Will Handwriting Ever Die?

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Many years ago in a far-away place at a far-away time, I had a 21st birthday. In those days, one of the standard presents one would often receive was a pen, in a nice gift box. If you were lucky, there might also be a matched reticulating pencil. A few years ago I received a beautiful Montblanc pen which was stylish, fashionable and not cheap. Do people still receive pens for their coming of age or graduation? I would imagine not. The new writing tool of the digital age is an iPad or something similar. Many of you will view my precious pen as an antiquity!

Despite the attraction to things electronic, handwriting is important. It is a complex skill that affects your cognitive development and exercises visual, motor and memory circuits. When you write you build hand-eye co-ordination and practise fine motor skills. Professor Feder from the University of Ottawa suggests the repetitive process of writing builds motor pathways into the brain. The more children write, the more connections they build, although he states that poor handwriting also builds faulty pathways. There is also a suggestion that good handwriting can lead to better grades. There is a direct link between handwriting skills and academic success.

Some studies of Pre-Kindergarten students indicate those with well developed fine motor skills score higher in reading and mathematics than those students with poor handwriting. Perhaps this has something to do with the old adage; write it down so you won't forget it.

Writing stimulates cells at the base of the brain called the reticular activating system (RAS). The RAS acts as a filter for everything your brain needs to process, giving more importance to the stuff that you're actively focusing on at the moment - something that the physical act of writing brings to the forefront. In her book Write It Down, Make It Happen, author Henriette Anne Klauser says that “Writing triggers the RAS, which in turn sends a signal to the cerebral cortex: Wake up! Pay attention! Don't miss this detail!”

There is certainly a shift in some schools to employ more technology in the classroom. We now talk about BYOD (Bring your Own Device). With limited hours and increased pressure to meet higher standards, teachers are emphasising technology and tablets and less of the written word. Gone are the romantic days of practising cursive writing, curly Q's or loopy L's and giving book marks for neat writing. Mobile phones and SMS have even created new spelling, new words and abbreviations and emoticons that people add to their messages. Nevertheless, handwriting should retain its importance alongside the development of technology skills.

At the moment, all external examinations are handwritten, although there is talk of this changing. Education ministers have set 2016 as a provisional date to scrap pencil and paper tests and move NAPLAN online. The shift is expected to lead to quicker turnaround of test results and a more detailed, accurate view of student performance. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Chief Executive Robert Randall stated: “Online assessment offers benefits including potential for more accurate measurement of student achievement, and the ability to get information back to teachers and parents more quickly. Our research shows that a move to online testing will be beneficial to students with increased engagement and increased completion rates.”

That may be true in theory, but in practice will it work? With the high speed NBN roll out nowhere near our front gate (or in close proximity) I can't see it working. Our task as educators is to chart a course between rhetoric and reality.

In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald in 2009 it was mentioned that the Higher School Certificate students could be typing their examinations essays on computers as early as 2012, according to Board of Studies predictions. Carol Taylor, the then Acting Chief Executive at the Office of the NSW Board of Studies, said it was “inevitable computers will be used in HSC exams”, particularly for subjects such as English. It is now 2014 and this seems no closer! There was also concern from several independent school Principals about the deterioration of handwriting. The former head of the Presbyterian Ladies’ College, William McKeith, said: “Changing technology driven by fast-tracked stimulus spending in our classrooms is occurring so rapidly that handwriting is the silent casualty.” He stated, “It has served us well and, no matter how many computers or mobiles we have, we still need to know how to handwrite, and write legibly.” The Headmaster of The King’s School, Tim Hawkes, said generations of employers had complained about the quality of handwriting. “It also needs to be acknowledged it is important for students to develop keyboard skills because this is very likely to be the means of communication in post-school life and in employment ... What is required is judicious instruction and training in both skills.”

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