

# ACT I

## A Maine-Island Fishing Community in the 1980s

### INTRODUCTION TO 1992 EDITION

In 1978, on an island off the Maine coast, I began teaching two classes of junior high school students who enjoyed class discussion but who resisted writing. By the time the first winds of autumn blew down the bay, many students were studiously refusing to write more than a single draft. Writing only scant amounts in moody silence, they worked in a routine and often begrudging manner and asked why they could not simply tell me what they knew. Few students seemed pleased to see their writing displayed, to hear it read aloud, or to receive high grades. When I read their writing, I found it spare and shorn of the rich descriptiveness of their talk. A small but very vocal group successfully disrupted class by asking in both their words and actions, “Why do *we* need to learn how to write?”

Their question not only echoed their skepticism about the value of writing itself but also challenged the way in which I was teaching writing by a process approach.<sup>1</sup> Despite my attempts to orient the classes to students’ interests and to current issues in the community, before the first snow, students were hostile toward the kinds and amount of writing entailed by this approach. Although many students questioned also the value of reading, their entrenched resistance was to writing. Workbook exercises in grammar and

usage, however, were tolerated, I think, because students were inured to rote work and saw it as the real basis for English.

When I had previously taught students who did not want to write, their resistance was often because they had been given too few opportunities for personal writing and too many analyses of literature. The resistance of these island students was qualitatively different, however, and I had not heard their question asked with the same insistence before. While my students actively challenged writing, in many other ways they sought a personal relationship and shared their world with me.

Had I been entering the school in 1990 rather than in 1978, the teacher-researcher movement might have offered critical ways to explore what was happening in our English classes. But my immediate focus then was on how to work with groups of students whose attitudes fascinated even as they frustrated me. Since I wanted students to write every day, their resistance successfully undermined our work together. By the end of the first year, my efforts had united the students into a spirited community of non-writers. My second and third years of teaching both junior and then senior high English were slightly more successful. We knew each other better, and students agreed to write a little to maintain our relationship, but not, I think, because they saw any greater value or took appreciably more pleasure in the activity.

With a view to understanding more about how social contexts shape students' responses to writing, in 1981 I left the school district to begin graduate studies in English and education. During the next three years, I thought about why my teaching only partially had met the needs of some students and had failed to reach those who quit school. In 1984 I returned to the island to make my students' insistent question, "Why do *we* need to learn how to write?" the subject for an ethnographic research project. I began by accepting the invitation of my ex-students to go fishing and to learn more how their lives beyond the schoolhouse had formed and informed their time within it. I had realized that the hostility to writing was part of a broad-based resistance to schooling and reflected what I saw as a disparity between home and school. When students had described their lives at home, ways of proceeding had emerged that contrasted significantly with the patterned ways and values of life in school. One of the most visible features of the difference between the cultures of home and school was in how time was conceived and realized in daily activities. This observation led me to ask: Was my students' resistance to writing grounded in how community representations of time related to those of the school?

## COMMUNITY

To provide an exhaustive account of resistance to literacy in this one community would require several avenues of enquiry. One might explore how the

kinds of reading and writing that the community values are different from school-based literacy. In this fishing community, writing tends to be used more often to transact formal business and to share information publicly than to record what is memorable in a fast-changing lifestyle. Within this community there are highly literate individuals, but many regard the ability to talk and to listen as skills sufficient to meet their communicative needs, an observation that would hold true also for communities in which literacy is highly valued.

Another account of resistance to writing would consider that in 1978 students first identified themselves with a life directed toward the sea in contrast to a life in school. In part, students' antisocial behavior during writing class was a dramatic critique of the perceived relevance of writing to their future lives. In 1978 most of the island's young people planned to remain on the island to fish or to become homemakers and to raise families. For the most part, reading and writing were not seen as means essential to reaching these goals. To secure much more than a survival-level literacy appeared a superfluous achievement. The major value of a high-school education appeared to lie in being able to say that one had earned the diploma, a literate document to celebrate a homecoming after a rough passage.

### THE CULTURE OF TIME

Rather than explore each possible source of resistance, I chose to hold onto my question about time. I believed that it would connect with and lead to other sources and make visible a constraint on learning that I seldom had seen discussed fully in the literature. The answers that emerge, however, cannot be generalized to account for the behavior of students in other classrooms.<sup>3</sup> What I learned about the relations between time and literacy in island life is context-specific knowledge that will increase our understanding of how lived time relates to schooling only if other teachers ask comparable questions in their own schools. Although I will argue that the culture of time will always be a constraint on learning, we cannot predict how its influence will play out in different arenas.

With the purpose of reflecting broadly on the influence of time on learning, consider the master schedule that organizes education in most American high schools. The day is often divided into seven periods, each lasting for fifty minutes. After classroom rituals, office communications, and transition time, a resourceful teacher and highly motivated students will do well to have more than thirty minutes for learning. By the time our students are settling into the rhythm of work, the bell rings, and they stream off with three minutes to reach the next class and to begin a different subject. Talk with students ends midsentence and the once-common ritual of leave-taking is reduced to a hasty "Gotta go. I'll be late." Like Alice's white rabbit, we teachers also look at our watches to verify that we are behind and have not "covered" the syllabus

for that day. Back in the staffroom, teachers ask for more time in which to teach while our students complain that being in school is like stepping onto a production line.<sup>4</sup>

If we pause to examine the qualities of time that shape our work in school, then we notice that this clock-driven experience of time controls virtually all aspects of our daily life. Pervasive in modern industrial societies, clock time measures the heartbeat of the production of goods and services.<sup>5</sup> Although the temporal contours that we have drawn around our lives enable us to coordinate and synchronize activities among people and organizations with diverse time needs, these boundaries quickly assume the absolute status of the laws of nature.<sup>6</sup> Despite the apparent absence of human signature to our clock culture, people shape time to embody and to represent the values currently most important to their social, economic, and political life.

The metronomic<sup>7</sup> approach to the temporal organization of life and work in modern society has been inherited by most of our schools and imported into our classrooms. With the rationale of making education efficient, educators have established a series of time standards that measure in Carnegie units the number of hours students are to receive instruction in each subject before they can graduate. When we question the rationale behind school time, the answers given are grounded frequently on time-honored values embedded within the cultural habits of daily life. Educators have argued, for example, that time and learning are most efficient when divided into discrete units.

The effects of the temporal organization of education on students' learning has remained largely an unexamined domain (see Leichter, 1980, 360–63). As a profession, educators do not know enough about how the quality of time in school influences how our students feel, think, and act. This area of knowledge is difficult to scrutinize<sup>8</sup> but is beginning to receive critical attention from a range of different research traditions. As teachers of English, we recognize that learning to write is influenced by students' sociolinguistic backgrounds and specifically by their oral language, but we often overlook the influence of cultural frameworks so fundamental as the learners' modes of perceiving time and space.<sup>9</sup>

In this study, I have focused on time as though this category of human experience existed in isolation from space. Many readers will rightly see this separation as artificial as it would be for us to separate form from content. Issues of cultural and physical space will be evident to the reader, for example, in my discussions of classroom life, in observations on the imaginative space that student writers create, and in descriptions of linear and cyclical scheduling of local activities. My primary focus in the time-space modality is on time, because this dimension always appeared to be more significant than space to students.

A more complete account of the influence of cultural frameworks on learning in this community, however, would need to look at each phenom-

enon and how each relates to the other.<sup>10</sup> My purpose in this study is twofold: first, to describe how the sociotemporal mismatch between home and school has serious consequences for education; second, to invite teachers, administrators, and those concerned with the quality of schooling in both urban and rural settings to look at the ways in which the culture of time may influence their own students' responses to literacy.

## LITERACY

Since this book is about the relationships between time and literacy, readers will look for clear definitions of each key term. In recent years, however, we have seen increasing public debate over what literacy can, if not should, mean for those in school and particularly as preparation for work. With the move from the age of industry and technology to that of information, the need for a differently and more highly educated labor force has increased bringing new concepts of literacy (Purves, 1990).

The boundaries we have assigned to literacy have ranged from the minimal ability to sign one's name to the power to bring oneself into being by transforming word into world. (Freire and Macedo, 1987). In our attempts to define literacy, we have had difficulty reaching clarity and consensus on how literate people think, feel, and act; on what they know about language; and on how they might use it in different rhetorical situations. As Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff observe: "Literacy takes on meaning according to the historical and social setting. Notions of which skills constitute literacy change over time and differ by setting, causing estimates of illiteracy to vary enormously from time to time and from place to place" (1987, 202–206).

As our understanding of literacy has broadened, we have moved away from defining literacy wholly in terms of the ability to demonstrate for the purpose of school-based assessment a set of discrete skills, abilities, and performances. While such competencies are indeed essential, we now believe that definitions of literacy must reflect also the needs and purposes of language users in particular sets of circumstances. We have recognized the need to study the social and pedagogical contexts in which literacies are situated (Robinson, 1990). Within this study, I will discuss literacy as a set of communicative practices shaped by and in the engagements between home and school.<sup>11</sup>

By watching how the island students approach writing, the uses to which they put their spoken and written words and the social constraints on those uses, we can begin to understand the role that literacy plays in their lives. In Lorri Neilsen's words (1989, 2): "Because I believe literacy is not a skill that we acquire but is a reflection and creation of who we are, my findings show these people in the process of living."

My focus then will be to describe students' approaches and attitudes toward the task of writing, to examine the value that writing had in their daily

lives, and to consider the role that literacy played in how these students created their identities. I will use the broad term of literacy where the students' responses to writing are embedded in and conditioned by their responses to reading and talking and on those occasions when it is especially important to think about reading, writing, and talking as connected activities.<sup>12</sup>

## TIME

Agreeing on what we mean by literacy is problematic, and to suggest how we understand time is equally so. To begin by admitting the problem is commonplace among those who write about time. "Time is everywhere, yet eludes us. Time is so bound up in our universe and ourselves that it resists our efforts to isolate and define it. Time haunts our experience like some invisible spirit of things, some irretrievable truth" (Grudin, "Preface," 1982).

In *Time the Familiar Stranger*, J. T. Fraser (1987, 35) uses the key distinction between *time felt* and *time understood* to account for St. Augustine's difficulty in defining time in *The Confessions*. Bk. 11, sec. 14: "What then, is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to someone who asks, I know not" (35).

Augustine locates time in the mind. Bk. 11, sec. 27: "It is in you, my mind, that I measure time. . . . As things pass by, they leave an impression on you. . . . It is this impression which I measure. Therefore this itself is time or else I do not measure time at all" (34).

When I arrived on the island in 1978, I confess that I was not thinking about time as the personal impress of change. From my teacherly perspective, I identified time with the public measures of clock, calendar, and schedule. Being raised in the England of Greenwich Mean Time, I had inherited through school and community a set of somewhat rigid time values that in turn informed how I organized classroom life. For example, events happened *on* time, not *in* time; punctuality was a virtue, lateness a venial sin.

Although such values had equal currency in the mainstreams of American life, these norms had far less purchase on the lives of my island students than I had expected and wanted. A more social sense of time was making impressions on my students' minds and bodies, which were invisible to me. In not recognizing the many nonverbal signs and markers of time, I failed to understand the extent to which the students' sense of time is a key dimension in the social contexts of learning. My own oversight reflects the scant attention that educators have given to this area until quite recently.

As a topic of study in education, time has been approached from a range of perspectives. Miriam Ben-Peretz and Rainer Bromme (1990, 64) offer the following categories, acknowledging that they overlap and provide a provisional rather than a definitive framework: instructional time, curricular time, sociological time, and experienced-personal time. Instructional time is

defined as “classroom time, allocated and prescribed by teachers, and engaged in and used by students” (Ben-Peretz and Bromme, 1990, 64). Researchers study teaching by measuring instructional time in evaluating the “teaching-learning process,” determining what occurs during “academic learning time,” studying the effects of the order of classes on the intensity of learning, and assessing the time requirements of individual students, of different subjects, and more broadly of schooling itself.

Curricular time is defined as “time allocations, and specifications for time use, prescribed by curriculum developers” (Ben-Peretz and Bromme, 1990, 67). Because this perspective views time as a scarce curricular resource, it raises political issues of how time is to be distributed for particular subjects as well as for social experience and issues encountered in schools. Going beyond questions of time allocation, curricular time examines from developmental perspectives the effects of timing and pacing on learning. When and at what rate do we introduce material in instructional sequences?

The sociology of time, a new area of investigation, studies the “*socio-temporal order*; which regulates the lives of *social* entities such as families, professional groups, religious communities, complex organisations, or even entire nations” (Zerubavel, 1981, xii). Studies in sociological time look at the qualitative difference between such different kinds of time as the sacred and profane, the private and public. In *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (1981), Zerubavel describes as forms of temporal regularity the four parameters that we commonly use to present the profile of a social event or activity, namely, the dimensions of sequential structure, duration, temporal location, and rate of recurrence (1).

These terms provide a useful set of references for describing the time orders both of communities and schools. English class might be scheduled every day from 8:05 until 9:00 a.m., to last fifty-five minutes and be followed by math. These parameters establish norms that students and teachers often come to regard as natural, even though they are socially constructed. By making social situations orderly, predictable, and coordinated, however, temporal regularity helps to provide the participants with a sense of “cognitive well being” (12).

Experienced personal time is one of the least studied perspectives of time in education. Ben-Peretz and Bromme (1990, 73) define this perspective in terms of “the perception of the temporal order by individuals [who] perceive time in different ways and may be viewed as assigning personal meaning to time.”<sup>13</sup> As public as the units of time might be, these measures take on personal meaning only as we interpret them in the context of our own lives. Ben-Peretz and Bromme cite Rousseau’s dictum that the most important educational principle to “lose time” illustrates one approach to how personal time might be conceptualized: “The growth and development of a person should not be dictated by the tyranny of the clock. Each person

is conceived as an individual, different from others. Therefore, each has his or her own pace of development, and the passage of time is experienced by each in a unique way” (1990, 73).

The reader might argue that what we lose is not time but our awareness of how it is represented. While this qualification is an important one, the point is well made that we need to attend closely to how students in school view time and what it comes to mean in their individual lives: “1.18. For the real problem of time is not in nature but rather in our position toward nature, not in what we see but in the way we look” (Grudin, 1988, 9).

Although my own approach to the study of time makes reference to and has implications for how we think both about instructional and curricular time, my focus is primarily on how students experience time in the writing class and more broadly in school. My descriptions of the life worlds of students in school and communal life are informed, in part, by a sociological view of time.

When Thoreau spoke of time as “the stream I go a-fishing in” (68), he pointed to time literally as the medium in which we create our sense of self. Members of the island community construct the contours of the stream to serve a life of sea-related work. Identity is predicated on an essential freedom to schedule activities in accord with the natural cycles of tide, season, and daylight, and their attendant time values. Because we cannot separate a context from our interaction with it, time and the stream of activities are one and the same.<sup>14</sup> Time is perceptible only in the impress of one activity on another. Time is not an influence affecting things and relationships, but rather an essential element of things and relationships. The cosmos is not so much a thing in motion as a thing of motion, a complex interplay of energies and paces (Grudin, 1988, 21). Time is fishing, time is writing, and time is children in school.

So far I have spoken of literacy and time separately. How might we relate time and literacy? Both constitute and organize daily experience and allow us to orient ourselves in the world. They enable us to make meaning from and to give shape to our experiences, two fundamental means by which we establish personal identity.<sup>15</sup> Saying who we are has both linguistic and temporal dimensions. As human systems, time and literacy are socially constructed, but they are structured and evaluated differently across social groups.

In moving between home and school, island students observed differences in the forms and uses of time and language and experienced discontinuities between how each system was evaluated in its setting. To establish an identity in school controlled and evaluated by measures of time different from home was a major issue for these young people. I will argue that these disjunctions affected students’ ability and their motivation to write. While I focus primarily on the time order of students’ approach to writing, the time order of the writing itself deserves comment.



In narrative writing, I had noticed interesting departures from textbook English in how my students managed tense and aspect and in how they located themselves in narrative time. For example, students shifted frequently between past and present, favored progressive verb forms, and structured their stories without a clear delineation of beginning, middle, and end. Although we cannot assume that linguistic time, for example, tense and aspect, directly reflects the lived time of the narrator, I thought that the ways in which students managed discursive time within their stories, the time of telling, would represent at some level their lived experience of time.<sup>16</sup> By examining what their teachers regarded as temporal miscues, I believed that I could gain insight into the larger cultural configurations of time that clearly had shaped my own students' responses to instruction in writing.

Although both time and language are culturally constructed, I soon discovered problems in attempting to relate the time order of written or spoken narrative to how the language user appeared to perceive time. At best, I was able to make inferences about cultural attitudes toward time but was unable to show any predictable correspondences across the kindergarten through twelve narratives examined. To understand the temporal logic of student narrative, I have included several in which the writer's handling of time deserves the scrutiny that Mina Shaughnessy applies to errors. It is too easy to assume merely that temporal miscues need correction rather than attempt to establish the narrative's temporal logic for its author.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The lives of the people in this fishing village are depicted through the voices of students and adults describing life and work, first in the community and then in school. My focus in these chapters is on how time and identity are related to each other within the settings of home and school and on the role that writing plays in mediating and revealing the contours of this relationship.

Chapter 1 takes the reader through a day in the life of Mike, a young lobsterman who, finding nothing of value for himself in school, quit in grade nine to go fishing. We see how the fisherman's work and identity are grounded in the challenge to develop a schedule that accords with the natural and changing cycles of tide, season, and daylight. The patterns of activity, time values, and attitudes toward work taught in school are seen to contrast sharply with those of work on the water.

Chapter 2 describes the life and seasonal work of people ashore doing such traditional things as clam digging, home making, and crab picking. I argue that the social and economic values represented in the temporal organization of these kinds of work influenced how Mike approached and valued his school learning. Through students' perspectives both on failing to meet their school's expectations and on finding an education appropriate to their needs,

we come to understand why many of these students put minimal efforts into school or quit school altogether. The patterns of communal life that emerge in chapters 1 and 2 establish a context against which the lives of students in school are presented in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3 moves from the world of lobster boats and clam flats into the elementary classroom where we see school through the eyes of Fay. The different ways in which young children (K–2) become aware of time at home and in school are presented, for example, through television shows, teacher announcements of a change of activity, school bells, and the arrival of the buses. Fay and her friends are then shown responding to being taught to write by a process approach followed by a critique of how time is used for in-class writing.

Chapter 4 portrays life in grade six from the perspective of Mark and his friends. As they describe their process of composing, we see a change in attitude from students' enjoyment of writing to asking, "Why write?" Students are being taught to write by an approach that recognizes neither the insistence of their question nor the time values of people in this community. Despite the teachers' efforts to make learning personal and to involve students in planning activities, the power of schools to depersonalize learning emerges in this chapter. Contrasts are drawn between home and school learning to illuminate the cultural influences on how students regard school-based literacy.

Chapter 5 presents the attitudes of Christie and her friends in grades eleven and twelve toward how their time needs are recognized by school and the English class: drafting, peer review, meeting due dates, and students' responses to teacher evaluation are discussed here. The influence of gender on students' attitudes toward the writing process and toward literacy emerges in this chapter. We see how culture-based knowledge of how artifacts are made serves as one paradigm for approaching writing. Attitudes toward pursuing a traditional lifestyle in contrast to alternative careers broaden the concluding discussion to assess the roles that literacy and formal education might play in the future of these students.

Chapter 6 identifies the different kinds of time evident in this community and describes their coalescence into "island time," a multifaceted form of time that contrasts sharply with the monolithic time of schools. I raise the political issue of what kinds of literacy will be needed in the future if local people are to manage their island and to govern the schools. Although many teachers do not work in communities where time values are predicated on the activity patterns of rural life, I argue that all students are affected by the school time values. Examples of how professional writers use their time are provided as a reference against which English teachers can enhance their effectiveness by developing alternative *timescapes* for literacy (defined on p. 167).

Appendix 1 is for those readers interested in the approach taken in this study. I describe why this approach was appropriate to the problem I chose

to study, as well as how I gathered information and shared my readings of school and community life with those I described.

The logical order of the chapters within the study might suggest a nexus of causal relationships between the adults' daily activities and the students' approach to writing in school. But in fact, the chapter sequence reflects my own shift in focus from teaching students to write to exploring the contexts that influenced how they approached this task. The nature of the relationships between the temporal rhythms of communal life and the students' attitudes toward literacy will emerge in the chapters ahead. My reason for immersing the reader in what might appear to be an overly detailed account of the fishermen's lives and life ashore is to show, by way of a particular example, that teachers in schools will always need local knowledge of their students' life world. To teach students effectively, we must study the contours of their world as we engage them with ours. This is an account of how such knowledge was gathered in collaboration with a group of people who encouraged me to tell their stories in full detail.

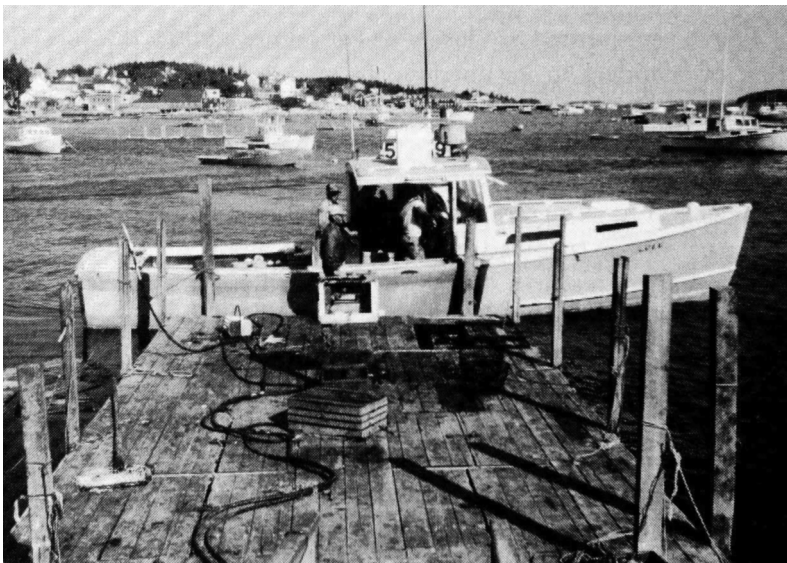
#### A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION AND VOICE

I have represented as closely as ear and eye allow the speech and writing of islanders in their unedited form, a practice now broadly accepted when presenting variations of American English. In making transcriptions, I have sought to preserve the integrity of regional voice but without attempting to represent speech phonetically. By the use of "eye-dialect," I have suggested dialect variations within the community but have otherwise followed standard American orthography.

To preserve linguistic markers of my own voice in the first edition, I followed UK spellings except where reporting direct speech. Following the convention reminded the reader that as narrator I was from another country and that in my teaching and conversations with islanders the interplay of language and culture had been more complex than if I had been raised in the United States. For the second edition, I was advised to standardize (or standardise in the UK) so as not to distract the reader's attention from the text.



Brothers Fishing



Docking Lobster