Learning to Write/Writing to Learn

Discovering the crucial role of cursive writing in the learning process.

Linda Spencer

Indications are that technological advances and state-mandated tests, in addition to other variables, are forcing cursive writing (a form of handwriting in which each letter of a word is connected to another letter) to receive less instruction time in the classroom. Although the teaching of cursive varies across the country and even within the same school district, instruction time has been greatly reduced and practice beyond the third grade is rare. Lesson and practice time for cursive handwriting has been reduced from the excessive two hours a day or more decades ago to the “as we have time” present day allotment which is usually fifteen minutes a day or less. Schools often start teaching cursive at the end of second grade and stop after third grade. Steve Graham, Ed D, professor of special education at the University of Maryland, College Park, says of cursive writing: “True fluency requires time and practice. The point at which kids write fast enough so that it doesn’t interfere with composition and class note taking usually doesn’t occur before sixth grade. Students gain fluency by practicing writing.” The reduction in instruction time for penmanship has been slowly and subtly taking place over the last several decades. Most importantly, this change has occurred without a scientific understanding of what effect this change may be having on student learning and development.

Although some schools spend little time on cursive handwriting lessons, studies show a connection between cursive handwriting and brain development. For example Neurologist Frank Wilson, author of The Hand: How its Use Shapes the Brain, Language and Human Culture, says, “Although the repetitive drills that accompany handwriting lessons seem outdated, such physical instruction will help students to succeed.” He says these activities stimulate brain activity, lead to increased language fluency, and aid in the development of important knowledge. He describes in detail the pivotal role of hand movements, in particular the development of thinking and language capacities, and in “developing deep feelings of confidence and interest in the world-all-together, the essential prerequisites for the emergence of the capable and caring individual.”

Much of the education research being conducted by universities focuses on technology and literacy. Little regard is given to the interrelationships of handwriting development and reading, spelling and composition. Learning handwriting is closely tied to learning to read. Brain research is constantly providing new revelations about how the brain works and how we all learn. The discovery of neuroplasticity is one the most exciting and popular areas of research in psychology today and promises to provide a strong foundation on which to base educational decisions. Neuroplasticity refers to the brains ability to restructure itself after training or practice. Neuroplasticity relates to how cognitive demands and new learning create new neural pathways and connections in response to stimuli. It is now possible to determine how learning to write in cursive affects the learning process.
It is likely that courses in the arts, music, drama, art, woodworking etc. which have also suffered diminishment in school curriculum, will be vindicated through this brain research. They too play important roles in the learning process. There are many fascinating neuropsychology research studies and book references available on the internet. While many current educational practices fit well with the research, others run counter to what we are learning and pose significant challenges to those who work in schools.

Psychiatrist and Neuropsychology expert Dr. Norman Doidge, author of the book *The Brain That Changes Itself*, says he fears that if cursive fades away, so will cognitive skills that handwriting builds. He says that if children don't learn those movements, their brains "will develop in a different way that no one has really thought through." Dr. Doidge explains, "When a child types or prints, he produces a letter the same way each time. In cursive, however, each letter connects slightly differently to the next, which is more demanding on the part of the brain that converts symbol sequences into motor movements in the hand."

In an Australian (ABC) TV interview with Kerry O'Brien, (09/09/08) neuroscientist Dr. Doidge was asked to elaborate on a statement in his book where he said, that humans were instinctively on the right track in the age of rote learning in education. He responded:

Some neuroscientists say if cursive disappears, those cognitive skills will simply be replaced by new ones, just as they always have since humans began leaving their marks on cave walls. No doubt the lost cognitive skills will be replaced by new ones. But, it isn't it irresponsible to promote such changes without understanding if these changes are beneficial or harmful to the learner? Before continuing to allow time for cursive handwriting practice to be diminished in the classroom we need to know and understand what is being lost and what is being gained. It is quite possible that by relaxing the student's need to strive to meet required handwriting standards and also by reducing practice time for penmanship, we may have hampered and in some cases damaged the learning process. We may have inadvertently added to the need for special education. Difficulty with basic reading and language skills are the most common learning disabilities.

Some of the more remarkable studies using handwriting and the brain are those associated with learning disorders. Many studies are being conducted using handwriting and special education needs. Dr. Virginia Berninger, University of Washington professor of educational psychology, and Steve Graham, Ed.D, professor of special education at the University of Maryland, College Park, have several interesting research studies using handwriting and the brain available for perusal on the internet. As a handwriting specialist with over 25 years of experience I understand how learning to write in cursive benefits the student well beyond the basic act of handwriting. Practicing the writing process establishes many valuable habits in the learner. One of the most important habits is mental and emotional discipline, a foundation for learning and a prerequisite to maturity and social responsibility.

Since cursive writing isn't emphasized after third grade, few students are getting enough practice or reinforcement to make cursive automatic. In other words, when the student no longer needs to think about how to write but can focus on what they want to say in their writing, the skill becomes automatic. How long this process takes may vary from child to child but it is certainly longer than the third grade. When kids aren't taught how to learn penmanship properly, they make it up, develop bad habits and handwriting never becomes fluid or routine. In many cases it becomes illegible. One of the results of the reduction in practice of cursive handwriting is that more and more students are printing. Many parents are
unaware that their kids cannot write in cursive or in some cases cannot read cursive. Scenarios like the following are surprising many families:

Grandma writes a note in cursive on the birthday card she gives to her sixteen year old grandson. She is shocked to hear him say he can't read cursive so he doesn't know what she said.

Mom asks her thirteen year old daughter to sign her name on a savings account bank deposit slip. Her daughter prints her name on the signature line. When mom asks her to also write her name in cursive, her daughter replies that she doesn't know how to write in cursive. She always prints her signature.

You might think that these are unusual occurrences but parents all over the country are noticing that their kids are printing when asked to hand write a note or sign their name. Many had no idea their kids were not able to write in, or in some cases, read cursive. When handwritten essays were introduced on the SAT exams for the (high school) class of 2006, just 15 percent of the almost 1.5 million students wrote their answers in cursive. The rest printed, many in block letters.

Many people think that the reduction in time spent teaching cursive handwriting is basically related to the introduction of computers into the schools or pressure on teachers to meet qualifications for SAT testing. However, the origins in the decline of penmanship instruction and practice are colleges of education, school curriculum directors and administrators who dismiss handwriting as an old-fashioned subject that is no longer relevant. Very few, if any, colleges of education offer courses in the teaching of handwriting. Many primary school teachers never received proper instruction and practice in cursive handwriting themselves. The power to change this trend resides with the parents of today’s students. First, become aware of how handwriting is taught and practiced in your school, do some research and then demand that time for cursive handwriting in primary grades be extended and that it is practiced until it becomes automatic.

Penmanship was a cornerstone of education in America for decades. Removing or weakening a cornerstone can be a substantial risk to the entire foundation of education. America has been falling behind other nations in several areas of education and one of the most problematic areas is reading. Learning to write in cursive is closely related to learning to read. Care must be given to subtle and obvious changes developing in school curriculum. Students must be computer literate to compete in today’s global economy but keyboarding should be in addition to, not instead of penmanship skills. We can and we must discover how the tools being used in teaching affect the learning process itself. A Nation at Risk (described in the Federal Government’s landmark 1983 report) is still at risk and can no longer afford to allow curriculum changes to occur based primarily on opinions and assumptions.

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