

The Typewriter, the Phenomenology of Writing and Teaching Children How to Write

History of Teaching Handwriting

Hello everyone, I'm Marcia. My video is about the typewriter, the phenomenology of writing and how this ties in with children learning how to print and write. I hope you enjoy it and thanks for watching!

In early childhood education, a lot of time is spent working with children to develop proper pencil grip, appropriate posture for sitting at a desk, and correct directional strokes for printing. Is all of this for nothing? Will these children even find printing and handwriting the "correct" way to be a valuable future skill?

In America, the teaching of handwriting dates back to the 1600s, when according to Mary Dougherty's 1917 article "History of the Teaching of Handwriting in America" said, "The acquisition of writing skill was so highly esteemed that it was common to have school devoted solely to the purpose of teaching this art" (Dougherty 1917). Teachers of handwriting were to be properly licensed and experienced to teach children to use materials such as the quill pen, birch bark and lead plummets (Dougherty 1917). Eventually, in the 1800s after the Revolution, textbooks became important, steel pens were introduced, as well as the first lead pencils. It is at this time that evidence for what we know as teaching printing was seen. Pestalozzi's theories involved "four or five guiding lines resembling the staff in music...used to measure exactly the height of the letters, and spacing was regulated by vertical crosslines. The elementary strokes as slants, curves, loops, and turns were taught first and identified by number" (Dougherty 1917).

In the late 1800s to early 1900s was when other questions arose in regards to writing: style, position, both of body and paper, and desks. Large amounts of paper were required at this

time to support drill methods that had come into existence (Dougherty 1917). More teachers were required to teach as well as to grade handwriting. Today, much of this may sound ridiculous to some, but it is clear that at this time, the teaching of handwriting was very serious and formal.

Writing by hand is a very sensory experience. “The closeness of the hand to the paper is associated by some writers with a sense of ‘intimacy’ with their text” (Chandler 1992). This makes me think of love letter writing when people would wait weeks and even months to hear from their loved ones far away. The smell of the paper, the handwritten ink on the weathered paper, is such a romanticized image that one just wouldn’t get with a letter typed on a computer and printed out on an inkjet. As advances in writing tools have been made, it does not change the underlying notion that “the primary advantage of writing over speech [is] the ability to revise” (Chandler 1992). Daniel Chandler, in “The phenomenology of writing by hand” however, goes on to say that,

Different tools vary in the support they offer for revision, and their use tempers the experience. ...Some feel that the wordprocessor encourages them to do too much editing and leads to a loss of spontaneity (Chandler 1992).

Richard Polt, in his lecture titled “A Phenomenology of Typewriters” described a situation when “a customer who received a typed letter from a business in the 1870s...wrote back angrily to say that he was perfectly capable of reading handwriting, and the business did not need to have documents specially printed for him. Typing can be an insult” (Polt 1996).

There is definitely a sense of ownership when it comes to writing something by hand. “For some writers, writing in one’s own hand has a resonance of privacy and informality, in contrast with the fixity and public nature of print...” (Chandler 1992). I think of signatures and autographs and how meaningful they once were. Now a simple inked stamp at the bottom of a letter or entering a pin number into a pinpad is enough to prove identity and authorize a transaction. I can’t imagine an artist completing a one of a kind painting only to finish with an inked stamp of his/her signature in the corner. There is a sense of privacy and trust when it comes to a signature.

Wikipedia suggests that the first commercial typewriters were introduced in the 1800s. One instance that I found particularly interesting was Italian Agostino Fantoni who created a typewriter in order to allow his blind sister to write. This sparked my interest in how typewriters were and still are used to support special needs children and children in general. Teaching young children how to print neatly and write simple sentences is a huge task and I wondered how this might all fit together.

Children and Typing

Many young children appear to be “not ready” for writing. Perhaps they are not able to grip a writing tool appropriately, maybe they have trouble sitting or focusing. Research has been done comparing writing and typing in young children and results seem to show that “...provided they are not too young, handwriting learning helps children to memorize the form of a letter” (Longcamp, Zerbato-Poudou and Velay 2004), however this finding is confusing as the link between writing and learning to read is a separate issue, as well as whether learning whole words as typed letters would be different than learning individual letters. Smoke, Murphy and Rockwell (2009) did a similar study on memory for handwriting vs. typing and found that

“Without the additional information provided by the physical act of handwriting, memory for typed words would be comparatively poor” (Smoke, Murphy and Rockwell 2009). In other words, memory is created when letters are being physically formed by the writer. A more recent study in 2015 by Kiefer, Schuler, Mater, Trumpp, Hille and Sachse, however, recognized that many young children today will have experiences with a computer or phone much earlier than they will master handwriting (Kiefer et al., 2015). They point out that “...typing on digital devices is taken as an argument in favor of writing training with typing to accelerate writing in young children or in children with less developed sensory-motor skills” (in Kiefer et al., 2015).

The following is taken directly from the Technology Act of 1988,

Assistive technology (AT) is defined as any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities (Technology Act of 1988). Assistive technology provides support for individuals who have sensory, motor, cognitive, and/or linguistic challenges. Assistive technology allows for or enhances the participation of children and adults in many of the daily activities that many take for granted...

Studies done on the use of assistive technology and learning disabilities indicate that the use of assistive technology devices with young children with disabilities is warranted, and that...the devices are likely to promote child engagement in typically occurring learning activities and permit children to perform functions that otherwise might prove difficult or even impossible ...”(Campbell et al., 2006; Mistrett, 2004 in Dunst, Trivette, Hamby & Simkus 2013).

To echo this, Jennifer Beck in her article, “Emerging Literacy through Assistive Technology” found that, “With the use of assistive technology, preschool-aged children with disabilities are able to successfully participate in literacy activities” (Beck 2002). Children who, in particular, have challenges with motor skills and language, with the use of a keyboard, can have a smoother time communicating, writing and participating in all aspects of the classroom.

Future Implications

Many studies today question whether or not handwriting is a dying art and what that means for the future generations. Noella Mackenzie in “Keyboarding, handwriting or both for 21st century” stated that, “Children of today do not know a world without mobile phones, tablets and computers. They often learn to swipe a touch screen before they learn to hold a pencil” (Mackenzie 2016). The general logical consensus seems to be that there must be a combination of both handwriting and keyboarding skills taught in school today. The link between memory and the physical act of doing something seems undeniable. Mackenzie said in the same article that, “Even adults remember more of what they write by hand than what they write on keyboard or tablet” (Mackenzie 2016). Anne Chemin echoes this thought by quoting Edouard Gentaz in her article titled “Handwriting vs. Typing: Is the pen still mightier than the keyboard? with, “Drawing each letter by hand improves our grasp of the alphabet because we really have a ‘body memory’” (Gentaz in Chemin 2016). It is no longer about perfection and formation of the letters, it is simply about being able to have your work read by others. Mackenzie supports that there is a difference in printing and cursive writing but that, “Cursive or not, the benefits of writing by hand extend beyond childhood. For adults, typing may be a fast and efficient alternative to longhand, but that very efficiency may diminish our ability to process new

information. Not only do we learn letters better when we commit them to memory through writing, memory and learning ability in general may benefit” (Mackenzie 2016).

Conclusion

I feel that it is important to stress that one is not necessarily better than the other in all capacities. Learning how to use various tools to help us succeed is what will be most effective overall. For special needs students in particular, the invention of the typewriter made a huge difference not only in learning but in teaching, evaluating, demonstrating and supporting. More and hopefully all students will be able to participate and be engaged in learning activities when various tools are accessible.

Thank you for listening. Making this video was a great learning experience for me and I look forward to watching many of yours.

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