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The pedagogy of conversation in the home: 'familiar conversation' as a pedagogical tool in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England

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This article argues that domestic conversations taking place in a sociable context played a more important role than has hitherto been considered in the intellectual training and development of children. The centrality of conversation as an informal method of training the mind to reason had one important consequence: the publication of the highly successful 'familiar format', texts which used 'conversation' as the method of instruction. Written mainly but not exclusively by women, these texts were modelled on the instructive 'familiar' conversations which were part of the fabric of social and familial exchanges, and were an attempt to extend conversation's educational effectiveness into a pedagogy. The article also explores why the format became a lost pedagogy.

Keywords: *conversation as pedagogy; home education; familiar format; critical thinking; domestic pedagogy; Jane Marcet; Anna Barbauld; Maria Edgeworth*

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the home was increasingly seen as the privileged site, 'the best place' (Walters, 1997, p. 131) for instructional activities. Although domestic education had long been the norm for very young children, for most girls and for many boys in upper class and middling professional families, this perception of the home as the ideal site for instruction suggests a shift not just in the meaning of the home but in the meaning of education. In this period, the domestic space became the preferred site for the diffusion and consumption of knowledge. What was new, in addition, is that it involved the 'entire family' (Secord, 1985, p. 133; see also Keene, 2014). Home education could be envisaged because, in the absence of an overall educational authority and of any teacher training, anyone could teach, and often did (Cohen, 2006). Moreover, because the

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classical curriculum was relatively fixed and unchanging, a classically educated father could teach his son what he had learned as well as a schoolmaster could. 'You are in every respect qualified for the task of instructing your son, and preparing him for the university', poet William Cowper wrote to his friend the Rev William Unwin. In the case of girls, whose education was 'modern' (in the sense of not being 'classical'), there was no standard curriculum and a parent (usually a mother, but in some cases a father) could teach what they had learned as well as a governess or schoolmistress would. In this period, the relative ease with which home education could be conducted was coupled with an emphasis on domestic instruction as preferable not only for girls, but also for boys. Thus, Cowper underlined his point by adding that at school, a boy's 'morals are sure to be but little attended to' whereas a home education ensures boys are under the watchful eye of their father (Cowper, 1827 [17 September 1780], p. 90) and thus 'escape the dangers of "the tavern, the gaming table or the brothel"' (Secord, 1985, p. 129).

Education within the family however also provided an additional attraction, overlooked by most histories of education: familiar conversation. The conversations held by families and their social circle, which could include a variety of guests, could broaden children's horizons.

Being able to converse well on a wide range of subjects including natural history, chemistry, mineralogy and botany ensured that a guest would be 'particularly esteemed' (Gleadle, 2003, p. 64). Contemporaries had much to say about the role conversation played in developing not just knowledge but the mind and critical faculties. This is because 'conversation' was not just talk. Not only was culture 'a form of conversation',but at the time conversation was also involved in issues ranging from how it should be performed to whether it could represent 'a community of culture', be a form of 'sober enquiry after truth' or a 'reminder of linguistic dispersal and potentially of social disintegration' (Mee, 2011, pp. 7, 122, 237). Conversation was also an integral part of practices of sociability and politeness aimed at individual improvement and self fashioning, and had to be instructive as well as entertaining. Author of conduct literature Hester Chapone captured the essence of this ideal in her 'Essay on Conversation' where she notes that 'It is almost impossible that an evening should pass in mutual endeavours to entertain each other [in conversation], without something being struck out, that would, in some degree enlighten and improve the mind' (Chapone, 1775, p. 16).

In the late eighteenth century then, conversation was of central importance both as a key element of sociability and as a central feature of domestic instruction. The aim of this article is to investigate the ways middle class and elite families exploited conversation in both its oral and written modes—spoken conversations and texts constructed as 'conversations'—as a means of educating their children at home. I argue that the thoughtful and deliberate use of familiar conversation, with its potential for formality as well as informality, digressions, interruptions and for entertainment as well as 'improvement', made the domestic space a key site for the training of children's minds and critical faculties.

I. Conversation at home

Eighteenth-century parents were aware of the importance of conversation in the training of children's minds. For example, in her diary, Anna Larpent, the wife of a civil servant and mother of two sons, noted on 30 October 1792:

> Heard George (aged 6) English and Latin lessons, he read in Sandford and Merton [although?] the scenery of which was at Venice and in Turkey. This raised his geographical enquiries. He placed the map of Europe, found the places named and had much general conversation concerning the map of [C?] which fitted up all our time, perhaps more usefully than by our routine of learning. (Larpent, 30 October 1792)

Similarly, the educationist Maria Edgeworth's comment that 'whatever can be taught in conversation, is clear gain in instruction' (Edgeworth & Edgeworth, 1798/1801, vol. II, p. 53) leaves no doubt that she was a firm believer in the importance of conversation, not as random desultory talk, but as a system. In the same vein, in the anonymous *Thoughts on Domestic Education* (1826) 'A Mother' states that: 'the best aim of education is to teach children to think for themselves', emphasising conversation as the means to do so. She describes her method: 'on reading Defoe's admirable story of Robinson Crusoe, the young reader might easily be led into a familiar chat respecting the conduct of its hero … and a consciousness of [it] could be insensibly awakened in the mind' (A Mother, 1826, p. 45). By the 1830s, the idea of teaching children 'without their suspecting it' by using familiar conversation was common place (Genlis, 2007 [1783], p. 250). Thus, Thomas Shore, a country clergyman and educator, was reported in his daughter's diary as arguing that the reason poor children seemed to have 'more vacancy and stupidity of mind than those of the higher ranks' was not because of a 'natural want of intelligence' but, he explained, 'because they are not drawn out by questions; they are not in the habit of being taught to apply what they know' (Shore, 1891 [26 March 1833], p. 40). 'Drawing out by questions' was the quintessential characteristic of instructive conversation, formal and informal, spoken and written; it was what educationists *did*, when they used conversation to instruct. Drawing children out by questions ensured that they were actively involved—asking as well as answering questions, agreeing as well as disagreeing, interrupting and changing the subject—their voices were foregrounded. It was also the pedagogical model for the 'familiar format', texts structured as 'conversations' which I will discuss below.

II. The acquisition of conversation skills

Although there has been no systematic study of children's participation in the sociable activities of middle class and elite circles, Peter Borsay has argued that children as young as six or seven were included in the leisure activities of their families (Borsay, 2006). While he does not specify the kind of activities this leisure included, there is much evidence to suggest that in middle and upper class families, children's participation in social/domestic conversations with adults was a normal feature of their upbringing.

Children's language socialisation involves not just learning language but also what to say, how and when to say it (Hymes, 1972). As a result, home education included training in manners, which eighteenth-century middling and elite families considered an integral part of upbringing. Exercising children's minds *by* conversation was indivisible from training and disciplining their tongue *for* conversation, as required by the conventions of politeness and sociability. The complex skills comprising conversation were neither 'natural' nor simple, as attested by the numerous manuals of conversation published in the late eighteenth century. They were primarily acquired in 'good', mainly adult, company. It was in company, argues Ingrid Tague, that elite boys and girls shared 'the same educational process' in the 'informal, yet essential, lessons of sociability' (Tague, 2002).

Evidence from gentry and middle class families in this period reveals many instances of parents advocating exposure to adult society and conversation as a means of training in manners. Thus Mrs Delany's advice to her sister to expose her little daughter to a 'variety of good company, which is of more use in forming a gracious manner from the ages of seven to fourteen than seven years after that', conveys how important she considers this training to be (Delany, 1861 [letter of 7 April 1754], 1st ser., vol. 3, p. 219). Similarly, when Lord Sheffield encouraged his daughter Maria Josepha, while yet a child, to enter into all his interests, and converse with 'the leading men' he entertained at his home, he was not just enabling 'her keen intellect' to be stimulated (Adeane, 1896, p. xvii) but implicitly ensured that she would know how to express her opinions. Maria Josepha was not unusual. Such lessons were also valued for boys, and many boys participated, like girls, in domestic conversation and instruction, but evidence about their participation is harder to find than for girls. The reason is mainly historiographical. Education, as regards boys, usually refers to their learning the classics and less formal instruction has tended to be overlooked. However, there are some significant examples. Thus Lady Stafford deplored the absence of her 14 year old son Granville at a dinner she hosted where Prime Minister Pitt explicated Homer in a 'lively and entertaining' manner (Leveson Gower, G. letter of 14 May 1787, in Castalia, 1916, vol. 1, p. 8). Granville's participation in learned table talk with eminent personages was normal in their family. Texts in the familiar format also demonstrate clearly that boys, as well as girls, engaged in domestic conversations on a variety of subjects.

Advice about conversation included in most eighteenth-century conduct books and prescriptive educational texts usually linked its intellectual and social skills. In *The Polite Lady; or a Course of Female Education* published in 1775, the letter 'Portia' writes to her daughter at boarding school advising her to practise conversation nicely illustrates this: conversation, 'Portia' writes, will 'whet your genius and fix your attention, warm and improve your heart, polish and refine your manners, and give you a certain ease and elegance of address which is not to be obtained in any other way' ([Allen], 1775, p. 153). Such sentiments were echoed in many other advice texts. For conversations to 'whet the genius' or 'stimulate the intellect', they had to be instructive, but the evanescence of the spoken word makes it impossible for the historian to reach, and to assess how far such advice was put into practice.

Letters are one of the ways of recovering conversations as letter writers often recorded them (see Hannan, 2013), and they do suggest that conversation was frequently used in these ways. Reading, often done aloud, was inextricably intertwined with active listening and critical judgement, all important skills necessary for conducting polite conversation and therefore necessary components of children's education. In the Edgeworth household, children would practise them by being 'encouraged to ask questions' during reading sessions (Butler, 1972, p. 99). Similarly, when John Aikin was writing *Evenings at Home*, a juvenile collection intended for family reading aloud, he 'would have everything he wrote read aloud by one member of the family to the others, and encouraged comments even from the youngest' (Rogers, 1958, p. 122). Familial conversations about reading were thus an important means of putting into practice Locke's pedagogical assertion that 'the object of education is to inculcate in children the practice of deliberation' so that they will be able to think rationally and consider 'whether to assent propositions about the physical, intellectual, moral and political worlds' (Parry, 2007, p. 218). These practices also rehearsed the skills of conversation itself. Indeed, the reading cards and other material artefacts Jane Johnson, a clergyman's wife, developed in the 1740s to teach her children to read, were 'designed not only for learning to read but also to become skilled in the art of conversation as well as the art of reading aloud—signs of good manners and gentility' (Arizpe & Styles, 2004, p. 344).

For all the expansion of print, the eighteenth century was still very much an oral culture (Secord, 2007) especially as the practice of politeness was indissolubly linked to conversation, its 'master metaphor' (Cohen, 1996; Eger, 2005; Klein, 1994, p. 8). A critical component of conversation as well as polite practice concerned the necessity to pay attention to what people said and retain what they said. This required a 'habit of attention' as well as memory, which children were trained to develop from a young age by practising listening to conversations or readings and then recounting them orally or by writing them down from memory. This was so thoroughly inculcated that eighteenth-century adults remembered conversations and therefore learned by conversation in ways that we can perhaps imagine but no longer experience. Elizabeth Robinson attended the learned conversations hosted by her step-grandfather Conyers Middleton who then expected her to provide an account of these conversations (Robinson, 1930 [1801]). Even though Middleton thought this reporting might be difficult as she was not yet in her teens, he thought she would thus acquire a 'habit of attention' that would be of use to her in the future (Doran, 1873, p. 4). Like letters, diaries and journals can provide evidence of the role and practice of conversation in self-instruction. Naturalist and artist Katherine Plymley's diaries include 'lengthy political conversations she had witnessed between her brother and his guests' which she wrote down and 'elaborated upon', explaining their meanings (Gleadle, 2003, pp. 68–70). Plymley was deploying her mastery of a skill she was likely to have learned when young, to extend her self-education.

Such skills and strategies were fostered by the pedagogical strategies then adopted in the home. For, contrary to the common historiographical assumption that

domestic education was superficial, usually 'haphazard' and 'nearly always unsystematic' (Bryant, 1985, pp. 17–18; Hilton & Shefrin, 2009, p. 9; Sutherland, 2000, p. 31), in the eighteenth century, the instruction offered to girls at home might be extensive. Thus, while there was no prescribed curriculum for girls' education, and every individual parent, moralist, educationist, schoolmistress or girl herself could devise their own curriculum, and often did (see Cohen, 2006), there was a core curriculum which usually included history, geography, religion and languages such as French and Italian, as well as 'accomplishments' such as music and dancing (Cohen, 2004, 2005b, 2006). In addition, affluent homes might often also provide a well-furnished library (Allan, 2008; Pearson, 1999), which daughters might use—as Catharine Macaulay and Jane Austen did—to great effect. In contrast, Eliza Fletcher, who had read Addison in her father's library before attending school from the age of 11 in the 1780s, found that 'four volumes of the *Spectator* constituted our whole school library' (Fletcher, 1874, p. 18). The instruction offered at home might often be better than anything most schools of the time could offer.

This was arguably true for boys as well. Thus, in a letter to Unwin, William Cowper remarks that 'geography, a science … necessary to the accomplishment of a gentleman, yet … imperfectly, if at all, inculcated in schools' (Cowper, 1827, [7 September 1780], p. 88). The notoriously narrow classical curriculum of boys' schools (see Stray, 1998) could however be supplemented by home instruction. Significantly, both girls' home education and the complementary instruction offered to boys were facilitated by the expansion of juvenile publishing for young readers (Secord, 1985), in particular, of dialogic texts in 'familiar' format. These texts aimed to emulate the instructive conversations that were part of the fabric of the familial exchanges documented in the letters and memoirs discussed so far.

The dialogic texts which have attracted most scholarly attention are those which 'popularised' science (Amies, 1985; Fyfe, 2000a, 2000b, 2008; Gates, 1998; Hilton, 2007; Keene, 2014; Myers 1989, 1997; Secord, 1985; Shteir 1996), but I argue that the familiar format, just like these conversations, was used to teach a variety of subjects ranging from history, both sacred and secular, and English grammar to painting and domestic duties to young married women.

III. The familiar format

Although texts in familiar format are instructional, they are not always constructed as a didactic exchange between an all-knowing adult-teacher and an ignorant child-learner (Myers, 1989; Shteir, 1996). Rather, the characters can include two or more children or adolescents who may or may not be siblings, teaching each other and conversing with an adult who is neither all-knowing nor always in control of the dialogues and may just be a secondary character, or even in the absence of adults (see Jamieson, 1819), and the form in which knowledge is provided and discussed is not necessarily formulaic and fixed, as G. Myers and Ann Shteir have argued (Myers, 1989; Shteir, 1996). To illustrate this variety, I have selected four excerpts to show different positionings for 'learners' and 'teachers' as well as textual

interruptions and digressions, two of the techniques authors used to better simulate conversational authenticity in the written mode (Pujol, 2005). The first is an excerpt from *Conversations on Chemistry* (1806) by Jane Marcet, selected to show the relationship between the tutor, Mrs B, and one of her pupils, where the pupil queries Mrs B's statement, who then admits an error.

Conversation V 'On Oxygen and Nitrogen'

Mrs B	… the iron, in burning, has acquired exactly the weight of the oxygen which has disappeared, and is now combined with it. It has become oxide of iron.
Caroline:	I do not know what you mean by saying that the oxygen has disappeared, Mrs B, for it was always invisible.
Mrs B	True, my dear, the expression was incorrect. (Marcet, 1806, vol. I, pp. 140–141)

The second excerpt, from Alexander Jamieson's *Conversations on General History* (1819), exploits what Catherine Dille has shown to have been a domestic practice of the period, siblings instructing each other without an adult being present (Dille, 2013, July). In this text, the father appears only in the fifth conversation and is not the sole authority.

Henry	But Amelia, pray go on with your account of the sciences in ancient Egypt.
Amelia	In medicine the Egyptians made little progress, as anatomy was not studied anciently … [she continues].
Henry	now I am satisfied
Charlotte	Indeed—and where now is your inquisitiveness about all the institutions of the Egyptians?
Amelia	not so, Charlotte: Listen to me, Henry:—About the priests, whose morality was pure and refined, though it has little influence on the manners of the people … debased by the most absurd and contemptible superstitions … [she continues]. (Jamieson, 1819, pp. 16–18)

The third excerpt, from Mrs Markham's *History of England*, exemplifies the different forms instructional conversations could take, and shows how the instructor, the mother, shifts the discussion to material not included in the text she has just read out because of the questions the children put to her.

Mrs M has just been discussing the battles of Cressy, Poitiers and Agincourt.

Richard:	Was it not extraordinary, mamma, that so small a number of English should again beat an immense army of French?
Mary:	I wish, mamma, there were not so many shocking stories in history.
Mrs M:	History is, indeed, a sad catalogue of human miseries, and one is glad to turn from the horrors of war and bloodshed to the tranquillity of private life. Shall I tell you something of the domestic habits of the English in the fifteenth century?
Mary:	Oh do, Mamma, I shall like that very much. (Markham, 1823, pp. 186–187)

The last excerpt is a counter-example: N. Meredith, *Rudiments of Chemical Philosophy* (1810), where there are no characters, and the dialogic format does not attempt to simulate a real conversation; Meredith warns the reader that he is not interested in emulating real conversations with characters each with their own voice: 'the dramatis personae of the text are not well supported', but this is 'of no consequence at all' because 'every one knows that the information or entertainment of the reader is the object aimed at' (Meredith, 1810, p. xiii).

> *What is the most general effect of caloric on the different bodies?*
>
> Its most general effect is the increase of their bulk; hence, if a bar of iron be accurately measured when cold, and afterwards heated, it will be found, if measured again while hot, to have increased in length.
>
> *Has caloric the same effect on fluid bodies as on solids?*
>
> Yes, but in a much greater degree, their particle being more easily separated from each other; everyone who knows the principle on which the steam engine is constructed, must be aware how much the bulk of water is increased, when converted into *steam* by its union with caloric …. (Meredith, 1810, pp. 5–6)

While conversation was always associated with the free exchange of ideas, it did not necessarily entail avoiding contention and debate. On the contrary, there was 'a role for combative talk as pleasurable and productive' (Mee, 2011, p. 5). For example, in John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's social circle, people 'exercised their right … to examine, compare, choose, reject' (Mee, 2011, p. 122). Training children to think rationally and critically meant allowing them that right too. Marcet's *Conversations on Chemistry* include several instances where pupils disagree with or show up Mrs B's errors, as in the excerpt above. Equally significant is that in both Marcet's and Markham's excerpts, the interruptions and digressions all come from the children, demonstrating that they are not mere passive recipients, receptacles to be filled with knowledge. They are presented as agents, and their interruptions can shape the direction of the narrative. This is also how the familiar format, where both pupils and the teacher 'asked questions and advanced opinions' (Amies, 1985, p. 91; Fyfe, 2000a) differs from 'catechisms' where the pupil's sole role is to ask the questions that produce undeviatingly the knowledge to be conveyed, as shown in the excerpt from Meredith.

IV. Choosing the familiar format

Since other textual dialogic forms—'catechisms' and 'Questions and Answers' without characters—co-existed with the familiar format, why did authors choose to use the latter?

Evidence from within the texts themselves suggests a number of reasons. Thus, Priscilla Wakefield explained that she adopted the dialogue format for her *Mental Improvement*, because she wanted her instructive lessons to 'be read rather from choice than from compulsion, and be sought by my young readers, as an entertainment not

shunned as a mere dry perceptive lesson' (Wakefield, 1794, vol. I, p. ii). Ann Murry, author of *Mentoria,* chose it for a different reason: it acts 'to lure the mind into knowledge, and imperceptibly conduct it to the goal of wisdom. This mode of practice often succeeds, where formal precept fails' (Murry, 1778, p. xi). Even though written conversations are nothing like spoken ones, authors using the conversational genre presented their work as if this difference did not matter, possibly because the shift from spoken to written mode was perceived as mere 'transcription' (Anon., 1823, p. 53). Like spoken conversation, it was an attractive and non-coercive mode of instruction for both sexes, particularly in contrast to the regime of rote learning prevailing in boys' schools (see however Grenby, 2009) and because conversation was a successful method for conveying knowledge without 'cramping' the mind. This is echoed in the work of today's leading psycholinguists, who emphasise the pedagogical effectiveness of mutually constructed knowledge through 'cumulative talk' between teacher and learner (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 54). Wakefield further highlighted what might be another reason for its popularity, the familial and domestic aspect of conversational instruction, which chimed particularly well with a contemporary emphasis on parental intimacy and close relations between siblings. Encouraged by 'a new culture of open parental affection' (Grenby, 2011, p. 207), Wakefield argued that the 'familiar intercourse, that is now maintained with young people by their parents, and those who preside over their education' is a result of a shift from

> The austere manners of former times secluded children from the advantage of conversing with their parents or instructors; an unnatural distance was maintained between them; they were seldom admitted into the parlour, but to pay a ceremonious visit … The times are greatly altered in this respect for the better, and the familiar intercourse, that is now maintained with young people by their parents, and those who preside over their education, affords them an agreeable opportunity of enlarging their minds, and attaining a fund of knowledge, by the easy medium of conversation. (Wakefield, 1794, vol. I, pp. 119–120)

These texts also enacted Catharine Macaulay's recommendation for parents to 'take measures for the virtue and harmony of your family, by uniting their [children's] young minds early in the soft bonds of friendship' (Macaulay, 1790, Letter iv, p. 50) and bringing them up together. In *Natural History*, the father chides his son Charles: 'you need not have called your sister silly; you are twelve years old and she is but six. You should instruct her kindly and not ridicule her' (Rippingham, 1815, vol. 1, p. 12).

The domestic site also provided the opportunity to transform the quotidian into an educational experience. Maria Edgeworth noted in *Practical Education* that 'we have found, from experience, that an early knowledge of the first principles of science … may be insensibly acquired from the usual incidents of life' (Edgeworth & Edgeworth, 1798/1801, vol. II, p. vii). Mrs Mason, the moral governess in Wollstonecraft's familiar dialogues *Original Stories from Real Life*, 'converts everyday situations into her instructional medium—a bad habit, a passerby, a visit, a natural scene, a holiday festivity' (Myers, 1986, p. 46; Wollstonecraft, 1788).

The familiar format resonated very clearly with late eighteenth-century ideas about instructive conversation and contemporary pedagogical preferences. Spoken conversations developed children's critical thought, enlarged their mind and allowed the acquisition of knowledge at the same time as training them in the art of expressing their thoughts clearly in keeping with the requirements of polite sociability. The familiar genre allowed authors to extend the 'efficacy of conversation' (Fyfe, 2000a, p. 473) to a textual form. To achieve this aim, authors appropriated the conversations of social intercourse, expanded their form, infused them with their own pedagogical ideas and produced different educational experiences. Jane Marcet, one of the most celebrated writers of the genre, exploits this in a multilayered exchange in her *Conversations on the History of England*. Sophy, aged eight, wants to read the history book her brother Willy is reading. Her mother replies:

> The [history] your brother is reading is written by Mrs Markham: it is intended for children older than you are; it is fit for Willy, and Lady Callcott's is for you. But, mamma, Sophy says, what makes his history so amusing is the conversation at the end of every chapter: all the children talk about what they have been reading, and Mrs Markham explains what they do not understand. Is it so in this little history? No, replied her mother. But I will tell you how we can make up for that; we may talk the conversations instead of reading them. You must make your own observations, and I will explain the difficulties. (Marcet, 1842, pp. 1–3)

Whether aiming or just claiming to emulate real conversations, the genre flourished from the 1780s until the mid-nineteenth century. Through this genre, educators and authors developed pedagogies that were supremely well-adapted to the conversable sociabilities and family cultures of the late eighteenth century (see Hilton, 2007). It thrived in a period when domestic instruction was considered the ideal for both boys and girls, and continued to have currency in a period of moral as well as educational pressure on English middle and upper class families to educate daughters at home. Even though boarding school education expanded for both sexes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Skedd, 1997), domestic instruction with a mother, father or benevolent governess as instructor remained important well into the nineteenth century. Authors adopting the 'familiar format' simultaneously exemplified and enabled the practice.

Yet, by the 1850s, Barbara Gates argues, 'the dialogue form had begun to outlive its own credibility' (Gates, 1998, p. 43). It became a derogated pedagogy. While a number of suggestions have been put forward to explain why texts in familiar format became popular (Amies, 1985; Gates, 1998; G. Myers, 1989; M. Myers, 1986; Shteir, 1996), only Ann Shteir has proposed an explanation for its demise. In her study of women and botany, Shteir argues that dialogic texts to teach botany, often associated with women, became vulnerable to 'textual misogyny' in the later nineteenth century. This suited a professionalising agenda which aimed to distinguish between botany as a polite accomplishment embodied rhetorically 'feminine', and serious scientific botany for males (Shteir, 1996, pp. 163, 156). However, as Shteir discusses only those dialogic texts referring to botany, while the familiar format was used for a wider variety of subjects of instruction, her

argument has limited explanatory power. Gender undoubtedly played a role, since women educators, who were the main writers of the familiar format, were under attack since the late eighteenth century (Clarke, 1997), but broader cultural changes also need to be taken into account.

V. The demise of the familiar format

Both the popularity and the demise of the familiar format can be explained by its relation to the role of spoken conversation in the practice of politeness and sociability in the long eighteenth century. Conversation was not just a pedagogy, it was an integral aspect of politeness, the practice that gave it meaning and for which it was the supreme expression. The familiar format was modelled on conversations that took place in the context of eighteenth-century polite sociability, but as this dominant cultural form waned in the early nineteenth century (Cohen, 2005a), conversation, no longer framed by politeness, could be abstracted from the practice of social skills and sociability and become just a method. As a method, 'conversation' could be—and was—appropriated for a wide variety of texts, ranging from dialogic with named characters, to third-person narratives with only reported speech, sometimes in the same text. Elizabeth Helme's *History of Scotland related in familiar conversations by a father to his children*, is an example of the latter. As read by the father, Mr Wilmot, the text is a narrative, even though it deploys 'interruptions' because, Helme argues in her introduction, they 'render[d] the subjects lighter, and the domestic conversations more interesting to the children' (Helme, 1804, p. vii). However, her interruptions are 'reported': 'Indeed papa', interrupted John ' it was more than he merited after what he had said' (Helme, 1804, p. 127) whereas the interruptions used in dialogic texts like Marcet's *Conversations on Chemistry*, to make conversations sound 'authentic', actually break the visual text:

> *Mrs B*: Oxygen gas is a little heavier than atmospherical air, therefore it will not mix with it very rapidly and, if I do not leave the opening uncovered, we shall not lose any—
> *Caroline*: Oh, what a brilliant and beautiful flame! (Marcet, 1806, vol. I, Conversation V, p. 139)

This difference could matter when the texts were read aloud, as they usually were (Fyfe, 1999, 2000b; Grenby, 2009, 2011).

The meaning of conversation as a method could also be stretched, as in Mrs Alfred Higginson's *The English Schoolgirl* (1859). This text consists of narrative 'lectures' on a variety of subjects, meant to form the basis for 'familiar and conversational weekly lessons' (Higginson, 1859, p. vii). Conversations are the justification for the book's existence and integral to its methodology, but they are putative, and take place *outside*, not *inside* the text. Such examples show how loosely the term 'conversation' could be used by the mid-nineteenth century, although they beg explanation as to why authors still claimed that 'conversation' was central to their methodology. One hypothesis is that advertising conversation as the instructional

method had commercial appeal because it was 'one means of forming and elevating individual character' (Higginson, 1859, p. vii) and promised instructional success.

It was not just the meaning of conversation, however, that changed by the mid-nineteenth century, its role in social life was also changing. Earlier, knowing how to converse was essential and parents knew it was important for their children to acquire the expressive and intellectual skills associated with it for their future success. At the end of the eighteenth century, conversation was also developing another function, one which linked domestic familial instruction with what Priscilla Wakefield claimed was the 'new affection' in parents' relations to their children (Wakefield, 1794, vol. 1, pp. 119–120). Helme's *History of Scotland* illustrates the force of these idealised filial relations. Asked by his father what he wants as amusements for his birthday, John replies 'I had rather a thousand times be seated around our own fireside listening to either papa or [his mother], relating some history, as you did that of England' (Helme, 1804, p. 3).

As nothing more than a method, conversation could also be criticised, and was. In the late eighteenth century, Clergyman Joseph Robertson was already scorning the 'gossiping dialogue' and the 'trifling drama' (Robertson, 1798, p. 15) of the familiar format. Nearly 30 years later J. S. Forsyth, author of an introduction to Linnaeus, mocked dialogic texts as a 'baby system of education' fit to be taught only by 'some garrulous old woman or pedantic spinster' (Forsyth, 1827, pp. 15, 17). While these two examples illustrate Shteir's 'textual misogyny' (Shteir, 1996, p. 163), Robertson also targeted the 'slogan' (Grenby, 2003) of eighteenth-century pedagogy, that instruction be amusing and entertaining. He claimed that the 'business of education is a serious pursuit', not an amusement and that diverting children from the paths of science gave them a 'disrelish' for anything which is not amusing (Robertson, 1798, p. 11). His critique is evidence of an emerging trend which decried the entertaining aspect of 'serious' education (Arizpe & Styles, 2004). It would eventually result in the segregation of amusing and instructive texts. From the end of the nineteenth century 'new children's books were written to amuse children, while instruction was left to the schoolroom' (Fyfe, 1999, p. 28). This subverted the character of the dialogic format, its foundation in the conversational pedagogy of the eighteenth century. However it was not schooling as such which produced this change. In the late eighteenth century, in *Evenings at Home*, a paradigmatic instructional text, the readings and conversations take place after the school day, as do those in the later *Austin Hall,* and in *Breakfast Table Science* (Aikin & Barbauld, 1846 [1792–1796]; Anon., 1831; Wright, 1840). Even then, conversation in its late eighteenth-century social and pedagogical meanings was still central to instruction, as the author of *Austin Hall* declares in the 'preface to parents': 'It is by conversation, by daily intercourse, that character is chiefly formed. The Royal road to knowledge is that of oral communication … Familiar intercourse with our children is the best mode of education' (Anon., 1831, p. iii). As this text makes clear, familiar conversation was highly valued, even when it was supplementary to schooling.

And yet, one aspect of familiar conversation might have made it vulnerable to the charge of frivolity and lack of seriousness, and vulnerable to the claims to order and system being made by contemporary schools: its informal and digressive nature. The introduction of *Evenings at Home* specifies that its authors 'have presented its contents in the promiscuous order in which they came to hand, which they think will prove more agreeable than a methodical arrangement' (Aikin & Barbauld, 1846 [1792–1796], p. 8), although this was planned by the authors (Fyfe, 1999). The 'promiscuous' topics of the delightful *Breakfast Table Science* include amusing questions such as 'Why our dog's teeth are white', 'Why a rotten apple is bitter', 'if a fly had a sore toe, what would happen', all of which convey serious scientific information but lack any discernible order in their presentation. Such promiscuity was highly prized in the sociable conversation of the late eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the value of education was being gauged on a scale of 'method' and 'thoroughness' (Cohen, 2004).

Like its rise in popularity, the demise of the familiar format can be related to the shift in the meaning and function of conversation in the practice of politeness and sociability, and as a corollary, to the shifting value attributed to conversation in children's domestic education. There must be other reasons too, connected to the cataclysmic social and political changes that took place during the period of the format's popularity, but these are beyond the scope of this article. One crucial change needs further exploration: as arguments for the superiority of schooling over home education increased in power, as revealed by the disapproval of domestic education of headmistresses such as Frances Mary Buss and Dorothea Beale in their testimonies to the Schools Inquiry Commission (Report from the Commissioners, 1867–1868), the popularity of the familiar format declined. The historical trajectory of the familiar format can contribute to illuminating how this shift, which involved profound changes in pedagogical theory—not always for the better (Cannon, 1984)—over the course of a century of educational practices, took place.

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