

OPINION

Handwriting Just Doesn't Matter

By Anne Trubek

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I thought politicians had enough to fight over. Apparently not: Legislatures around the country are now debating the future of cursive penmanship.

When the Common Core standards were released in 2010, handwriting took a back seat to typing. Schools were told to ensure that all students could “demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills” by fourth grade, but they were required to teach students “basic features of print” only in kindergarten and first grade. Cursive was left out entirely.

This infuriated many teachers, parents and lawmakers. At least nine states and numerous districts have lobbied, successfully, to reintroduce cursive into public and publicly funded charter schools, and others have bills pending.

People talk about the decline of handwriting as if it's proof of the decline of civilization. But if the goal of public education is to prepare students to become successful, employable adults, typing is inarguably more useful than handwriting. There are few instances in which handwriting is a necessity, and there will be even fewer by the time today's second graders graduate.

If printing letters remains a useful if rarely used skill, cursive has been superannuated. Its pragmatic purpose is simple expediency — without having to lift pen from paper, writers can make more words per minute. There have been cursive scripts since the beginning of writing: The Egyptians invented one of the first, demotic, which allowed scribes to take notes on business transactions and Pharaonic laws faster than they could using hieroglyphics.

Indeed, the desire to write faster has driven innovations throughout history: Ballpoint pens replaced quill pens; typewriters improved on pens; and computers go faster than typewriters. Why go back?

Some experts argue that handwriting offers children neurological benefits. Professor Virginia Berninger of the University of Washington says that “handwriting — forming letters — engages the mind, and that can help children pay attention to written language.” A 2012 study of 15 children found that forming letters by hand may facilitate learning to read. But there seems to be no difference in benefits between printing and cursive. A 2014 study found that college students who took handwritten notes in lectures remembered the information better than those who typed notes, but that may indicate only that the slower speed of handwriting causes students to be more selective about what they write down. Perhaps, instead of proving that handwriting is superior to typing, it proves we need better note-taking pedagogy.

The goal of early writing education should be for children to achieve “cognitive automaticity” in it — the ability to make letters without conscious effort — as soon as possible, so they can think about what they want to say instead of how to write the words they need to say it. Many students now achieve typing automaticity — the ability to type without looking at the keys — at younger and younger ages, often by the fourth grade. This allows them to focus on higher-order concerns, such as rhetorical structure and word choice.

Some also argue that learning cursive teaches fine motor skills. And yet so did many other subjects that are arguably more useful, such as cooking, sewing and carpentry, and few are demanding the reintroduction of those classes.

These arguments are largely a side show to the real issues, which are cultural. In April, when the Louisiana State Senate voted to put cursive back into the public school curriculum, senators yelled “America!” in celebration, as though learning cursive were a patriotic act.

A month later, Alabama required the teaching of cursive in public schools by the end of third grade by way of “Lexi's Law,” named for the granddaughter of the state representative Dickie Drake; Mr. Drake believes “cursive writing identifies you as much as your physical features do.” In other words, our script reveals something unique and ineluctable about our inner being.

For most of American history, cursive was supposed to do the opposite. Mastering it was dull, repetitive work, intended to make every student's handwriting match a standardized model. In the mid-19th century, that model was Spencerian script. It was replaced by the Palmer Method, which was seen as a more muscular and masculine hand suitable for the industrial age — a “plain and rapid style,” as Austin Palmer described it, to replace the more effeminate Spencerian. Students who learned it were taught to become “writing machines,” holding their arms and shoulders in awkward poses for hours to get into shape for writing drills.

It was also believed that mastering the Palmer Method would make students better Christians, immigrants more assimilated Americans (through its “powerful hygienic effect”), “bad” children better (“the initial step in the reform of many a delinquent”) and workers more industrious (because the script had fewer curves and strokes than Spencerian).

Our 19th- and 20th-century counterparts grafted their values onto handwriting, just as we do with our conceptions of individualism, patriotism and the unique self. These are projections we make onto squiggles and loops.

We have seen similar debates over the meaning of handwriting during other moments of historic transition. In the early medieval era, monks were told to stop using a Roman-based script because it looked too pagan and to adopt a more Christian-looking one. In the 16th century, Erasmus wrote a dialogue in which characters writing in the Renaissance-infused Humanist script complain about the “barbarous” look of Gothic script which they deem less civilized. They also complain that women have messy, impatient handwriting. (Today, women are perceived as being naturally better at penmanship than men, largely because handwriting is now taught at a younger age, when the fine motor skills of girls are more developed.)

Cursive has no more to do with patriotism than Gothic script did with barbarism, or the Palmer Method with Christianity. Debates over handwriting reveal what a society prizes and fears; they are not really about the virtues or literacy levels of children.

Finally, current cursive advocates often argue that students who don't learn cursive won't be able to read it — “they won't be able to read the Declaration of Independence” — but that is misleading. Reading that 18th-century document in the original is difficult for most people who know cursive, as the script is now unfamiliar. A vast majority of historical manuscripts are illegible to anyone but experts, or are written in languages other than English.

In fact, the changes imposed by the digital age may be good for writers and writing. Because they achieve automaticity quicker on the keyboard, today's third graders may well become better writers as handwriting takes up less of their education. Keyboards are a boon to students with fine motor learning disabilities, as well as students with poor handwriting, who are graded lower than those who write neatly, regardless of the content of their expressions. This is known as the “handwriting effect,” proved by Steve Graham at Arizona State, who found that “when teachers are asked to rate multiple versions of the same paper differing only in legibility, neatly written versions of the paper are assigned higher marks for overall quality of writing than are versions with poorer penmanship.” Typing levels the playing field.

Ours may be the most writing-happy age in human history. Most students and adults write far more in a given day than they did just 10 or 20 years ago, choosing to write to one another over social media or text message instead of talking on the phone or visiting. The more one writes, the better a writer one becomes. There is no evidence that “text speak” like LOL has entered academic writing, or that students make more errors as a result. Instead, there is evidence that college students are writing more rhetorically complex essays, and at double the length, than they did a generation ago. The kids will be all right.

Despite the recent backlash, handwriting will slowly become a smaller and smaller aspect of elementary school education. That will be a loss — I don't deny it. The kinetic movement of pen across paper is pleasurable, and soothing in its familiarity. It is affecting to see the idiosyncratic loops and strokes of relatives from generations past.

But as a left-hander with terrible handwriting who watched my son struggle to master cursive — he had to stay inside during recess for much of third grade because he wrote his j's backward — that is a loss I can weather. And history is replete with similar losses; consider how rarely people now carve words in stone, dip pens into ink or swipe platens of typewriters. There will be no loss to our children's intelligence. The cultural values we project onto handwriting will alter as we do, as they have for the past 6,000 years.