

# WRITING LETTERS ONLINE

## A Meta-Analysis of Five International Student-Directed Weblogs

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### GOALS

- o Write to learn and create academic disciplinary knowledge within an international interactive online learning community
- o Increase confidence and competence in writing to specific audiences for academic purposes through reflection and revision
- o Use multiple literacies and modes to engage content with words, visual images, movies, performance

### LETTERS FOR LEARNING

"Letters...may appear humble, because they are so overtly tied to particular social relations of particular writers and readers, but that only means they reveal to us so clearly and explicitly the sociality that is part of all writing...."

Charles Bazerman, "Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres," 2000

### METHODS

- o Assignment design: Accommodate course goals for multiple student cultures, backgrounds, degree programs
- o Genre: Letters for interactive written social and academic conversation
- o Technology: From closed academic systems to open, public Internet blogs

### PROJECTS

- 2003: Writing technologies in academia and the workplace
- 2004: Tomas Tranströmer and English Translations 1
- 2005: Tomas Tranströmer and English Translations 2
- 2006: T. S. Eliot, and Multimodal Communication
- 2007: Emily Dickinson, Multicultural and Multimodal Communication



Dear Online Classmates, I have to agree with Wayne [in Virginia] that even slightly different word choices in translation...can confuse and mislead the reader....I especially appreciated the letter from Adrian [in Sweden]; I, too, felt the "harmony" between the man lying under the branches and the branches/tree/world....I also felt the Robert Bly translation was a little jarring.... I especially appreciate the reference to the "night butterfly." There is no similar word in English; unfortunately, "moth" doesn't have quite the same poetic softness and luminary quality. (Karen, Clemson)

Hej, Group - Something that disturbs me in all of the translations [of Tranströmer] is the use of the word moth as a translation to nattfjäril. Maybe there is no such word as "night butterfly" in English, but I think that would give a more accurate translation to the overall mood of the poem. I don't know how you react, but I definitely don't get a pleasant image on my retina when I read the words "crawl like huge moths". (Adrian, Chalmers)



### BLOG WRITING

"The ethos of blogging is collaborative and values the sharing of ideas..."

Torill Elvra Mortensen, "Personal Publication and Public Attention," 2005.

Dear Group,

Dickinson did a good job of expressing the feelings that are felt at a funeral in the first four lines of the poem. To me there is always some sort of quiet reverence that is in the air at a funeral. The sounds of "cathedral tunes" in the air, somber faces with tear filled eyes yet carrying a half-smile remembrance smirk, and the smell of death fragrances by the aroma of flowers. Sometimes at funerals I feel the weight that Dickinson described in line 3 on my chest as I try to breathe; the knot in my throat growing larger as I try to hold back tears until at times I can't swallow. (Mike, Clemson)

Hej,

First of all thanks to everyone for giving your points of view. I enjoyed reading your different opinions. About the poem: "Because I could not stop for Death": Melody and Dan, I see that you two agree with the point of view of Death as a gentleman/human form. After reading the poem again I'm able to see it and makes me give a new sense to the poem. My point of view or the meaning I gave to it was about a relationship broken by Death. But as Mike said, both meanings can be for the poem (In my defence I'll say that in the Latin languages Death has a female sense and that confused me to see the relation Death-He!). (Alvaro, Chalmers)

### RESULTS

- Flexible blogs: Blogs offered a multifaceted, accessible medium to bridge cross-cultural boundaries of time and place and support intercultural academic communication.
- Letter genre: Letters distributed in an electronic medium were familiar and versatile, personal and academic, enabling student-directed learning across a variety of boundaries (language proficiency, academic discipline and level, and cultural background).
- Writing and learning in academic contexts: Asynchronous collaboration encouraged students to use writing to build on each other's knowledge through extensions, questions, reflections, and careful attention to audience, diction, and discourse conventions.
- Multimodal expressions: Creative alternatives extended interpretive practices and enhanced intercultural understanding.

I appreciated Mike's description of "There's a certain slant of light." He pictured the poem by expressing his own vision of "the feelings that are felt at a funeral," and his images made an impression on my own interpretation of the poem. "Sometimes at funerals I feel the weight that Dickinson described in line 3 on my chest as I try to breathe; the knot in my throat growing larger as I try to hold back tears until at times I can't swallow." I think personal experiences can help us relate to the emotion a poet expresses or is generating in his/her poetry. Mike's insight enabled me to recognize certain despair, a certain affliction in the poem I had not noticed before. It encouraged me to read the poem in light of my own personal experiences of death and loss. I also want to touch on Alvaro's response to "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" ...since it seems that Alvaro and I have the same interest in structural engineering, yet we are an ocean apart. I thought that it was interesting that Alvaro saw Death as an actual person and not the spirit of death. I reread the poem from this perspective and it made perfect sense. (Melody, Clemson)

### MULTIMODAL LITERACY

"language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message...."

Gunther Kress, Literacy in the New Media Age, 2003

In 1937 Sergej Prokofiev wrote a piano suite from his ballet "Romeo and Juliet". In the beginning of the suite the feelings portrayed are of pure love, but gradually the theme moves closer to death and pain of lost love. So this is one thing that could be related to Prufrock, although it is pretty dark from the beginning. In the tenth and final piece of the suite "Romeo with Julia before parting", the feeling has grown very eerie and tragic. If you listen closely you can hear the time running in the first bars. As I interpret it, Romeo and Juliet have a last moment together, and they remember their happy times (2:34,4:44), but constantly the darkness of the moment interrupts (as dark tolling octaves in the bass, Prufrock this can be related to him remembering moments of "tea and cakes" etc....Both Eliot and Prokofiev were groundbreaking, and both used "classical" art as a basis and augmented it with new "twisted" ideas. (Jacob, Chalmers)



I've always admired the painting by Salvador Dali: The Persistence of Memory. I think it is representative of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by the melting away of time. The entire poem reflects on time in some form. The word is seen 11 times in lines 23-48.

Also, in the song "Time" by Hootie and the Blowfish the question is asked: "Time, why you punish me? Like a wave bashing into the shore, you wash away my dreams." The song personifies time and its overwhelming presence. Time, in a sense, controls everything and we must learn to make the best of what little we have. Prufrock does not understand this—he is unable to take a stand and do something about his situation. (Marigrace, Clemson)

