

Running head: STUDENTS PASSING NOTES

The Discourse Community of
Middle School Students Engaging in Note Passing

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Abstract

The main point of my research was to further look into various components of middle school students' passing notes in an academic setting. The key points of my research include looking at themes that students tend to write about, why they engage in passing notes, the characteristics that students who pass notes generally have, how technology has affected note passing, the genres that note passing falls into, and how teachers have tried to stop note passing over the years. Means of research include interviews with teachers that have been in the profession for many years, discussion boards on educational websites, textbooks on genres of writing, and articles on discourse communities as well as articles on how technology is affecting communication in the modern day classroom.

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Characteristics of Note Passing

The small, tightly folded, blue lined loose leaf freshly ripped out of the notebook with the edges still roughly crinkled. The paper must meet the precise requirements to certify as note passing material; folded twice in half vertically, then folded in half again in the shape of an “L” where that can be manipulated a few more times until each of the corners of the page are fit like a puzzle piece into a convenient, compact square perfect to grip, catapult, or flick into the palm of a hand.

A Passing Note is existent not only to the classroom, but in the music world as well. By definition, musically, a Passing Note is a music note that connects two consonant pitches by stepwise motion and usually occurs on a weak beat; similarly to what the motion of two students’ passing notes really is. If the teacher misses a beat, the two silent pitches are connected and telepathically music is made.

Since the beginning of time, the act of two students acting sly as the teacher feverishly writes on the board, aiming to teach brilliance among her young ones, is interrupted by more important concepts that must be attained to immediately; such as the school dance coming up at the end of the week, the latest crush amongst a group of girls and her friends, what everyone did the past weekend, and what the plans are for the following weekend. Occasionally other imperative questions will be asked like “What is going on after school?” or “Do you have the homework for our next class?” Regardless

what topic of conversation is being discussed, it is always more important than what the teacher is lecturing about in front of the class.

The most important aspect of passing a note in an academic setting other than the topic is obviously the method of delivery. This can range from quickly launching the neatly folded square across the classroom as the teacher's back is turned, or more uniquely having a fellow peer fake a seizure. In the mean time while the teacher has heart palpitations and is paging the nurse, the note is delivered successfully to the recipient in the middle of the chaos (Chaos Kids, Note passing techniques of the wickedly sneaky). Other methods include rolling the note into a tiny tube like shape and stuffing it into a pen. As the student hands their friend an "extra pen," the teacher smiles as she admires their responsibility for having an extra pen to lend a friend in need.

What are Middle School Students so Anxious to Talk About?

Lurking deep in the back corner, underneath my bed sits a white floral box contained with any tangible form of middle school that would fit. In the chaotic mess that has accumulated over the years, I began to separate pom-pom pieces from my cheerleading days, movie and play ticket stubs, and other trinkets of unknown significance now. Then I came across the tiny white folded paper squares, realizing upon my touch, the paper has become soft and dull over the many years of finger prints that have caressed the paper. There were about twelve notes that I saved, and of those, eight that I remembered what the content was referring to.

According to my personal middle school experiences, and from current teachers that were willing to assist me in my findings, I have discovered general themes that

middle school students tend to write about in their passing note missions. The first has to do with plans that occurred over the previous weekend or upcoming plans for the following weekend. Some of the plans have to do with school events; such as a big dance coming up (M.Grugre, personal communication, November 24, 2008).

The second most popular topic for the young ladies to be discussing during valuable education time is boys. Occasionally, code names are used for the actual name of the boy just in case the note falls into the wrong hands. Other times, the obvious is stated, sometimes providing way too much information to risk being read by anyone other than the note is intended for.

After talking with other middle school teachers who have been in the field of education for over fifteen years, I came to the conclusion that the most significant part of middle school in the eyes of the students is socialization. The notes being passed by students conclusively contain information regarding being included or excluded, best friend problems, exclusion from the “in crowd,” or from lunchtime activities. Most of the notes are passed by the girls (M. Szucs, personal communication November 21, 2008).

I don't think that students passing notes has a significant affect in reaction to what the teacher is doing in front of the room, or whether the teacher is engaging the student or not. What the situation boils down to is that students' value socialization at such a high level during middle school years; it's impossible for some students to think about anything else except socializing while they're in school. If they have a problem with their best friend, or they have issues at lunchtime, how can a student be expected to focus in class? Some students may be able to focus better than others, but students who can't

will pass notes either to their friends, or to another person outside of the situation to vent, or get another opinion on the situation. I don't think it's fair to put all the blame on the teacher. In middle school, students need to feel accepted. If that means engaging in passing notes, then students will be passing notes for years to come, regardless of what is going on in the classroom.

What characteristics do students who pass notes generally have?

Prior to research, in my head it made sense that a student who was doing poorly in school, didn't care about their grades, or struggled with school was more likely to pass notes than a student with the opposite characteristics and attitude. I discovered this is not the case.

After reading anecdotes, and interviewing multiple middle school teachers that have been in the profession for as many as twenty five years, I realized that every student has the same practicality of passing notes. It doesn't matter if a student is in a resource room with four other students (B. Pohan, personal communication, November 21, 2008), or if the student is in a general education classroom with thirty other students. If a student cares about their grades, but they have a problem on the playground that day, or they had a fight with their best friend they want to resolve, that is the priority; not what is being taught in front of the room. The student is not mature enough to worry about how their education will benefit them in the rest of their life; their life is their friends, and being accepted in middle school years. If resolving their issue means risking passing a note during class, that is what the student is going to do, regardless of their grades or attitude towards school.

Connecting to the idea of a Discourse Community

A “discourse community” is defined by James Porter as a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated. Discourse communities follow certain regulations that are referred to as “forums.” The members of the community decide what is appropriate for discussion, and what has validity. A discourse community can either have strict boundaries in which case well defined *ethos*, or less indefinite boundaries (Porter, 1986).

Middle school students’ passing notes are a discourse community in itself. They have to follow certain regulations for passing notes such as what has been mentioned in the previous section. They have certain regulations, but not strict *ethos*; the boundaries are more open to possibilities such as various methods of delivery, but overall a central theme of the content being written, and the way that the note is folded generally hold true to meet the definition of a discourse community.

Discourse communities share assumptions about what objects are appropriate for discussion, and what to do with the information that is at hand (Porter, 1986). In middle school, students decide among themselves as well as who they are passing the note to, what is important enough to risk going behind the teacher’s back to attempt the communication. They are a distinct group forming the communication, and they decide who is let into their community and who is not. For example, teachers and other members of the administration would not be permitted to enter their community. They wouldn’t meet the qualifications for the themes that are talked about in the notes. Students also decide among each other who will be permitted into their community. For

example, a student who does not want to partake in the action of passing the note won't be permitted by other students who do want to engage that form of communication to enter their discourse community of passing notes in an academic setting.

Discourse communities are ultimately a social part of society. They vary from big communities such as being part of a university, or as small as students engaging in the act of passing notes in a classroom. Students who do choose to pass notes are inviting themselves to be part of a distinct group that is agreeing to go against school and classroom policies.

The classroom is a discourse community, by having a charter of rules that are to be followed by the people that enter that room, and those rules are accepted and chosen to be followed by those who enter. However, the students that engage in passing notes go against that charter in the classroom community, and that is how a new discourse community is formed. Students who do not wish to go against certain rules from the classroom would not meet the qualifications to join the discourse community of students choosing to pass notes.

Genres

Students passing notes constitutes for a variety of genres. The genres I have further investigated and compared the discourse community of students passing notes to are social which includes all social aspects of students passing notes; communal which discusses how students who pass notes encompass their own community; situational genre which describes the situation note passing takes place in; functional which describes why this discourse community exists in the first place; structured genre

explains the requirements that the group of students passing notes meets; and stable genre which elaborates on the history of note passing, and its significance in the classroom.

Note passing is a social genre. Students pass notes because they are either part of a clique, yearn to be part of a clique, or simply because they have their mind on telling their friend about a social event that can not wait until after the class is over. Passing notes is a social process in itself. It involves two people communicating, tangibly, but in a discrete way.

Note passing is a communal genre that is specific to the people involved. They have their own discourse community with specific regulations as to what is accepted, who has the ability to participate in the discourse community, and the information that is being transported. After all, if the person doesn't have a recipient for the passing note or anything of value that would interest the other party, then it is impossible to take part in the community.

Passing notes in class is a concrete example of situational genre. This involves two parties communicating with one another in writing. In order to pass the thought along as the teacher is lecturing in front of the class, it must be written down on a piece of paper and then use a clever tactic to deliver the message. The situation at hand is forcing the student to write because verbal communication is not an option during certain academic settings.

The act of passing notes in the classroom is a form of functional genre for the student because they feel the need to communicate a thought at a particular time. The note is serving a social purpose in conveying a thought, action, or question between two people. Whether or not the topic is relevant is dependant upon who is viewing the

situation. According to the two students communicating via discrete note passing, the act is very functional, and very necessary. The teacher may have a slightly different view of the situation, due to her absent position in the discourse community (Cooper, 1999).

This whole concept of note passing correlates with structured genre because there are very specific requirements in order to participate in the discourse community. With lack of planning behind the action, the mission of note passing ultimately fails. The note must be folded in the proper form in order to be launched, placed, or squeezed at the angle of success. The teacher has to be angled at just the right time to ensure the perforated vision is blocked.

Note passing is a stable genre. Students passed notes when my grandfather was in school, and they are passing them now. There are various forms throughout the years of how it has evolved but the basic idea of communicating on paper when the focus should be on academics is nothing new. Decades back, teachers put duck tape over the mouths of students which now is illegal to do. (D. Riggitano, personal communication, November 15, 2008). Now, teachers have various forms to stop note passing in the classroom, but what is the right way or wrong way to go about it?

How do teachers stop it?

Teachers have various opinions on how to end the epidemic of passing notes in the classroom. Some teachers feel that students are going to pass notes regardless of what consequences or preventive tactics are put in place, so the best way to go about it is to incorporate note passing into the curriculum. One teacher has students write to who ever they want in the beginning of her class as part of the lesson (“Teachnology Teacher

Forum: Middle Level Educators: Stop the Note Passing,” 2005). I disagree with this, because some students get a rise out of the sneaky aspect of passing notes, so they wouldn't be satisfied with passing notes being permitted.

Other educators read the note out loud to the class, which I also disagree with because humiliating a child doesn't help a situation. It may cause a student to have more animosity towards the teacher which would encourage future undesired behavior.

Another teacher said that she takes the note and calls the parent of the child, and reads the parent the note. The teacher that responded with this tactic said it usually has a one hundred percent success rate because most times the student is reprimanded by the parent instead of the teacher, and they are also embarrassed to have their parents know about specific details in their social life (Mari, 2005).

Technology Effects

William Griswold, a professor of computer science at the University of California said, “The notion of backchannel in the classroom is as old as whispering in someone's ear. We'd always dealt with the problem, but technology was magnifying the effect.” Students have been passing notes since formal education has existed. In catholic school, in the 1960's Nuns were permitted to stick duck tape across the mouths of students caught engaging the act of passing notes (D. Riggitano, personal communication, November 15, 2008). Although means of punishment are different in public school, and in catholic school in the modern day, the problem of students passing notes still exists, but now has become more complicated due to the many forms of communication that are in effect other than pencil and paper.

Professor Griswold has implemented software in his lecture halls that allow him to be included in the discourse community among his students. The software is hooked up to either the students' lap top or a personal digital device that joins to a public network in his lecture hall. This allows students to ask questions and respond to his lecture instantaneously. Another positive feature of this program is that the messages are sent anonymously which encourages participation from all students, including those who are more apprehensive to participate in front of large groups (Cohen, 2004).

Griswold's technology in the classroom was in response to the problem with lack of participation from students, and students communicating among each other when they shouldn't have been. This experiment was done in a college classroom, so what do middle school teachers do about the situation?

First of all, teachers, students and parents need to accept the fact that students will continue to pass notes regardless of what is going on in front of the classroom or how serious a student is about their academics; at one time teachers and parents passed notes too, maybe in similar ways as students do now. Secondly, the acceptance and implementation of technology must be recognized. New rules have been put into effect to deter problems of note passing when class is in session, but students will find a way to get around the rules.

Ultimately, in middle school, school is a social setting. It is a time where students are getting to know themselves and others around them. If there is a social problem occurring, that is their ultimate concern regardless of how interesting a lesson is in front of the classroom. Teachers need to do their best to involve the students as much as

possible in the lesson, but one hundred percent of note passing won't be prevented because students want to be accepted, and want to communicate with their peers.

It is not so much as what *type* of student passes notes or how well the teacher has the attention of the class in front of the room. The issue has to do with the society we live in. The implementation of new technology starting with instant messenger, cell phones, and text messages has opened up an entire new wave of society. Everything needs to be done momentarily, at the push of a button. Forms of communicating with one another is evolving to the point where it is either done on a screen, and even on the phone, it is done mostly through texts. Students are forgetting what it is like to wait until after class to resolve an issue. It has to be done immediately, and education and communication skills are depleting in the process.

The teacher is not the sole responsibility for why students pass notes, as what is interesting to one student may not be interesting to another. What is important is to acknowledge the discourse community of students' passing notes and that administrators will never seize for it to exist. If a student is passing a note, and a teacher sees it, the teacher should confiscate it and tell them not to let it happen again during class time but other than that, sit back, relax, and hope that the students are using fabulous vocabulary and impeccable grammar as they contribute to the infinitely growing discourse community; for as long as the sun shines, and the waves roll along the beach, students will be passing each other tangible thoughts once the teacher's chalk meets the surface of the board.

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