

Hold That Thought: Doing up writing by hand

*Clara Birnbaum
Rikkyo University*

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It is well-known that the benefits of having our foreign language learning students keep and share journals, are many, and now, with modern tools of informational technology, it is even possible to do it all on computer, instantly and over long distances. However, in our enthusiasm for computers and other electronic gadgets, we have lost a sense of balance. By inviting our students to make their own booklets to hold their writing . . . to hand bind and decorate them, according to their own whims . . . it is possible to bring back to life, screen-dulled senses, and give back a little of what has been lost.

Where are we going? While this question is probably one that ought to shape how we live our lives in general, the title given to JALT 2001, “A Language Odyssey,” urges us to pay special attention to it together, as workers in the world of language instruction. That PAC3 was a main feature of JALT 2001, and that people from many Asian countries participated, gives added scope to this exploration. The image of language as journey raises a complexity of issues, from the usual one of how to teach more effectively, to the broader issue of what kind of future we are contributing to.

We often ponder the fact that the world has been going through so many changes so quickly. Catch phrases such as “the global economy”, “our information age”, hint at some of what it means to live in these times. The nature and significance, of course, depends on one’s vantage point; at one end of the spectrum, access to resources, power and wealth, and at the other, a world breaking apart at its very core.

Most of us who attend professional conferences experience life somewhere in between these two extremes, but we may be closer to the latter one than we think. The general apathy we see around us regarding those who live at that end of the spectrum in a very tangible sense, is precisely what puts us there, in another sense. Our modern lifestyle is dragging us further and further away from a sense of connectedness with nature, and as we drift off into new synthetic worlds, we are paying a dear price. So are our students. In this paper, I want to focus on journal writing, and I want to talk about making books to hold it. . . designing them and binding them by hand; about bringing this simple skill to the language classroom. I propose it for a number of reasons. Briefly stated they are:

- to balance the technological world we’ve become so dependent on
- to nourish our senses dulled by the computer and other electronic gadgets

- to relearn the satisfaction and pleasure of making something by hand
- to sensitize ourselves to the extent of the waste we produce
- to appreciate the resources we use and the labor involved in making things
- to preserve with beauty and a personal touch, writing we want to save
- to remind our students of a vanishing skill . . . a skill that is part of their heritage
- to link ourselves more deeply with a heritage that drew many of us to the East
- to bring us closer to our students (especially with shared journal writing)
- to slow down

Do your students keep journals?

There has been a lot written in praise of having students keep and share journals as part of their second language learning process. A journal can be an informal chance for students to write however they want, about whatever, or it can be used as an ongoing reflection of what happens in the classroom. It also is an extra chance for shy, reticent students to express themselves; the type of student who doesn’t fare particularly well in groups or even pairs. I have had false impressions happily shattered when supposedly dull, submissive, weak students, for example, have flowered in their journal writing to reveal

a most lively and mischievous character. In a large class it may be the only opportunity students have to communicate personally on a one-to-one basis with the teacher or with students outside their social circle.

It takes time to read and respond to many journals, so it may be necessary to limit the number of groups asked to keep them, and to take them only twice in the term, for example. This is what I do, although I ask students to actually write after each class we have together. I look forward to the day they hand me their little booklets because it means several tantalizing hours in a nearby coffee shop.

Journals can be written in simple notebooks, of course, that are cheap and easily available, or in beautifully-designed books with blank pages that are also easy to buy nowadays. However, I suggest that there is value in having students make their own books.

A sense of values, a sense of balance

As we continue our odyssey into the 21st century, the tools of informational technology are fast becoming an integral part of the EFL learning process in Japanese classrooms and beyond. Besides the benefits and possibilities it offers for distance-learning, and information-sharing, for example, it is also opening new avenues for creative expression, such as in computer-based diaries, to help us record our thoughts and adventures and share them instantly.

We have been so wooed however, by the technology itself, that qualities like uniformity, speed and efficiency are no longer simply conveniences we need once in awhile, but have acquired virtue status, and have taken over so much of our lives. The process has been subtle and insidious. Our atrophied senses drift into dreary slumber as we sit in front of our screens; all except our weary eyes, of course, which are very engaged, in the most utilitarian way. Let's focus on writing.

Picture Japan of times past, when a letter was more than just a verbal message. The calligraphy and papers, chosen carefully for color and texture, were a magic key to the spirit of the writer. On special occasions, the choice of flowers and leaves in season to decorate and scent the letter, the folding of the paper, all these things made the simple act of communicating with another, an intimate and touching human exchange, a gift that engaged all the senses. Even mundane articles such as shopping lists and merchant cashbooks were lovely things to look at and touch because they were made with human hands and with available, natural products.

Why not add a new dimension to the act of writing?

Balance can be restored today, and a more human and artistic touch brought to the act of writing, by the simple inclusion of another stage. We can preserve and share our reflections, be they generated on the computer

or with a pencil, by binding them into booklets, turning them into scrolls, or placing them in lovely handmade boxes. This would also take the marvel of self-publishing a step further. The satisfaction of adding this traditional touch to writing we want to save is well worth it, and need not be time-consuming, nor technically demanding.

The long tradition of bookbinding that Japan shares with other Eastern cultures, including many of those that participated in PAC3 at JALT 2001, involves a technique that produces beautiful books, but is very simple to learn and teach. In less than one class, students can be shown (or reminded of) how to make their own booklets using some very basic techniques.

The marriage of two ideas

Bookmaking and journal writing are a natural and obvious match. It is a chance for students to tap into energies the usual curriculum shamefully ignores. They can derive much satisfaction in tailoring their own book to suit their personality and esthetic sense, making a cover that is whimsical, artistic, evocative in some way, or just plain silly. It may awaken also, an appreciation for an aspect of their heritage that is in danger of being lost. Inviting our students to make their own books may give them greater incentive to write, and may be just the thing to inspire some of them to start a journal in their own language, in another little homemade book later on.

On the technical side

Putting together the basic book does not require much by way of materials, tools, or time. If a folding machine is available and B4 sheets have been folded ahead of time, about 3 staplers can be brought to class, and students can assemble the basic book in a few minutes. The handout (appendix 1) which gives some basic hints and design suggestions should be distributed, and samples shown if any have been made, but the rest is up to the students. At home, if they activate the magic inside, they can transform the cover into something they relate to, and make a book that is truly all their own.

Obviously computer-generated writing would have to be bound afterwards, but with writing done by hand, there is the choice of binding the books first and then writing in them, or of binding written work after. When blank books are made to be written in later, there is another attractive feature which is the reason that I favor this approach. It offers a chance to pay a small tribute to the environment, and to raise awareness. Let me explain.

About paper waste

Part of what it means to be falling out-of-touch with nature, is that we no longer have much sense of the materials and resources we use or of the labor involved to make things. The machines we buy are too complex to repair, so we throw them out. We use half of one side of a sheet of paper then throw it out. If students

make their own booklets rather than buy them, it is also possible for them to use some of the wasted paper that piles up everyday in the print room. B4-size sheets previously used on one side can be folded in half with the used side inside, to create two clean B5 pages.

They'll say they can't do it

Many students will insist that they are not artists. However since their journals are for themselves, this predictable refrain need not be a deterrent. Instead, students can be encouraged to dig into the wells of their imagination and pull up something--anything--that touches a cord. A minimum requirement can be to stick a few photos they like on the basic cover, but, in the end, most students will probably choose to do more than that because they will discover that it is a pleasant task with a playful and unusual nature.

Some design ideas

There is no limit to the kind of design that can be used for the covers of handmade books. From papering the basic cover with beautiful *washi*, to slapping together colorful images in wild cluttered collages, the world is the limit. Fabric can be used instead of paper, and even wood is possible, or leather, grasses, bubble wrap, and window screening. Why not?

As for scrolls

Scrolls are simply another form of book but one that is romantic with the evocation of a distant past. One idea at a gift-giving time of the year would be to have students make them and write letters on them to a classmate whose name they've pulled out of a hat. Reusable scrolls can be made of cloth or durable paper, and can be used again and again as lovely packages for letters. Scrolls, like books, are simple to make, and basic instructions can be covered in one lesson. (Appendix 2)

Conclusion

No doubt all of us who teach hope to bring a warm touch and a sense of relevance to the classroom. We are often up against great odds, with large classes, imposed curricula, absurd curricula, and so on, but there are many ways to make a difference. Amongst them is the small suggestion made in this article. As simple an idea as it is, there is a challenge inherent in it. It is the challenge to reflect on things we've come to take for granted, such as our "right" to consume and waste with little regard for the consequences, our "basic right" to a lifestyle, which is not a basic right, but the privilege of a few at the expense of a great many. Inviting our students to make little books, decorate them as they like, fill them with what they please, and share them together, is about slowing down, and enjoying what we do together . . . slowing down enough to ponder what it is we really want on this journey we're on.

Appendix 1: Handmade Books

The following two methods are for very simple B5-size handmade books. Choose your own materials, colors, and cover design. Let your imagination fly, and you can create a book that you love to write in.

Method 1: simple book construction

cover base (note: English books open from left to right)

To make the cover, a front and back base are needed on which to apply the design. To add thickness, use B4-size sketching paper folded in half, or two ordinary B4-size sheets, folded together.

cover design suggestions:

Simply cover the base with lovely paper or fabric, draw directly on the base or glue photos, drawings, paintings, or make collages, etc.

constructing the book

Use B5-size paper for book pages. Join the covers and pages by stapling, or stitching with thread, or by punching holes and joining with nice cord or ribbon. If staples are used, they can later be covered to suit the design of your book.

(suggestion: Spare a few trees by using B4 sheets that have been used on one side. Fold the sheets in half, with the used side inside, to create two clean B5 pages.)

Method 2: a little more difficult

cover base (note: English books open from left to right)

This method gives a neater, more finished result. The cover design must be made separately from the cover base, and it must have 2cm margins on all sides. It is glued to the cover base.

constructing the cover (front and back)

- a) Glue cover base to wrong side of design, inside the 2cm margins. (fig. a)
- b) Fold the corners down at 90° angles, and glue to inside of base. (fig. b)
- c) Fold the margins down and glue to inside of base. (fig. c)
- d) Glue nice paper (a little smaller than B5) to inside of cover. (fig. d)

Appendix 2: Letter-size handmade scrolls

It is possible to make very simple scrolls that are lovely and very personal. These instructions will explain some of the technical problems, but you make all of the artistic decisions.

Method 1: simple scroll construction

Materials

cardboard tube (3 cm. diam x15 cm. long) / 1 B4 sheet of nice paper that is a light colour on one side / nice cord (about 60 cm.) / white glue / scissors / stapler

Procedure

1. Cut B4 sheet in half lengthwise (fig.1)
2. Cut 2 bands from B4 paper (12 x 5 cm.). Glue around ends of tube. (fig.2)
3. Lay tube flat and draw straight line lengthwise, (not on bands). (fig.4)
4. Glue around tube, but not 1 cm. from edges.
5. Using line on tube as guide, join B4 paper (white side) to tube, 1 cm. from edges.
6. Cut rounded corners at other end of paper. (fig.6)
7. Staple cord to centre of nice side of paper, cover staple with nice paper. (fig.5, 6)

Method 2: a little more difficult

Materials

cardboard tube (3 cm. diam x15 cm. long) / small piece cardboard (4 x 7 cm.) /

1 B4 sheet white paper / 1 B5 sheet fancy paper (not too thin) / nice cord (60 cm.) / white glue / scissors / stapler

Procedure

1. Cut B4 sheet in half lengthwise; cut B5 sheet in half in width. (fig.1)
2. Cut 2 bands fancy B5 paper (12 x 5 cm.). Glue around tube ends. (fig.2)
3. Cut 2 circles cardboard (3 cm. diam. Cover in fancy paper. (fig.3)
4. Glue covered circles to edges of tube.
5. Lay tube flat and draw straight line lengthwise (not on bands). (fig.4)
6. Glue around tube, but not 1 cm. from edges.
7. Using line on tube as guide, join B4 white paper to tube, 1 cm. from edges.
8. Glue fancy B5 paper (from step 1) to outside of other end of letter paper. (fig.5)
9. Round corners, staple cord (outside center), cover staple with nice paper. (fig.5, 6)