

A Critique on Beck and Fetherston's Study on the Effects of Incorporating a Word
Processor Into a Year Three Writing Program

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In 2003, Beck and Fetherston embarked on a qualitative case study entitled, The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor Into a Year Three Writing Program. The goal of the study was to investigate whether or not the use of a word processor altered the students' attitudes towards writing. Beck and Fetherston utilized three main questions to help focus their research. The first two questions focused on the students' attitudes towards traditional handwriting. The third question concentrated on the development of students' writing when a word processor was used.

Seven students in Year Three from a school in Perth, Australia participated in the six-week study. They were to produce two hand-written works and two word-processed works. For each of the two pieces using each method, students were required to use a story starter for one piece and had the choice of using a story starter for the other piece. For the word processed pieces, students were required to use *Story Book Weaver Deluxe*. During the research process, data was collected in the form of observations and interviews, augmented by field notes, documents, and the assessment of students' written output.

The students' written work was assessed for quality using two methods. The first method was an analytical scoring system that focused on four categories including ideas, organization, style and mechanics. Within each of these categories, students' writing was assessed as either being weak, average, or strong. The students were also assessed using a Writing Developmental Continuum, which enabled the researchers to determine the students' abilities in their writing development.

Beck and Fetherston's study concluded that students' writing had improved as a direct result of using a word processor. Their findings led them to believe that students' word-processed works were longer, contained more detail, and had a larger selection of words. Generally, Beck and Fetherston claimed that written pieces were better when composed using a word processor rather than through handwriting. In addition, Beck and Fetherston also proclaimed that all of the students preferred using the word processor to handwriting.

I have many concerns regarding Beck and Fetherston's qualitative study. The use of *Story Book Weaver Deluxe* could have altered Beck and Fetherston's findings as it is highly graphical in an almost video game like configuration. In addition, the software enables the user to add background pictures imbedded within the text. While most word processors do in fact allow for the end user to add photos, *Story Book Weaver Deluxe* caters to children due to its highly colourful graphical user interface combined with sound effects and animation. Beck and Fetherston encouraged students to use these features of the software package including the use of pictures to help them get started. I believe that if the students were allowed to add pictures (by drawing them onto their paper) to their hand-written works, they would have enjoyed the process of handwritten story writing more than they proclaimed.

I also believe that the small sample size of children from the same class, only two of which being female, affected the study negatively. Also, I believe the study was altered negatively because students were only studied for a six-week period and only needed to produce four pieces of written work each.

Furthermore, I think that the students' teacher may have played a large part in the students disliking traditional writing. The teacher was obsessed with neatness, which stifled and caused trepidation amongst her students when they wrote. As a result, students came to the conclusion that neat writing meant good writing because they believed their teacher placed a higher value on neatness than content.

References

Beck, N. & Fetherston, T. (2003). The Effects of Incorporating a Word Processor into a Year Three Writing Program. Information Technology in Childhood Education Annual, 139-161.