Cursive Writing: Are Its Last Days Approaching?

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Indicators are that technological advances and state-mandated tests, in addition to other variables, are forcing cursive writing to become a casualty of the American educational landscape. It behooves us to examine the historical, practical, and essential aspects relative to cursive writing.

We no longer use hand cranks to turn down the windows in vehicles. All types of vehicles are now manufactured using electric windows. Then, “why do we force our children to write in a systemized loopy script that is rather difficult to decipher and leaves many adults with knots the size of walnuts on their knuckles?” (Rufo, 2004, p. 4). The digital age of technology increasingly threatens cursive writing because of computers, instant text messaging, e-mails, faxing, and employment applications. State-mandated tests and limited classroom time have also impacted cursive instruction and writing. In many states, cursive writing “varies from district to district and school to school” (Nix, 2008, p. 1). It is time to explore the concerns of cursive instruction. It behooves us to examine the historical, practical, and essential aspects relative to cursive writing.

Historical

Previous generations used cursive writing as an indicator of an educated individual. It was a form of communication. According to Marge Rea, “In 1904, handwriting was considered the most important thing. Before typewriters, everything was handwritten: land deeds, legal paperwork, orders and business records” (as cited in Yackley, 2008, p. 1). The cursive form was often used ornamentally for various types of certificates and diplomas. Further, Tamara Plakins Thornton in *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (1996, p. 41) points out that during the colonial period cursive writing occurred as “self-presentation but not self-expression.” She also relates that male handwriting indicated a gentleman’s integrity while for women it was a form of artistry.

Practical

In the era of computers and standardized testing, how practical is cursive writing?

As Carpenter explains:

The Palmer and Zaner-Bloser penmanship methods ruled the day for decades. Students spent 45 minutes every day on handwriting. Penmanship was a separate grade on report cards. Today, handwriting instruction might get 10 or 15 minutes a few times a week. Keyboarding skills are taught much earlier, now. (2007, p. 3)

With decreasing instruction time to teach students cursive writing, another practical aspect is legibility. Elementary students are taught cursive either in the latter part of second grade or in third grade. Letter configurations change dramatically. For example, the letter “S” in (manuscript) block print is one style; in cursive it is another style. Students have to learn a new set of alphabet letters (both upper and lower case), connect those letters to make words, write sentences, develop paragraphs and execute essays. Usually by fourth grade, there is no continuity in cursive instruction. What are we doing to our diverse classrooms of students? In reality and practicality, the
results are mixed writing methods: difficulty in deciphering words, writing projects lacking logical writing/comprehension, and loss of instructional time.

Another practical concern is lefties. “Learning cursive the ‘right’ way can be a nightmare for lefties. The most common problem is the left wrist hooking around as the child writes, which can be uncomfortable and lead to poor penmanship” states Hudson (1999, p. 1). While lefties have greater challenges, other students may also have difficulty.

With the inclusionary classroom composed of identified students, along with ESL (English Second Language) and ELL (English Limited Language) students, cursive writing instruction can be problematic. Teachers have IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) to assist identified students, and content areas progress at varied levels and rates for all learners. While students are included in the same classroom settings, teachers may have a student in the classroom who speaks that individual’s native tongue; however, the student is not skilled to read or write in the native language. When placed in an American classroom, entry in another culture has countless ramifications. Teachers and literacy coaches must work to assist students to learn the concepts of the curriculum and work to have them somewhat ready for the state-mandated tests. These are awesome and overwhelming challenges. Teachers often resort to having students use only block print to enable translations, comprehension, and concept attainment for students. The state mandated tests are in print (block) format.

The aforementioned are practical aspects noting that we must re-conceptualize cursive writing’s importance in the curriculum as well as beyond while focusing on the quality of instructional time required to ensure that students are prepared for today’s digital age and the future workforce.

**Essential**

Schools are microcosms of our society. We need literate individuals in our society. There are essential aspects to consider. It begins by having students who are able to read, write, listen and communicate effectively. Manuscript (block print) and consecutive years of the same letter formations are essential for students to obtain skill acquisition in communicating. When students are able to concentrate on their compositions and not handwriting, perhaps their compositions will indicate more logical thought processes and the mechanical components are more likely to be in place. It is essential that we teach students proper grammar, sentence structure, and writing skills.

Cursive proponents cite the College Board data on the writing portion of the SATs that “15 percent of students who wrote their essay in cursive did slightly better than those who used some other type of handwriting” (Carpenter, 2007, p. 2). In contrast, Karin Klein, a trained scorer for the SATs, emphatically states in “How I Gamed the SAT,” “Length doesn’t always mean a better score, but I would advise any kid: Write at least a page and a quarter. Nobody who got one of the top scores wrote one page or less” (Los Angeles Times, 2005, p.1). Hence, any student using manuscript (block format) may increase speed of writing and score higher on the SAT because of knowing this tip.

Another essential aspect is assessment. Teachers must do varied forms of measuring student progress. It only makes sense for teachers to be able to read and score students’ work in a timely and accurate manner. Trying to decipher written words/paragraphs in essays, short answers, and/or fill in the blank type questions requires extra time for teachers and may result in resubmits for students. Hence, this causes anxiety for students as legibility of their handwriting style is impacting their learning.

With the variation of different writing models – Palmer, Zaner-Bloser and Writing
Without Tears to name a few—it is difficult for teacher-education programs to include any of these in their programming. As Troyer points out, “minimal time is spent teaching cursive to future teachers” (2009, p. 2). Teacher education programs now have the demands of courses for inclusion, technology, diversity, and ESL/ELL students, in addition to the content major. Hence, writing is often not required. Graham, et al. (2008, p. 66) notes that “lack of either instructional knowledge or knowledge of handwriting development could weaken the quality of teachers’ handwriting instruction.” Educational institutions that have teacher training programs are concerned about accreditations and the needed programmatic changes required to meet its state and/or NCATE standards relative to the aforementioned.

Conclusion

The aspects reviewed and discussed will not solve the difficulties of cursive writing. However, the historical, practical, and essential aspects call for a number of questions and the need for more educational research in this area. Indicators are that technological advances and state-mandated tests, in addition to other variables, are forcing cursive writing to become a casualty of the American educational landscape.

References


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