

# The Computer: Mightier than the Pen?

by Natalie Troyer

Learning the loops of cursive writing might seem like a waste of time to students and teachers who are accustomed to the computer as the principal tool of communication. But some educators say cursive writing is a communication tool that deserves to be upheld in elementary schools today.

Students still need to know how to communicate effectively through good handwriting skills, said Charles B. Pyle, director of communication at the Virginia State Department of Education. "There will still be occasions when students need to express themselves with pen and paper, and what they write should be read and understood without a lot of difficulty," he said.

Advocates say teaching penmanship has benefits, citing research evidence of a direct link between the process of learning to write and developing the ability to read fluently.

"Cursive writing itself was developed because connected strokes help create a continuous stream of writing," said Dixie Stack, director of curriculum at Maryland State Department of Education. "When you first look at cursive writing, it's like trying to interpret a foreign language. However, working at it – and practising it yourself – helps you to read it."

Roger Vanderhye, principal of Spring Hill Elementary School in McLean, Virginia, said cursive writing is "not a lost art quite yet". "We still believe that fluid writing lends itself to thinking ... we've seen that students' ideas start to flow better when they learn cursive", he said.

Heidi Hogan, reading and writing specialist at Spring Hill, agrees. "Keyboarding hasn't replaced cursive," Mrs. Hogan said. "Even with technological developments, we still feel it's important for students to know how to write. Most children actually enjoy cursive – they see it as a rite of passage or a grown-up thing to do."

The process also helps students who have problems with reversed letters in their handwriting.

Some say reliance on computers is hurting the art of penmanship, however. More emphasis is being placed on using the computer as a tool to aid the writing process, ultimately placing more emphasis on what students are writing, rather than how they are writing it.

Patricia Young, assistant elementary education professor at the University of Maryland, suggests that handwriting basics need to be taught alongside computer technology. "When students submit an exam, it'll be handwritten", she said. "Penmanship and computer skills, therefore, need to run side by side."

James Beers, reading and language arts professor at the College of William and Mary, said that although penmanship may be declining, it's not going to disappear. "Not all forms can be filled out on-line," Mr. Beers said. "And even though more and more people are using e-mail to communicate with each other, there's still much value to the personal letter – and that will never go away."

*(Excerpted with permission from The Washington [D.C.] Times, Jan. 18, 2005)*

by Sarah Schmidt

Children in Alberta are exploring the keyboard in kindergarten. In Atlantic Canada, students in grade 1 are expected to compose and begin to revise and edit a simple text with a word processing program. In grade 2, youngsters in BC should be able to use graphics software and create, save, and retrieve Word documents. By grade 3, young Ontarians are expected to know when to type an e-mail instead of writing a letter.

The primary years used to be devoted to mastering printing and learning the rudiments of cursive writing. But today's schools have an additional burden: to teach technological and information literacy skills alongside traditional numeracy and literacy. Some are questioning whether school systems can do it all. "If it's keyboarding versus penmanship, I think penmanship loses out, just because of the packed curriculum. "It's something that you need time to do," said Susan Whelehan, an elementary teacher in Toronto.

Handwriting and penmanship used to be valued skills, even honoured as an art form to be nurtured. After hours of practice drills, students would show off their distinct loops and curves, a sign of strength of character and discipline.

Those days are long gone, but there is a push from some corners to make sure kids maintain strong handwriting skills. In Calgary, the local health region works with the school boards to promote the Handwriting Without Tears program, created by US occupational therapist Jan Olsen to emphasize ways to make handwriting an automatic skill for children.

"There has been less focused attention on the production of letters", said Lori Craig of the Calgary Health Region. "Formalized handwriting and printing has kind of gone out of the curriculum focus, so this has been looked to as an option that might fit."

Virginia Hartley of Edmonton can attest to this trend. The mother of eight children aged three to 21 admits some of her older kids can't write. "They print for basically everything, and I think they still have rotten printing. All they do is print. Even when they started cursive [writing] at school, you don't keep it if you don't practise it."

Ms Whelehan's approach to the lost art of penmanship is informed by her experience with Waldorf education. Both her children attended a local Waldorf elementary school, part of a movement founded in Europe in 1919. Waldorf schools believe the appropriate age for computer use in the classroom and by students is in high school, part of an overall approach to education that stresses the education of the whole child – hand, heart and mind.

Penmanship is highly valued, but is less about practice drills than about expressiveness, creativity and development of character, Ms Whelehan said. "If you really believe they're going to be in front of a computer for the rest of their lives, why would you want them to be in front of one as little kids?" she asks.

*(Excerpted with permission from CanWest News Service, Jan. 22, 2005)*