved to a new plane. But why didn't the children initiate contact? What stood in their way?

The MAILBOX team is only now beginning to address issues and questions such as these. Our comparative perspective, based on experience in real classrooms, is already proving fertile - in three minutes discussion, for example, we came up with three good explanations for that incident of non-interaction. In our next report, we may have some of the answers - and more questions.

More information about MAILBOX and its team can be found on our web page: http://tecfa.unige.ch/socrates-mailbox/