

Why Teach Handwriting? An Anecdotal Book Review

By Lynn Frances Guthrie, BA, MA

The debate on whether handwriting, and more specifically cursive, should be taught as part of the school curriculum is currently a heated one among educators of all levels, including teachers, administrators, and the Common Core Standards Committee. Laptops and hand-held devices are changing the way we think, communicate, live, study, and write. With all the discussion surrounding the subject, I decided to survey my students for their points of view. Who, after all, is better qualified to weigh in than the population required to learn this rapidly disappearing art?

My participants spanned the gamut of ages between seven and thirteen, from second to seventh grade, and, interestingly, the range of their perspectives mirrored the range of adult perspectives. Several students were adamantly against learning cursive. "It's not a good idea. No one asks you to write just cursive. It's slower because you have to pay more attention to how you write. Cursive should be optional. In the long run, it's a subject that's not worth it. When I'm a grown up, half the people will be writing on computers anyway so it's kind of a waste of time." After more discussion and reflection, however, students warmed to the idea. "It might come in useful when you're around 30 and want to write in a fancy way, like for a letter." Those who had already learned cursive, most often were positive. "I'm glad I learned it. I think it should be taught in schools. They should teach it in third grade and then offer it again later so you can improve. If more teachers had taught it, I would have used it and had pretty handwriting."

Cursive cons included:

- Regular writing is easier.
- Cursive is super hard to write and impossible to read. It looks like a bunch of fancy scribbles.
- I don't like writing cursive because it's hard and all the letters look like squiggly lines.
- You have to make all the right loops and all those loops make your hand hurt.
- Cursive is slower because you have to pay more attention to how you write.
- It takes a long time to learn and you can't mess up.
- Regular writing is faster.
- Print is enough.

Cursive pros included:

- It's harder than printing but faster.
- All the letters are connected and you can write quicker using cursive.
- It's a fancier way of writing.
- Every grown up writes in cursive so I think someday I might need it.
- Learning cursive gives you two different ways of writing.
- Many older people were taught cursive so if you know it you'll be able to read your parents handwriting.
- Cursive is neater than manuscript.
- Cursive looks really beautiful.

How would students use cursive in their day-to-day lives?

- You can use it on a daily basis for everything.
- It's useful for writing cards or letters.
- Some essays could be in cursive.
- It's important for proper documents like the Constitution. If we ever need to do that again, we are going to need cursive.
- The one unanimous answer was the importance of cursive for writing signatures because it looks cool.

As the comments of my students attest, the momentum of technology is pushing us towards the next evolutionary step, but should we leave writing by hand behind? In his recent book, *The Missing Ink*, Philip Hensher attacks this question on multiple levels. First he takes a rambling look at the history of handwriting and handwriting tools, jumping back and forth in time and providing illustrations.

In almost three centuries, the United States has produced a number of major schools of handwriting. Platt Roger Spencer, also called "the father of American Penmanship" and the author of *Spencer's New Standard Writing* in 1884, brought the ornately flowing Copperplate round hand to America with his hybrid "Spencerian Script." In 1890, A.N. Palmer simplified this script and developed a completely new style. His book *Palmer's Guide to Business Writing* made handwriting a commodity. Mandating upright posture, desks in straight rows, and drills, the emphasis centered on the necessary musculature to produce efficient, rapid, and legible writing with almost military precision. Then in 1935, the lesser known but more expansively thinking Marion Richardson published *Writing and Writing Patterns* and the pendulum of penmanship swung the other way. Richardson was an art teacher before she became a proponent of "free cursive handwriting." Her goals, antithetical to Palmer's, encouraged

exploration, “spontaneous scribble”, the experience of different writing rhythms, and creativity promoted through “the power of invention.”

There were other schools along the way, including Zaner-Bloser, still prevalent in the Midwest, but Handwriting Without Tears (not mentioned in Hensher’s book) is one of the most widely-used modern curriculum in the United States. It dates from 1977 and includes aspects of the Palmer methodology with systematic attention to start, sequence, size, placement, and control in daily drills. The goals are similar as well: neat, fast, and easy. However, Marion Richardson’s influence can be felt in the Handwriting Without Tears program that also includes creativity through music, dance, play, and drawing.

The Missing Ink touches on aspects of handwriting that go below the surface as well. In a later chapter entitled, “What Is To Be Done?” Hensher mentions research done by Virginia Berninger and Robert Abbott at the University of Washington. Their studies show that “improved handwriting also improved reading skills, better word recognition, better composition skills, and better recall from memory.” And he quotes Berninger: “Handwriting is not just a motor process; it is also a memory process for letters – the building blocks for written language.” In fact, the work of Berninger et al. merits much more attention. Their studies address the crucial question of the developmental importance of cursive. What should the academic curriculum include as education moves forward in the technological age? Their findings offer empirical data to be taken seriously when considering handwriting’s place in the cultivation of growing minds.

One such study is “Comparison of Pen and Keyboard Transcription Modes in Children With and Without Learning Disabilities.” Just as its title implies, the reader is given the answer to the question du jour: which is the fastest and more fluent method of transcription? For criteria, methodology, measures, procedures, and research aims, an in-depth read is advised. Both academic and engaging, there is much to learn and the conclusions are clear. “Although LD-TD and non-LD groups did not differ in total time for producing letters by pen or keyboard, both groups took longer to compose sentences and essays by keyboard than by pen. ... Consistently from second to fourth to sixth grade, children wrote longer essays with faster word production rate by pen than by keyboard. ... In addition, fourth and sixth graders wrote more complete sentences when writing by pen than by keyboard.”

Berninger and her colleagues also highlight the idea that “forming a written word letter-by-letter by pen may leave a stronger memory trace for written words than [selecting] a word letter-by-letter by keyboard.” This leads to the concept that “the motor act of producing a word results in tactile sensations in the brain; such sensations may create an envelope that links letters into single written word units.” These “*graphotactic* word envelopes ... may develop more quickly and become more automatic sooner for handwriting by pen than by keyboard.” What’s key here is the tactile aspect of writing by hand assists in letter learning, aids in fine motor-skill development, and shapes and engages the brain in composition tasks, such as idea generation and expression. Because of their findings, Berninger cautions that keyboard accommodations for students with learning disabilities may not always be the most effective solution for addressing transcription issues, particularly before adolescence. On a similar note, one might posit that the surge of dysgraphia-related learning disabilities may be due to the diminishing practice of handwriting.

Further work by Virginia Berninger, Todd Richards, and Robert Abbott yielded “The Role of the Hand in Idea Expression.” After the results of their longitudinal study, Berninger and her co-authors recruited a sample of these same participants for brain imaging observation. Their hypothesis concerning the correlation of handwriting with “idea generation in developing writers” broadened. “Language is a complex, multi-leveled, mediating system that contributes to the translation of ideas into writing, that is, makes connections between the vast internal cognitive representations in the unconscious, implicit memory and the visible language symbols that externalize cognition.” The complexity involves “working memory architecture” and arises when the interrelated loops of phonology, orthography, and morphology must work together with the hands, fingers, and eyes, plus the higher thinking executive functions to transmit letters and words from thought to the page. Berninger embraces the importance of handwriting in all its forms to such an extent that she recommends schools “create learning environments that support not only language(syntax)-based thinking but also translation of ideas in non-syntax format—as in poetry, art, music, and evolving forms of technology.”

The Missing Ink ends with a similar call to action. Besides the beauty and personal expression of writing by hand that is clearly absent with technological devices, Hensher concludes that “handwriting is good for us. It involves us in a relationship with the written word which is sensuous, immediate, and individual. ... To diminish the place of handwriting in our lives is to diminish, in a small but real way, our humanity.” His conviction is such that he attempts to construct a future that gives handwriting

relevance. “I dream of creating a space every day where we write with pen on paper, whether for ourselves or to communicate with other people.” The last chapter of his book is a passionate plea, offering ten suggestions on how to keep handwriting alive both individually and as a society. Hensher energetically enlists readers and writers in the cause. The bottom line is: handwriting is not just handwriting. Why teach it in schools? The answer is clear.

Reviewed by:

Lynn Frances Guthrie, B.A., M.A.

Literacy Specialist & Owner

READ WRITE LEARN

Seattle, Washington

(206) 723-6538

www.readwritelearn.net

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