The theme of learning in high medieval monasteries can be approached by analysing such contexts as “communities of practice” on the basis of preserved monastic letters and letter-collections. The letters’ propagandistic function makes it extremely interesting to analyse the ways in which they represent learning in order to serve different purposes: to attract people to a monastery, to offer advice to members of monastic communities, and even to intervene in the debate that opposed monastic to secular and scholastic modes of study. Moreover, epistolary sources offer insights into the complex dynamics of social interactions within the monastery, in particular the plurality of learning agents and the reciprocal nature of learning exchanges. Therefore, this approach can offer a valuable contribution to the study of learning as a shared and dialectical process, which takes place through social interaction within a heterogeneous community. In addition, it helps to understand the way in which learning is linked to the shaping of identities, both individual and communal, because it affects and transforms the reciprocal social roles of the members of a monastic community.

Introduction

“Learn to pray to God, learn to lift up your heart together with your hands; learn to raise begging eyes to heaven” writes Bernard of Clairvaux in a letter to a novice.1 The kind of learning to which it is here referred does not take

place in a class, but rather through practice and reciprocal help. Among the various monastic sources which, each in its own way, attest this notion of learning, this article focuses on eleventh- and twelfth-century letters and letter-collections, which, as I will illustrate, can offer insights into the dynamics of the learning process within monastic contexts and the way in which it was perceived and conceptualised.

The choice of the chronological timeframe is due to the fact that during this period new religious orders were founded and spread, creating an increasing competition: this often led the monks to reflect on their traditions, practices, and beliefs, and to compare them with others. The growth of secular schools also pushed many monastic authors to intervene in the debate over the distinctive approaches and aims of secular and monastic models of learning.

Letters were an important weapon in these battles, and the way in which they represented monastic learning served different purposes, as the following paragraphs will illustrate. As may be expected, there is a tendency towards polarisation in the representation of learning experiences: we tend to find either enthusiastic praise and therefore very positive representations, or bitter criticism and therefore very negative ones. This must always be kept in mind while trying to grasp what must have been the reality of learning practices, which can only be reconstructed through the compared analysis of a large number of attestations.

Epistolary sources have of course long been acknowledged as a particularly suitable source for the study of relationships between learned men and women, and in particular of master–disciple relationships. What is particularly interesting for the purposes of the present analysis is that they offer the possibility to study relationships from a number of different perspectives instead of only from one point of view, thanks to the preservation of replies and, in general, to the fact that various letter-writers also appear as addressees in other authors’ letter-collections. This is crucial to study the reciprocal nature of learning exchanges and the way in which each correspondent was embedded in his or her own network of relationships, outside and inside the monastery.

Studies focusing on the notions of “community” and of “network” have greatly contributed to our understanding of the social framework for monastic learning.

2. I will use the word “learning” instead of “education” or “formation” because I believe that the former is more effective in describing a process that was not limited to newcomers who had to be “moulded” into a monk, but rather concerned all the members of the monastic community.

3. In particular, I cite examples from the letter-collections of Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter the Venerable, Peter of Celle, Peter Damian, Anselm of Bec, Froumund of Tegernsee, Wibald of Stavelot, Adam of Perseigne, Suger of Saint-Denis, Lanfranc of Bec, and Guibert of Gembloux, as well as some individual letters to be found in collections such as the Patrologia Latina and the Monomenta Germaniae Historicae. I have also used the letters of Ivo of Chartres insofar as they refer to monastic learning, which Ivo himself experienced in the abbey of Bec.


In particular, a recent collective work has put forth the useful concept of “communities of learning,” but while many different types of such communities have been studied, much remains to be done in order to reconstruct how learning processes worked in practice within monastic communities.

The notion of “community of practice,” as introduced by the social anthropologist Jean Lave and the artificial intelligence expert Etienne Wenger in a 1991 monograph, is very useful for this purpose. The authors argue that learning is a social process in which the newcomers move gradually from peripheral to full (and from elementary to increasingly complex) participation in the socio-cultural life of the community. Thus, the shared processing of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes shapes the social and intellectual identity of all the actors involved and of the community itself. Community of practice theory describes in a surprisingly accurate way the notion of monastic learning attested by the sources: a continuous and potentially endless process of personal improvement which took place through practice and through social exchanges between the different members of a heterogeneous community.

Therefore, this theory offers itself as a valuable tool to contribute to the study tradition ushered in by Jean Leclercq, which considers the whole monastic life as functioning, in many ways, as a school, through all its spiritual, intellectual, social, and manual activities. This idea of an “educational way of life,” which has been applied to other learning contexts as well, has recently produced a flourish of studies consecrated to oral, visual, and other non-written ways of learning. Examples include studies on monastic orality, liturgical and musical monastic training, and on the role of the images and of body language in monastic learning.

7. J. Lave and E. Wenger, Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The concept has been further developed in E. Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). There have been other subsequent uses of the notion of community of practice, but they are less relevant to the theme of learning.
9. An important contribution in this respect has been that of Marjorie Chibnall, see M. Chibnall, The World of Orderic Vitalis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
10. S. N. Vaughn and J. Rubenstein, eds., Teaching and Learning in Northern Europe, 1,000–1,200 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).
One of the advantages of community of practice theory is that it offers a very flexible definition of community, which does not necessarily imply homogeneity, geographical, institutional, and social stability, or even consensus. The community is understood as the product of its members’ shared understanding of it, and of their effort to maintain and reproduce it by gradually turning newcomers into full members, who in turn will interact as such with other newcomers. In this sense the learning process emerges as a crucial means to shape the identity of both the individual and the community itself.

Although the concept of community of practice has enjoyed remarkable success in analysing present-day societies, its applications to the study of the past have been few. To my knowledge, the first scholar to apply this concept to the study of medieval monastic communities has been Steven Vanderputten, who used it to study some modes of training within the monastery, which were based on the trainees’ increasing participation in the activities connected with a role they were considered eligible for. In particular, he focused on “leadership training,” analysing the way in which some abbots’ biographies used accounts of learning experiences, and in particular the reference to social interactions and personal bonds between the abbot and his future successor, to vouch for the reliability of the transmission of leadership expertise from one generation to the next.

Although leadership training can certainly be considered a part of learning, I will focus on the nature of the wider process that transformed newcomers into members of a monastic community, and monks into more efficient members of it. Although this very wide definition of learning may seem unworkable, it is attested by the sources themselves, and the letters offer useful insights into the different ways in which it could be used, as the next paragraphs will show.

The Contents of Learning: An Overview

The first feature that makes letters a useful source to investigate monastic learning is their propagandistic function, which makes it interesting to analyse the ways in which they refer to learning.

A survey of the occurrences of the vocabulary of learning and teaching in high medieval monastic letters clearly shows that these texts do not provide information only about what may be called “bookish learning” (for example, the transmission of the trivium, quadrivium, sacra pagina and patristic literature), for the study of which they are so often used. Rather, they emerge as a very rich source for the study of other kinds of learning which took place within monasteries: the acquisition of practical skills, the struggle to improve 14. I am grateful to Tjamke Snijders for sharing with me her work (which will hopefully soon be published) on the uses of the concept of community in medieval studies and on the advantages of the application of community of practice theory.
oneself morally and physically, the adaptation to the community’s behavioural patterns, and the shared development of ideas and beliefs.

References to this kind of learning in the letters can be divided into two main groups: on the one hand we have all the allusions to the learning of a Christian way of life; on the other hand, the contents of learning which the authors refer to can be practical things that a monk or nun may need to learn in order to be a better and more efficient member of the community.

References to the learning of a Christian way of life are usually heavily metaphorical and rather vague in content: the authors did not feel the need to go into details over what appeared to them to be the ultimate goal that everyone should seek. In fact, as will be further discussed below, they often focused much more on the methods of learning and on its divine authority than on its contents. The terms vary widely: one can learn “to fight the Lord’s battles” (“doceantur proeliari proelia Domini”), in Bernard of Clairvaux’s words,17 or how people “ought to live happily in eternity” in Peter of Celle’s.18 God can also be presented as the direct object of learning: “discere Iesum\Christum\Deum.”

The way of living in a monastery could be the object of learning,19 especially for people who came from the secular world,20 and the monastic experience itself was sometimes described as education, with the monastery as the school (“blessed school,” “school of Christ,” “school of virtues”), the abbot as the teacher and the monks as the disciples, as in the Regula Benedicti.21 Basil, prior of La Grande Chartreuse, recalled in a letter to Peter the Venerable of Cluny how, although poor and without means, he had not been disdained in that monastery but rather loved, nourished, and educated with pious zeal to the suave responsibility of devotion (“ad onus suave religionis, piis studiis instruebatis”).22

The purpose of this education is mentioned, but what it included exactly is left unspoken, because the focus is on the context and the qualities of the learning experience rather than on the contents of learning, which were probably


19. See Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 387 to Oger (Gastaldelli ed., 424). Oger was going back to live in a coenobitic environment, and wanted to be taught (doceri) by Bernard how he should live in that place (“ubi qualiter post haec vivere debeas a me doceri flagitas, egregio utique doctore et magistro incomparabilis”).


considered self-evident, both for the addressee of the letter and for the wider (but certainly religious) audience.

The second type of references that can be found in monastic epistolary sources of this period concerns the learning of specific things, such as how to pray (“disc市场份额e Deum”),23 how to despise earthly things and love heavenly ones (“terrenatio despicere et amare coelestia”),24 how to avoid temptations,25 to moderate one’s behaviour (“ut … vitae tuae moderamen addiscas”),26 and even how to carry out menial tasks such as cooking (“coquinae disciplinam addiscere cogebatur”).27 These attestations are relatively more widespread in letters addressed to monks or referring to them, whereas the first type of references is typical of vocational letters (written to invite someone to convert to monastic life), in which the authors tend to talk in metaphorical or very general terms.

The way in which monastic letter-writers described learning as an inherent element of monastic life resonates with community of practice theory, since Lave and Wenger argued against the reification of learning as “one kind of activity,” and instead presented “a theory of social practice in which learning is viewed as an aspect of all activities.”28 Thus, applying these ideas to the study of medieval monasticism can be useful because it makes clear that information about learning can be found in all the sources that attest social contacts (as monastic letters clearly do, even when they do not deal with famous teachers). In addition, it helps understanding the way in which learning is inextricably linked to the shaping of identities, since it affects and transforms the reciprocal social roles of the members of a monastic community.

Characterising Monastic Learning in Vocational Letters

Vocational letters contain representations of monastic learning that are extremely relevant to the purpose of this analysis: one particularly interesting aspect is their connection with the debate over the distinctive approaches and aims of the modes of study that were typical of the monastic world, as opposed to those typical of the world of secular schools.

An example is offered by a letter addressed by the Benedictine abbot Peter of Celle to his friend, the scholar John of Salisbury, in 1,164. In it, Peter compared the “blessed school” of the cloister to the world of the Parisian schools:

O blessed school, where Christ instructs our hearts with the word of his virtue, where without study or reading we apprehend how we ought to live happily in eternity. There, no book is bought, no master of scribes is employed; there is no circumvention of disputation, no entanglement of sophistries, there is a clear conclusion of all

24. Guibert of Gembloux, Épître 10 to a fellow monk (Migne ed. PL 211.1297d).
25. “I have not learnt to ward off those melodies sweet to the ears” (“Suaves illas aurium modificaciones necdum propulsare didicerim”), Peter of Celle, Épître 37 to prior Thomas of Molesme (Haseldine ed., 142).
27. Peter the Venerable, Épître 53 to his brothers (Constable ed., 165).
questions, a complete understanding of universal reasons and proofs. There, life confers more than reading, simplicity is more proficient than sophistry. … If only the sons of men would give their attention to these better studies as they do with idle prattle and to vain and base frivolities. From this they will reap certainly more bountiful fruits, certainly more excellent favours, certainly greater honours, and without doubt they would receive the end of all perfection, that is Christ, whom they will not find in all these things.29

Peter was clearly worried that Paris could enthral his friend thanks to its intellectual splendour, and therefore wished to caution John against its “nets of vices” and its “snare of evils,” while setting forth a more salubrious alternative: the monastery, where he wished that his friend would join him. In order to give it credibility as an alternative to, and a competitor for, the environment of Parisian schools, Peter described the cloister as a school (he could, of course, draw on a rich tradition, since the Regula Benedicti already defined the monastery as a “dominici schola servitii”).30 The school of the cloister is here represented as an easier and more direct path to knowledge and wisdom, which benefits the individual much more than all that can be learned in secular schools. Monastic learning is presented as the most true and coherent kind of learning, due to its inclusivity of all aspect of life. This century-old motif finds here new life in the heat of the polemics against the rapidly growing world of secular schools.

Although the description dwells more on the pars destruens, listing negative things that are typical of secular schools, there is at least one thing that is presented as typical of monastic learning, that is, the fact that in a monastery one learns simply “by living”: that is, through practice and experience.

Bernard of Clairvaux adopted a slightly different approach in a vocational letter addressed to a student, Thomas of Saint-Omer. In it, he argued that true knowledge could never be learned from human masters, and that erudition leads people to err:

I ask you, what sort of tribute to virtue is this, what sort of advance in knowledge, what sort of result is this of your erudition, to fear when there is no cause for fear and yet to have no fear of the Lord? How much better for you to learn Jesus, Jesus crucified. This, of course, is not an easy knowledge to acquire, save for one who is crucified to the world. You deceive yourself, my son, if you think that you can learn from the masters of this world what is a gift of God and can be obtained only by those who follow Christ and scorn the world. This is a knowledge imparted not by books

29. Peter of Celle, Epistle 170 to John of Salisbury (Haseldine ed., 656–57): “O beata schola, ubi Christus docet corda nostra verbo virtutis suae, ubi sine studio et lectione apprehendimus quomodo debeamus aeternaliter beate vivere. Non emitur ubi liber, non redimitur magister scriptorum; nulla circumventio disputationum, nulla sophismatum intricatio; plana omnium questionum determinatio, plena universarum rationum et argumentationum apprehensio. Ibi plus vita confert quam lectio, plus prodest simplicitas quam cavillatio. … Utinam his melioribus studiis sic intenderent filii hominum quomodo vaniloquis, quomodo scurrilitatis vanis et pessimis. Certe fructus exinde utiores, certe favores excellentiores, certe honores maiores meterent, et finem omnis consummationis, id est Christum, quem in his inventuri non sunt, sine dubio perciperent.”


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but by grace: not by the letter but by the Spirit; not by mere book learning but by the practice of the commandments of God (exercitatio in mandatis Domini). 31

Here again, monastic learning is characterised as something linked to practice, in order to put it in opposition with book learning. At the same time, however, the abbot of Clairvaux stressed the fact that knowledge was a gift of God — thus setting his reflection on monastic learning in the broader context of his theological views. 32 One may observe that there seems to be a contradiction in Bernard’s claim that this learning is at the same time a gift of God, obtained through grace, and the result of practice. However, this may simply be due to that fact that there was no widespread idea — as there is today — of the existence of (at least) two kinds of learning, “learning from others” or didactic learning (for example, from a teacher in school) and “learning by doing” or experiential learning (for example, learning to ride a bicycle). 33 While we, together with Lave and Wenger, ascribe processes of learning without a master to the second category, Bernard and the other abbots identify God as the invisible teacher. This allowed them not only to account for the lack of apparent masters, but also to belittle the merit of the individual in learning, therefore reducing the risk of pride.

Finally, another example of representation of monastic learning is offered by the way in which Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, described the transition from the world of the school to the cloister in some of his letters. In a letter to an unknown master of the schools, Peter asked him why he attended them, why he struggled to learn and to teach. In the abbot’s view, what his addressee was trying to obtain with much labour and many words could be attained with a simple discourse and little effort. He reminded his correspondent: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:18), and claimed that to attain true wisdom it was essential to enter monastic life: only then could his addressee become a true philosopher. 34 In monastic life — explained


33. See, for example, A. D. Foster and M. R. Rosenzweig, “Learning by doing and learning from others: human capital and technical change in agriculture,” Journal of Political Economy 103, no. 6 (1995), 1176–1209.

34. Peter the Venerable, Epistle 9 to a certain Peter “scholasticus” (Constable ed., 15–16): “Quidigitur, charissime, scholas oberras? Quid et doceris et docere conaris? Quid per millia verborum, quid per multos labores inquiris quod simplici sermone, quod parvo labore, si volueris, assequi poteris? Quid inani studio cum comoedis recitas, cum tragoedis deploras, cum metricis ludis, cum poetis fallis, cum philosophis falleris? Quid iam non philosophiae, sed quod pace tua dictum sit, tantam studiabatur operam impendis? Stultitiae, inquam. Nam et hoc verti philosophi dictum est: ‘Nonne stultam fecit Deus sapientiam mundi’? Curre ergo, fili mi, ad propositam tibi a coelesti magistro, totus philosophiae unicum fructum, regni coelorum beatitudinem, quae adipiscis non poteris, nisi per veram spiritus paupertatem.”

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Peter — a celestial teacher offered the beatitude of the kingdom of heaven, which was the only fruit of the real philosophy.

The same ideas can be found in the abbot’s description of Héloïse’s conversion to monastic life, where he explained that she turned to a better study, therefore becoming a complete and true philosopher (“tota iam et vere philosophica mulier”), and in his characterisation of Peter Abelard as true philosopher of Christ when he led a pious life in Cluny. This use of the notion of “true philosopher” can be understood in the context of Peter’s attempts to attract learned men (and women) to the Cluniac order: he was suggesting that conversion was the only way to attain true knowledge, and therefore represented a necessary step in the pursuit of learning.

The Importance of the Context

Community of practice theory is based on the idea that learning is always “situated,” that is, that it is never an abstract corpus of notions which can be decontextualised from their social and physical environment. In developing this notion, a starting point was offered by the concepts of “learning by doing” or through practice, and “learning in situ,” although the notion of situated learning is more encompassing in intent. The expression “learning in situ” is used to describe a type of learning activity which takes place in the same environment where it will be used: this is certainly true for the learning process that gradually took place through participation in the activities of the monastery, on which I focus, and ideally also for the monastic school, which was in principle reserved for future monks, although exceptions were possible.

I will now analyse a few examples taken from eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic letters, which show both that the authors attributed to monastic learning a “situated” character, and that they represented it in various ways to serve different purposes.

Writing to a certain Robert, the bishop of Chartres Ivo rhetorically wondered which was the right way of life (aptus vitae modus) for his correspondent, and which place (locus) he should choose to walk in God’s path (“quis sit aptus vitae modus vel quis locus ‘ad ambulandum in via Dei’ eligendus sit”). Even if he did not mention it explicitly, he was alluding to monastic life, to which his addressee eventually converted. The use of the conjunction vel suggests that to choose a way of life or a place to practise it are on the same level, and are complementary: had they been opposed, the author would have used aut. In

35. Peter the Venerable, Epistle 115 to Héloïse (Constable ed., 304): “In melius disciplinarum studia commutasti, et pro logica aevangelium, pro phisica apostolum, pro Platone Christum, pro academia claustrum, tota iam et vere philosophica mulier elegisti.” The reference to Abelard can be found in the same letter (306).
36. Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning, 31.
38. Ivo of Chartres, Epistle 37 to a certain Robert (ed. J. Leclercq, 154), with a reference to Ps. 127:1 (“beati omnes qui timent Dominum qui ambulant in viis eius”).

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fact, in the case of monastic life, to choose a way of life also meant to choose
the place to practise it, and vice versa.

While in this letter Ivo did not have any particular interest in recommending
a specific order rather than another, vocational letters written by abbots are
much more explicit in identifying one specific monastic observance (or even
a specific monastery) as the best — or even the only right — choice. Peter
the Venerable declared in a letter: “the place and the path to beatitude is found
[here]” (“inventus est locus et via beatitudinis”), meaning his monastery of
Cluny. In a world of competing observances, choosing a particular place to lead
one’s monastic life also meant adopting a certain approach to the monastic
ideal and lifestyle, and this strengthened the interdependency between what
a monastic newcomer learned and the environment where he learned it. In fact,
a monk leaving his monastery could be compared to a child who is weaned
too early, implying that a change of environment could heavily affect the
process of education.39

The memory of the different activities of monastic life could even become
inseparable from the memory of the physical environments where they took
place, as can be seen in the aforementioned letter of Basil, prior of La Grande
Chartreuse, as well as in a letter written by Peter of Celle. The first author
wondered whether it could be possible to take away the discipline of the choir,
the cloister, the dormitory, the refectory of Cluny, and of all the other laborato-
ries from a man whose soul was subject to God.40 Peter’s letter, written to his
community while he was away from his monastery at Montier-la-Celle, stated
that his soul could not be separated from them and that he spiritually wandered,
“now the oratory, now the cloister, now the chapter house, now the refectory,
now the dormitory, now other parts of the monastery.” In both cases physical
environments stand for the activities that took place in them: Peter stated that
he would be troubled by any irregularity, while he would cheerfully and
joyfully join in thanksgiving at good living (bonam conversationem).41

This is also confirmed by the way in which the authors write about former
monks who decided to come back to their old monastery. Bernard of Clairvaux
praised one of his correspondents, the canon Oger, who had decided to come
back to the coenobitic environment where he had been educated:

I praise you also that you did not seek out a new master or a new place (non novum
vel magistrum vel locum requisitii), but returned to the familiar cloister from which

39. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 1 to Robert of Châtillon, 10 (Gastaldelli ed., 19): “Nutrivi
deinde lacte, quod solum adhuc parvulus capere poteras, daturas et panem, si exspectares ut
grandesceres. Sed heu quam praepropere et intempestive ablactatus es!.”
40. Basil prior of La Grande Chartreuse, Epistle 187 to Peter the Venerable (Peter the Venerable,
Constable ed., 436): “Potest avelli a homine cuius anima deo subiecta Est, chori, claustri,
dormitori, refectorii Cluniacensis, ceterarumque nobilium officinarum omni homini emulanda
disciplina?”
41. Peter of Celle, Epistle 41 to the prior and community of Montier-la-Celle (Haseldine ed., 158):
“non die, non nocte, recedit a vobis anima mea, sed modo oratorium, modo claustrum, modo capit-
ulum, modo refectorium, modo dormitorium,modo cetera officia circuibo, et ad inordinationem
quidem molestabor, ad bonam vero conversationem hylaris et gaudens congratulabor.”

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you had set out (claustrum de quo exerias) and to the father whom you had left. It would not have been fitting that a strange house should have profited by the loss of your mother house in which you were brought up (domus quae te nutrierat), but which had sent you out at the behest of fraternal charity.42 Of course, the context of learning was not only physical, but also social. Although in this case only the abbot or “teacher” was also mentioned (“ad priorem locum et ad tuum abbatem reversus est”), in many cases the context of the monastery is described as including also the locus, the Rule (or the order: but it is clear that what is in question is the institutional environment) and the brothers.43

The idea that learning was inseparable from a specific physical and especially social environment is also present in many letters of recommendation written for someone who needed to receive an education: learning always meant going to live in a certain place, be it a certain community or, more frequently, in the entourage of a specific person. For example, the monk Avesgot told Anselm of Bec that he wished for his nephew to stay with him so that he could grow wise from his instruction (“desidero eum manere tecum, tuo ut grammate erudiatur”).44

The Learning Agents

One key aspect of community of practice theory is that the teacher–learner dyad is replaced by a “richly diverse field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation,” where one can be a relative newcomer or old-timer on the basis of the person with whom he is interacting and the specific contents of learning that are in question.45 This can serve as a useful reminder that, although the sources grant abundant attention to master–disciple relationships (usually in order to justify a transfer of authority or to grant legitimacy), they also attest that the learning process involved a plurality of learning agents, among whom the learning exchanges worked both ways.

In particular, the letters are rich with information concerning different levels of moral and spiritual maturity among the monks, which led to different forms of interaction. For example, in the already mentioned letter to Oger, Bernard of Clairvaux advised him to dwell with simplicity among his brothers (conversare simpliciter inter fratres), devoted to God, submitted to his master (magistro), obedient to his superiors (senioribus), and obliging towards the younger (iunioribus).46

42. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 87 to Oger, 8 (Gastaldelli ed., 430): “Laudo etiam, quod non novum vel magistrum, vel locum requisisti, sed ad claustrum de quo exieras, et ad patrem sub quo profecerias, familiariter redisti. Rectius quippe fuit ut domus quae te nutrierat, sed pro fraterna charitate dimiserat, exoccupatum recipert, quam de eius desolatione aliena gauderet” (English translation in James, Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, 133).
43. See Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 1 to Robert of Châtillon, 10: “cur Ordinem tuum, cur fratres, cur locum, cur me … deserueris?,” and 3: “contra voluntatem fratrum, magister imperium, regularem decretum” (Gastaldelli ed., 19 and 10).
45. Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning, 56.
46. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 87 to Oger (Gastaldelli ed., 432).
Of course, the level of maturity of a monk was relative. In addition, maturity did not necessarily have a direct connection to rank, and even abbots could learn from their monks: in a letter to the Abbot Rainald, Bernard advised him on how to act in case someone among his monks was so good that he gave to his abbot more than he received from him. In such a case, Rainald needed to acknowledge the fact that he should not act as a father, but rather as a peer (parem) or a companion (comitem).47

Peter the Venerable went even further in suggesting that even the most experienced people in the monastery could learn from their subordinates. In a letter to Héloïse, the famous abbess of the Paraclete, he expressed his wish that she lived in a Cluniac monastery: her presence — he wrote — would have benefited the nuns, and she too would have derived no little benefit from them (“retulisses et ipsa ab ipsis non modicum quaestum”).48 In another letter, he told his nieces, who were nuns in a Cluniac monastery, to imitate their “mothers” (that is, their superiors) but also their sisters, that is, their peers.49

One may wonder whether perhaps the abbot of Cluny considered a non-vertical kind of learning as particularly befitting female communities, and whether this idea may have been shared by other authors, male or female, but this would require an ad hoc analysis which surpasses the scope of the present article.

In general, correspondence between masters and disciples clearly attest that the reciprocity of learning exchanges was a recurrent ideal. Masters often encouraged their student to compose letters, poems, and literary works, and sometimes referred to the fact that they received personal benefit from the results of their pupils’ efforts.50 In other cases, the letters attest that the roles of master and disciple could be significantly less fixed than they are often assumed to be. The terms magister, discipulus, and alumnus could be used in a remarkably loose way, sometimes without taking into account the age and rank of the people involved or even their actual educational experiences. This tendency is well-visible in the letter-collection of Peter of Celle, who in the salutation of a letter styled himself as a disciple of his friend master John

47. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 73 to Rainald of Foigny (Gastaldelli ed., 332).
49. Peter the Venerable, Épître 185 to his nieces (Constable ed., 434): “Imitamini sorores vestras et matres, cum quibus deo servitis.”
50. See, for example, the poem with which Froumund of Tegernsee tried to convince his pupil Ellinger to write poetry: Poem 27 from Froumund to Ellinger, in Die Tegernseer Briefsammlung (Froumund), ed. K. Strecker (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1925), 72 and the letter with which the abbot Wibald of Stavelot asked the monk Henry to compose, declaring: “Sed in opere, quod tibi scribendum et etiam dictandum iniunximus, volumus te intentam dare operam, ut de ingenio tuo perhennem fructum capiamus sicut in opere manuum non mediocriter gaudemus,” Epistle 293 to the monk Henry, in MGH Die Briefen der deutschen Kaiserzeit 9. Das Briefbuch Abt Wibalds von Stablo und Corvey, ed. M. Hartmann (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2012), vol. 3, 619.
of Salisbury ("karissimo amico suo et magistro Iohanni de Saresberia Petrus suus amicus et discipulus"), while stating in another letter that John had been a pupil of his.51 He also presented himself as a disciple of Bernard of Clairvaux, something he never formally was.52 It seems that in these cases the terms "master" and "disciple" were used to characterise a mutually beneficent relationship, or to indicate the influence of one individual over another even in the absence of an actual or at least formal teaching experience. A possible parallel is offered by the way in which the vocabulary of friendship could be used for people who did not know each other personally, to indicate an alliance.53

One could also play with the words "master" and "disciple" in reference to the same person to stress the person’s humility: Peter the Venerable praised Héloïse as a "discipula veritatis" and a "magistra humilitatis," and described Peter Abelard as a great magister who went back to the discipleship of Christ.54 More relevant in order to try and understand monastic discourse about learning are Bernard of Clairvaux’s observations about the difference between being a master for others and being a master for oneself. The abbot declared that the latter was much harder for him than the former ("facilius imperare, et securius possum praeesse aliis multis quam soli mihi").55 He who appoints himself master over himself—he wrote to his friend Oger—makes himself disciple to a fool ("qui se sibi magistrum constituit, stulto se discipulum subdit"). Therefore, Oger was wise in refusing to be his own disciple and deciding to subordinate himself to someone else’s authority, since he had judged himself not apt to governing others.56 Of course, the role of humility is crucial again, since Bernard praised his correspondent for not blushing over the fact that he was becoming a disciple again after having been a master ("de magistro fieri denuo discipulus non erubuisti").

In general, the need to show or recommend humility influenced almost all the representations of learning. One particularly clear example is the tendency, attested by several monastic letter-writers, to refuse, or pretend to refuse, the title and role of teacher (or, metaphorically, of father) attributed to them by someone, and to claim that they were rather on an equal level with their would-be pupil, as co-learners, peers ("non patrem sed parem," in Bernard of Clairvaux’s words).57

51. Peter of Celle, Epistle 169 to John of Salisbury and Epistle 143 to the prior and community of Canterbury ("fuit enim noster alumnus magister Iohannes") (in Haseldine ed., respectively 540 and 528).
52. Peter of Celle, Epistle 147 to the general chapter of the Cistercian order ("recolat igitur sanctissimum vestrum collegium, unum me esse de alumnis beatissimi Bernardi") (Haseldine ed., 652).
55. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 87 to Oger (Gastaldelli ed., 430).
56. “Sicut aliis dominari renueras, sic tibi quoque praeesse timuisti. Quoque ut magister esses aliorum, minus te iudicabas idoneum, nec te quidem tibi credens, tuus fieri discipulus contemptissi.”

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The monk Nicholas of Clairvaux called another monk his disciple, but immediately corrected himself, adding “or rather co-disciple” (“discipulus, potius autem condiscipulus”). They were — he explained — both pupils to God, whose school was on earth and whose cathedra was in heaven. Nicholas was probably influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux, for whom he worked as secretary: the abbot had once told a man to whom he was giving advice to accept him as a co-disciple, rather than a master, for the real master could only be Christ. It is possible that this tendency was linked to the idea, often expressed by the abbot of Clairvaux in his letters, that the members of a monastic community should never stop striving toward ever-increasing perfection: therefore, they could all be considered co-learners. Bernard used the metaphor of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:12), where people climbed up and down:

Anyone who does not advance in the school of Christ is not worthy of his teaching, especially when we are so placed that if we do not advance we must inevitably fall back. Let no one say: “I have had enough. I shall stay where I am. It is good enough for me to remain the same as I was yesterday and the day before.” Anyone who thinks like that pauses on the way and stands still on the ladder where the patriarch saw no one but those who were going up or coming down. Therefore I say: “He who thinks he stands firmly should beware a fall” (1 Cor. 10, 12).

Similar ideas regarding the endless nature of the learning process are attested by other authors as well, but I believe that their particular frequency in the letters of the abbot of Clairvaux is due to practical reasons: it allowed him to justify the passage (transitus) of a monk from a monastery of softer observance to one with stricter rules, and therefore from almost all the other orders to his own, and to condemn the opposite trajectory. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the other author in whose letter-collection the theme of the need for constant improvement is particularly frequent is Peter Damian. As in Bernard’s letters, religious fervour and practical reasons intertwined in the exhortations to progress from an easier religious lifestyle to a harder one — that is, from coenobitic to hermitic life. On the contrary, a Benedictine such as Anselm of Bec declared

58. Nicholas of Clairvaux, Epistle 38 to Lecelin (Migne PL 196.1633a).
60. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 107 to Thomas of Beverly (Gastaldelli ed., 514): “accipe condisciplum, quem magister eligis. Unus sit ambobus magister Christus.”
61. Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 385 to the monks of Saint-Bertin, 1 (Gastaldelli ed., 490): “Quisquis in schola Christi non proficit, eius indignus est magisterio, praesertim cum ibi sumus, ubi nihil in eodem statu permanet; et non proficere sine dubio deficiere est. Nemo proinde dicat: ‘Satis est, sic volo manere: sufficit mihi esse sicut heri et nudiustertius.’ In via residet qui eiusmodi est; in scala subsistit, ubi neminem patriarcha vidit nisi ascendentem aut descendentem. Dico ergo: ‘Qui se existimat stare, videat ne cadat’ (1 Cor. 10:12)” (English translation in James, Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, 491).
that a monk should remain in his monastery, rather than, driven by his religious fervour, desire to find something better elsewhere.63

Learning through Social Interaction
The letters richly attest the well-known idea that the sources of learning are words and examples, which must go together. Variants of the classic formula “docere verbo et exemplo” found in the letters include “exemplo atque doctrina,” “doctrina et vitae exemplo,” “verbis pariter et exemplis,” “verbo pariter et vita,”64 “exemplis et scriptis,” “modo per praecepta, modo per exempla.”65 Learning by example meant learning by imitating someone’s morally and spiritually superior life, as Bernard of Clairvaux explained in the famous letter in which he announced the death of Malachy, archbishop of Ireland, to the latter’s community:

I exhort you, my brethren, to follow carefully in the footsteps of our father, and all the more zealously from knowing from daily experience his holy way of life (eo studiosius quo vobis certius sancta eius conversatio diuturnis experimentis innotuit). You will prove yourselves his true sons by manfully keeping his teaching; and as you saw in him and received from him a pattern of how you ought to live, live by that pattern, and make more of it than ever. Wise sons are the pride of their father. Even I have been stirred from my sloth and imbued with reverence by the pattern of perfection he set before me. May he so draw me after him so that I may run willingly and eagerly in the fragrance of his virtues, while the memory of them is still fresh.66

According to this view, communal living is a means of learning because daily examples of holy life naturally lead to imitation. Bernard declared that in the short time he had spent with Malachy, the latter’s example had begun to change him for the better, and implied that a longer experience of communal living was bound to produce stronger effects. Although the specific vocabulary of education is not used here, statements such as “the glory of a father is the

63. Anselm of Bec, Epistle 17 to the novice Lanzo (Kohlenberger and Rochais ed., 125): “Quod si sibi videtur maiora quaedam ac utiliora spirituali fervora appetor quam illi praesentis monasterii institutionibus licet: aestimet aut se falli sive praeferendo paria paribus vel minora maioribus, sive praeumendo se posse quod non possit, aut certe credat se non meruisse quod desiderat.”
64. Both in Peter the Venerable, Epistle 115 to Héloïse (Constable ed., 304 and 307).
wisdom of his sons;” if contextualised in the long-lived traditions of parallels between parenthood and education,67 suggest that the discourse is relevant to the reconstruction of the monastic conception of learning within a community.68

Monastic letters are rich in examples of the ways in which monks could learn by interacting with their brothers: the most richly attested is conversation. A very interesting example is contained in a letter sent by Lanfranc of Canterbury to Anselm, then prior of Bec, about Lanfranc’s nephew (and namesake), who had just joined Anselm’s monastery. His uncle explained that the young Lanfranc was in a delicate phase of his life, both because he had recently joined the service of God and because he at his age a man was tormented by many different temptations. Therefore, he wrote to Anselm: “It is of the utmost importance that you allow him to share as often as possible in your informal talk (ut vestri eum colloquii participem sepissime faciatis) and that you direct all those whose teachings can do him good to converse with him on every appropriate occasion.”69

The hierarchy of the people involved in conversations was not always represented as being so important as it is in this case. Quite on the contrary, most of the references to conversations as a means of learning are embedded in discourses about friendship in which the equality of the participants is stressed, regardless of the different ranks in the monastery. A typical case is the representation of friendship in the letter-collection of Peter the Venerable: the abbot of Cluny claimed in a letter to a friend that what he loved about him were the spiritual qualities, and not the rank, wealth or power.70 In another letter, he presented his addressee as his peer in virtues and moral (michi vel moribus meis consimilem vel conformem): this man was his secretary Peter of Poitiers, a common monk.71

For Peter (as for many of his contemporaries), conversations were a crucial aspect of friendship, and of living together. He recalled in a letter the conversations he had with his brother Pontius while they lived together in the monastery of Vézelay, in which they reflected over the contempt for the present things and the desire of eternal things.72 A more detailed description of this kind of friendly exchanges can be found in a letter that the abbot addressed to the aforementioned Peter of Poitiers:

70. Peter the Venerable, Epistle 38 to the archbishop Peter of Lyon (Constable ed., 125).
72. Peter the Venerable, Epistle 16 to his brother Pontius (Constable ed., 23): “Fuerat cohabitatio tua mecum fere decennalis, quo toto tempore quanta inter nos de divinis collatio, quam fervens de spiritualibus sermo, quam frequens de praesentium contemptu collatio, qualis de aeternorum appetitum cohortatio fuerit, et ipse nosti, et ego non in toto oblitus sum.”

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Then we engaged in all-consuming conversation about the blindness of the human heart and its hardness, the snares of various sins, the many traps of demons, the abyss of the judgment of God, how terrible he is in his counsels over the sons of men, how he has mercy on those he wants and is hard on those he wants, and how a man does not know whether he is worthy of love and hate. We would talk about the fearful burden of our vocation, of the conferral of human salvation through the Incarnation of the Son of God and his Passion, of the fearful day of final judgment, of the incomprehensible harshness of the divine verdict by which he punished the evil forever, of his unspeakable mercy, by which he hands over an eternal reward to the good.73

The abbot described the conversation as “formidolosus sermo inter nos,” thus suggesting the idea of something frightening. Indeed, the themes mentioned are for the most part frightful, and the monastic vocation itself is described as formidabilis; one can safely suppose that the comfort of a friend could do much in helping a monk, or even an abbot, to cope with his doubts and fears.

Another important means of learning in the monastery was reciprocal correction, and once again, letters of friendship emerge as an ideal source, rich with tangible examples. Peter of Celle recalled in a letter how useful it had been for him to have been once rebuked by a friend, even if just in passing, because this had led him to correct himself: “I have not forgotten what you once said to me, as it were, in rebuke, that I strove to do other works and did not care for the monastery. This word, even if it was said in passing, was not heard fleetingly.”74 Correction between friends seems to be a particular preoccupation of the abbot of Montier-La-Celle: in another letter he expressed the idea that one should praise his friends more sparingly than others, and correct their wrongs more severely.75 More difficult to accept must have been correction by other fellow-monks, who may have not always been so benevolent, judging by the frequent references to the need of accepting gratefully, and not reluctantly, brotherly corrections (“fraternae correctionis zelum noli moleste ferre, sed gratulabundus amplectere”)76 and to the problem of excessively harsh rebukes among the monks: Peter of Celle listed the bitter criticism of the faults of others (while neglecting one’s own) among the bad habits of monks, just as Lanfranc of Bec referred to the case of someone who found “amusement in gnawing with Theon’s tooth at a brother’s way of life.”77

In this sense, it is not surprising that Peter the Venerable presented the existence of a strong reciprocal social control as one of the reasons for which

74. Peter of Celle, Epistle 144 to prior Inganus of Lapley (Haseldine ed., 530): “Non excidit a memoria quod aliquando michi quasi reprehensorie dixeris, studiere alia opera facere et non curare de monasterio. Hoc verbo etsi perfunctorie fuit dictum, non transitorie fuit audittum.”
75. Peter of Celle, Epistle 27 to Matilda of Fontevrault (Haseldine ed., 88): “Parcius enim laudare amicos, amplius amare debemus, severius quoque mala eorum corrigere quam malum sana palpando contractare.”
coenobitic life was a much safer and easier path to Christian salvation than hermitic life, where one is alone and has none to help and correct him. In a monastery the monks were supposed to fight, as an army (according to the fortunate military metaphor of the *Regula Benedicti*) in which everyone trusted the other even more than he trusted himself. Thanks to this, one laboured for himself and for the others as well (“laborant ibi singuli, et salutis suae insidiantes perimere, et coadiutores modis omnibus dispensare”). This attests a remarkable awareness of the inextricable link between the individual’s personal struggle to adhere to the ideal of Christian and monastic life and that of the others, which shaped the whole community.

Conversation and reciprocal correction are just two of the ways in which learning through social interaction could take place within the monastery; however, I believe that the examples cited, taken altogether, support the claim that analysing monasteries as “communities of practice” on the basis of the letters can offer valuable insights for the study of the dynamics of “shared learning” within the cloister. Firstly, they attest the fact that learning did not concern only novices and newcomers, but all the members of the monastic community, even the more experienced ones. Secondly, letters were an important means to attract people (especially literate, educated men) to monastic life, and therefore they contain many representations of the ideal path toward spiritual, moral, and intellectual progress. This often involves a comparison between monastic learning and the learning of secular schools. Finally, letters (especially when they deal with friendship, affection, and praise) often describe day-to-day interactions which involved exchanges of knowledge and reciprocal help.