

Is Manual Handwriting Relevant in the 21st Century?

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It has been heard all too often, “He doesn’t need to know how to write, he has a computer”, “Doctor’s have bad handwriting, and they are successful”, “Just give him a laptop”, and the phrases go on.

Just how important is handwriting in today’s world? What can be gained from learning to write legibly, and what is lost if we don’t? Compelling questions that deserve to be answered.

Research suggests that manual handwriting is very important, not just for communication purposes but for the creating and strengthening of visual-motor and sensory-motor skills.

Keith Beery, PhD, the author of the Visual-Motor Inventory (VMI) Tests has this to say about handwriting: (from the Visual-Motor Inventory Test Manual pages 125-126)

“Besides the fact that handwriting, as a common graphic behavior, is a natural vehicle for teaching, there are broader reasons for focusing upon it....Hand writing is frequently an indicator of children’s mental and social foundations. If a child lacks an adequate mental foundation, in the Piagetian sense, because of insufficient sensory motor and other experiences, it tends to show up in poor handwriting. Similarly, if a child lacks an adequate social foundation--has not developed basic self-respect and respect for others--it tends to be evidenced in poor handwriting. Because it is so visible (in contrast to spoken language), poor handwriting often operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a child is allowed to continuously portray his mental and social inadequacies graphically, he may come to increasingly believe that he is an inferior person and to behave accordingly.

On the other hand, a child who is taught to consistently write well not only strengthens her or his sensory-motor foundations, but also receives continuous, powerful reinforcement for development of a positive self-concept, self-discipline, effort, pride in accomplishment, and mutual respect.”

Other research also supports this connection. Glidden and Sheslow (Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology, Volume 12, Issue 4, 1997, page 323), in their article “Investigating handwriting: the relationships of visual-motor skills” contend that in addition visual motor abilities, factors such as motivation, planning skills, attention to detail, and speed of production are equally important in the mastery of handwriting. Therefore self-esteem (motivation), motor planning, visual processing (attention to detail) and smooth connected motor movements (speed of production) are all inter-related in the creation of fluid handwriting.

Rand H. Nelson, Vice President of the Peterson Directed Handwriting Resource Library maintains that there is a “wealth of scientific research indicating surprising new

importance for the physical learning experiences associated with the development of fluent handwriting.”

Dr. Veronica Ent, of ST. Vincent’s College wrote a paper and conducted a trial program that substantiated the importance of directional concepts, rhythmic movement and positioning skills that help early learners learn up, down, bottom, left, right, and relate “directional concept to their workspace”.

How many times have teachers and parents heard, “he’s in my way”, “she’s in my space”, pleas from children who are “claiming” their territory.

Other literature strongly suggests that poor handwriting is related to some language disorders. (Topics in Language Disorders, Pat Mirenda, PhD, Lippincott Williams, 2005) This article maintains that students whose handwriting is “insufficient for writing” also scored lower on standardized communication skills tests.

Connections between the sensorimotor cortex in the brain and pencil movements was established by Siebner, Limmer, Peinemann and others in the European Journal of Neuroscience, Volume 14, Page 726, August 2001, through PET scans of multiple individuals both adults and children. In summary they concluded that fast handwriting is a function of an optimized cooperation of the manual sensorimotor cortex network rather than selective activation of distinct network components. In other words, automatic vs. pre-movement thoughts/decisions/planning—the slow network.

And so to return to the original question: “Is Manual Handwriting Relevant in the 21st Century?” The answer seems obvious—yes, it is. It is relevant because of what it teaches the brain to do, not because it is a “dinosaur skill” academicians are reluctant to relinquish.

Technology is wonderful, this report was written on a computer, quickly and fluently. But handwriting cannot ever completely disappear. We will still have to sign checks, fill out applications, sign in at doctor’s offices, etc. And the teenager who goes to the fast food restaurant to get a job, will not be given the opportunity to “take the applications home”, for if he does, the assumption will be that he cannot write, and perhaps has difficulty reading as well.

The new SAT tests require an essay written in the students’ “own hand”. And many universities require tests to be taken in the traditional “Blue Book”, particularly the sciences and mathematics curriculums.

An alternative to the traditional “trace/write/repeat” handwriting programs, W.I.N.t^m Write Incredibly NOW, t^m is a kinesthetic based program based on movement and the visual motor retention of basic forms (4 for cursive, 3 for manuscript) that when combined form *all* the letters in just 12 hours!!

Using manipulatives, movement and color-coded visualizations, this US Trademarked program incorporates the whole body into the process of making handwriting automatic

and stress-free. This method uses everyday items such as rubber bands and paperclips to help children learn internal sensory confidence necessary for fluid handwriting.

The assessment materials are criterion-referenced, and use “everyday” easy to find materials.

It is a program that takes children from labored to legible in a finite amount of time in a peer-supported environment.

The US Department of Labor reported in 2004 that there were 1.6 million Americans who could not fill out any type of application and were functionally illiterate. This statistic is shameful in the “richest country in the world”.

Homework is inevitable; it is often fraught with fear and dread—writing the responses often bring procrastination to an “art form”. Handwriting matters because it is inherently tied to our self-esteem. It is our first self-advertisement of our personal performance as we mature from home to school and to eventual employment.

Handwriting matters—today more than ever. It should be taught in the public schools, it should be required to be neat and legible and it should not be “Alpha-smart-ed” away. It is a fundamental of education that we cannot afford to slip from our curriculums.

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