

This post consists of two parts: A documentation of the process, and my reflection on the process.

Process

1. Identify word: I wanted to find a word that would be easy to carve, so I looked up a scrabble word finder and put in letters consisting of straight lines only. I decided on the word "THINK".

2. Create stencil: I opened up Illustrator, typed in my word, chose my favourite sans serif font (again, for easier carving!), mirrored the word, and printed it out. I also did two sizes so I would have options considering the size of the potatoes.

3. Prepare 'letterpress': I cut out my letter stencils, and also cut the side of the potatoes that would be carved into to the same size.

4. Carve letters: I carved the letters into the potatoes.

5. Put letters together: I originally planned to stick the skewers through the potatoes to hold them together, but it turned out to be very challenging. I then thought to glue the potatoes themselves together, but it did not hold whatsoever. I ended up cutting the backs of the stamps to the same size and gluing the backs to the skewers.

6. Print: Once the glue dried, I prepared the ink, and used the ends of the skewers as 'handles' in stamping the word onto the sheet of paper.

Reflection

I was particularly excited about this task! My undergrad was in visual art and I recently bought supplies to try to pick back up on block printing, so this task served perfectly as practice.

In reflecting on my process, a few themes jump out at me:

Existing knowledge (and its influence)

It's been years since I've done block printing and I would've said I don't recall how to do it at all, but upon reflecting on my process, I may have retained more than I realized. This reminds me of Lamb's (2021) point about the influence of existing knowledge in that since we're "not a scroll-based culture, ... we imagine the regular use of scroll as being somewhat alien and clumsy" (Lamb & McCormick, 2021) – except in my case it's the reverse, in that I hadn't considered how much my previous experience influenced my approach, such as:

- considering the shapes of the letters and the level of difficulty in carving them;
- choosing to use a sans serif font for ease in carving the letters – I had no intentions of "imitat[ing] handwriting" like Gutenberg (Peña, 2022); and
- creating a mirrored stencil so that the stamp would print the right way.

I didn't consciously think of these considerations before I started, which is ironic given the word I chose. I just jumped right into it, and it took me about 15 minutes from choosing the word (step #1 above) to having carved the stamps (step #4).

New knowledge (through trial and error)

The one challenge I ran into was putting the letters together (step #5). I even rewatched Cooke's (2012) short film on letterpress for inspiration on how to hold the stamps together, but that didn't help. This trial and error added 20 minutes to my process, which is longer than the time I took for all the previous steps!

If I were to create a new stamp, now that I've figured out how to put the letters together, I imagine this part would take less than five minutes.

Connecting knowledge (and the evolution of technology)

I also realize now that, without thinking, I used a printer to aid my process... to print a word. In other words, I used the technology available to me now, which is made possible through what Bolter (2001) referred to as the "remediation" of the mechanization of writing (Bolter, 2001, as cited in Peña, 2022), in trying to experience the effort required to execute the origins of the technology of print. To close the loop on this silliness, I also scanned in my sheet to make it available to anyone who would like to print out a copy using their printers.

The technology available to us now allows us to print a whole page at home in a matter of seconds, whereas it would take me 30 minutes to carve and print a five-letter word. In addition, the printer prints significantly more consistently than I could with my stamps, as can be seen on my sheet with the variation of ink for each of the prints. This makes me especially appreciate the increasing speed and quality of print afforded by its remediation over the past 500 years.

This was a fun activity for a rainy Sunday afternoon with my two kids. We started by discussing which letters might be the easiest letters to carve in a potato. My 8 year old pointed out that straight letters might be easier than curved. Great point! With this in mind, we decided to start with the letters in my name: EMILY. Five letters, all different and all straight – perfect!

We started by writing the letters in marker on the potato, followed the directions for carving and 20 minutes later we had 5 stamps ready to go!

We added the paint and carefully started stamping. We noticed as we stamped that the letters are actually backwards and we didn't take this into account when we created the stamps. However, because of the letters that I chose it actually did not matter; with some careful maneuvering, we switched the E and the L so that they were legible on the paper. This would have been frustrating if we had chosen a letter such as G and would have had to start over. We just got lucky!

We attempted to make the copies as similar as possible and the whole process took about 40 minutes. As you can see, the paint is not perfectly even on all the letters and the letter placements are not identical or evenly spaced.

This activity allowed me to appreciate the time, effort and patience of those workers who used and continue to use printing presses. I understand why vice locks are used to keep the letters in place, as it was a challenge for me to get the right pressure and prevent the stamps from slipping. I can appreciate the time and effort that goes into creating more elaborate letter stamps than the basic letters that I chose. Finally, I understand that as the design becomes more complicated, the time and patience required increases and this needs to be reflected in the cost of the product created.

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