RESCUING HANDWRITING FROM REDUNDANCY.

We cannot deny that the computer is changing the balance between the use of handwriting and the keyboard. With several countries phasing out the teaching of handwriting, we need to reconsider our own strategies for teaching this important skill in a fast changing situation. How to teach and what to teach are two questions that must be considered within the limitations of the curriculum. Addressing these questions will allow our future students to acquire an efficient script to suit their fast altering needs.

I have come to think, after many years of dealing with the subject, that the whole emphasis needs to be altered, with less importance on copying the model – any model – and the emphasis on the basic movement (point of entry and direction of stroke). There also needs to be a re-think on the level (i.e. amount) of joining that is necessary.

Letters are the result of a pattern of strokes memorised then reproduced automatically by the motor memory. That should be the basis of teaching - starting with directed patterns preschool. Teach letter movement thoroughly from the start in stroke related letter families. If sufficiently learned to start with, handwriting is a skill for life.

Relax and consider placing less emphasis on copying the model – any model. Does it matter if a child’s handwriting is narrower or broader, slanted or more upright than any particular model? This might indicate the start of a personal script, suited to the child, their hand and personality. Of course there are other things such as height differentials to deal with, but too many teachers have become accustomed to handing out copy sheets and permitting them to do the teaching. They themselves will learn very little, nor will quite a proportion of children; some of whom are past the stage of needing a particular sheet and others not yet ready. A copy sheet does not help to correct an awkward posture caused by an odd paper position, or a tense and painful pen-hold. Whatever aids you may use, one-to-one teaching will be needed, particularly at the vital early stage of learning.

Now to joining: no efficient adult joins all their letters, all the time – at least not since it was essential to avoid blots when using a quill. The teaching of handwriting now appears to be focused on emphasising the need for children to join every letter at a young age. This
approach should be reconsidered. Often this cursive approach is being implemented in reception class before children have even automated the correct movement of letters.

To be able to write fast, you will benefit from less repositioning of the pen. In this case, some level of join between letters is needed. Once children are confident in the correct movement of separate letters, they need to be shown how appropriate letters can join to each other. With a little encouragement and supervision they may well find those joins that suit their handwriting best and are most beneficial. For instance, the most time saving join is perhaps the crossbar join from $t$ to $h$. That is seldom taught but can often be seen in young children’s script where they have worked it out for themselves. In the future many people may do quite well with writing mainly separate letters, as they will write very little during their school or working life. Nevertheless, if you start with simple letters with an exit stroke that promotes a forward movement, it only needs enough confidence to keep your pen on the paper between letters to let them join. This may come as a result of encouragement or sheer need for speed.

I am definitely NOT suggesting a return to print script. These straight letters with all the pressure on the base line, trained in an abrupt movement, actually made it harder to alter to a free flowing joined up script. What I am suggesting perhaps makes it all sound too easy: it is not. This is a plea to put all the time in where needed – at the beginning. Be less didactic, putting less stress on neatness while still pointing out the need for legibility. Otherwise, we will go on making the learning of writing an onerous task with seemingly little purpose for many reluctant students who will in their turn add their views to the argument for its redundancy in the next generation.

This slightly altered focus has been prompted by my being asked to plan a short program for teaching teachers in training about handwriting. Typically they would be going out to schools with very different models and methods (sometimes neither). Therefore it was necessary to focus on essentials, especially as many of them would have had scant teaching of handwriting themselves at school. However, I really mean that unless we make handwriting easier to teach, and less tiresome for the majority to learn, within one or two generations the tide will have turned against writing altogether.

Little of what I suggest will happen quickly. Schools that have invested in expensive handwriting programs will still consider that to be adequate; while those that have opted for
some of the inadequate less expensive programs becoming available on the internet, are unlikely to drop them. It will need courage, belief and determination. However, the one way that will result in the end of handwriting is not to teach it. Those who will ensure its survival deserve proper training.

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