

The Real Hands On Learning

Cheryl Lowe

“Hands-on learning” is one of those buzz words that educators like to use a lot. It implies that students are doing something concrete, real, useful, engaging—that they are using all of their senses. Hands-on learning suggests that students are using what they have learned rather than just memorizing and regurgitating. Schools love to provide pictures of their students doing hands-on learning: art, crafts, computer, labs, experiments, sports, music, etc. It’s not until we use our learning that it is of any use to anybody, so let’s hear it for hands-on learning!

But wait. What is the primary hands-on academic skill? Is it computer, art, basketball, or dissecting a frog? Not really. The primary academic hands-on skill is writing. Why yes, there is great emphasis on writing today. Writing is the most telling sign of an educated person after all, which is why education reforms invest enormous amounts of time on writing. Writing is now even required on the SAT. My own state of Kentucky passed an education reform act (KERA) in 1990 with a major emphasis on writing. Every student had to produce a portfolio of writing every year. Students were writing, writing, writing ...

No, no, I don’t mean composition. I mean penmanship! Putting letters and words on paper, printing, and even cursive are the first hands-on academic skills. Printing and cursive? Well, yes, children must learn to print, but cursive? Many schools today don’t even bother with cursive. So what is so important about actual penmanship? Why, in this age of computers, we hardly even need actual writing anymore. Everybody today just texts and emails. There are too many important things to learn in school to waste time on penmanship and cursive. What we need is more science and math! Writing is going the way of the landline telephone.

Why bother?

Why bother, indeed, is the subject of this essay. I submit that putting words on a page is the hands-on academic skill. It is vitally important, yet virtually ignored. There is nothing more physical and elemental in academics than writing letters and words on paper with your own hands. Your whole body is involved—your mind, eyes, arms, hands. The physical act of printing requires focus, discipline, patience, attention to detail, and accuracy—priceless skills for the young child at the beginning of his academic career. And the beginning work sets the stage for all that follows. The habits we form here will either help or hinder our students for the rest of their lives. Academics is mainly about words and numbers, and putting them on paper accurately and legibly is vitally important. Yes, putting words on paper is hard, but it is also satisfying work for the young child.

The education process is as much about mental and character formation as it is about information and subjects. The formative value of the subjects we teach in school is as important as—if not more important than—the actual content. Math teaches logical, accurate, precise thinking; history teaches judgment, discernment, prudence; literature teaches sensitivity to the human condition; penmanship teaches the beginning student the basic skills of concentration, accuracy, correct spelling, and the patience and persistence required to do quality work. These mental habits, work habits, and skills transfer to every area of life. They distinguish the educated person from the uneducated.

Why do we have an epidemic of attention deficit disorder? Could it be that our careless attitude toward written work is a contributing factor? If we can be sloppy in our written work, why can’t we be sloppy and careless in listening and reading and in all of our academic work? Do our students have poor organization and study skills? Do they spend most of their academic time filling out worksheets using writing that looks like chicken scratching? Maybe the two are related. Students who are not taught the habits of neat, legible penmanship are handicapped in spelling and computation. Poor penmanship is a way to disguise misspelled words. Writing arithmetic problems neatly on a page so that all numbers line up and are legible is a prerequisite for getting the right answer. Would not an emphasis on quality written work increase the student’s ability to concentrate, focus, spell, and compute?

Our attitude toward printing and cursive is a symptom of everything that is wrong with modern education. We value abstract, higher-order thinking and denigrate basic, lower-order skills. Though we talk about hands-on and real life, we have a curious distaste for the real, concrete hands-on work that forms the foundation of true intellectual growth. It's as if we are disembodied spirits that can problem-solve, compose, and create without demeaning ourselves with the physical and concrete—the physical act of writing and the concrete act of memorizing.

We are in such a hurry to get to the end result, we don't have the patience or humility to lay a strong foundation. It is not uncommon to hear educators say that we just don't need to bother with these lower-order skills anymore. Computation? That's what calculators are for. Latin? We can't wait to get into translation, even though we have barely memorized the 1st declension. Composition? We assign our students 20-page papers in English even though they can't spell or compose a decent sentence. We think we can do algebra and calculus without going through the discipline of mastering long division with accuracy and speed. Math facts? Mere memorization—it's beneath us. And penmanship? Doesn't require any real thinking—it's just the mere making of letters on paper. These attitudes reflect a mind-body dualism, Descartes' ghost in the machine.

[Like so many other bad ideas in education, the mind-body dualism of the 17th century French philosopher Descartes has had a negative influence on educational practice. Classical and Christian philosophers agreed with Aristotle that man was an integrated whole; the soul was “the form (or pattern) of the body.” But Descartes thought the mind and the body inhabited separate worlds, one spiritual and the other physical. Thus the expression, ghost in the machine, meaning the mind and the body are no longer bound up in an organic whole, but rather two things, one (the mind) merely haunting the other (the body).]

Paradoxically, we do value such things as art, crafts, and calligraphy, and we want our children to make beautiful things with their hands at school. But when it comes to written work, all of a sudden we are indifferent. But in penmanship we have the perfect opportunity to develop the pleasure of working with our hands, for making neat, beautiful letters, for patience, for accuracy, for creating a well-proportioned page. A page of excellent writing is a work of art, a process to enjoy, and a pleasure to see. Using your hands is an enjoyable, satisfying, and fundamental skill for academic success. For the child, it is the beginning of the disciplined way of the mind, a necessary and integral academic skill, if you believe man is both mind and body working together as an integrated whole, and not Descartes' ghost in the machine.

In an age when hands-on learning has instant appeal, we never really use the real hands-on pathway to learning. When parents ask me if we have hands-on learning at Highlands Latin School, I say “Yes, we do—hands on pencil and paper.” That is the real hands-on learning that develops intellectual skills, which is what education is supposed to be about. Do you want to imprint something on your brain so you don't forget it? Do what I do—write it down. Once I have written it down I no longer need my note because I remember.

And let me say a word about cursive. Ours is a culture that values speed above everything. We are in a hurry and expect immediate results, impatient for online orders to arrive in the mail in two days. Speed is one of the primary benefits of cursive! For instance, make a row of print e's and a row of cursive connected e's. See how much faster cursive is? In an age that values speed like ours, why we don't value cursive is beyond me. Think of the advantage of taking notes in college, at meetings, and in a thousand different real-life situations. Mental math and cursive are two of the most useful skills any business person can have. In our business, we are always brainstorming, thinking on our feet, calculating in our heads, and jotting notes on paper. Time is valuable and the speed skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic are invaluable.

Many schools today have given up on cursive, and the ones that still teach it do so halfheartedly, and it usually doesn't take. Most young adults today print. Several years ago, I addressed my teachers about the importance of cursive in school. I asked them to always write good cursive on the board, and require cursive in written work. What I found out later is that few of my teachers wrote cursive and most were completely intimidated by my comments. However, several of them taught themselves cursive, and one in particular became the cursive king, developing his own worksheets measuring slant and spacing for his students.

When to teach cursive?

We struggled for years with cursive at Highlands Latin School. We began cursive in third grade with much groaning and protest. Every year thereafter we listened to the same wailing and gnashing of teeth. Do we have to use cursive? The problem is twofold. The third grader no longer wants to learn cursive because he doesn't see the older students using it, and secondly, after having developed some speed with print, he does not want to learn a new script that initially slows him down. Attitude is everything, and without a positive attitude, cursive had become a problem that we needed a solution for.

Then we saw the light. Frequently our first and second graders asked if they could write in cursive. Since our younger students wanted to learn, why not let them? So we decided to begin cursive in the first grade, and it was a total success. By the end of second grade, our students are writing beautiful, fluent cursive. Now they can enter third grade prepared for its increased writing demands rather than slowed down by the unwanted impediment of learning a new script. Presto—our problem was solved. To make sure that cursive sticks and becomes a lifelong habit, we require cursive in all written work in grades three and up.

And cursive in first grade seems to integrate well with the whole language arts curriculum of primary school. Reading and writing skills in kindergarten mirror each other as the child learns the basics of pencil grip, left to right directionality, and printing and sounding out individual letters and words. But by first grade, the child is blending the isolated sounds into words and words into sentences much more fluently. The growing fluidity of reading is mirrored in the flow and connections of cursive. By introducing cursive in first grade, the student's motor skills are advancing parallel with phonics and reading. By the end of second grade, the student has completed all of the fundamental language skills, which all fit together and prepare the child for the big change that occurs when he moves to grammar school in third grade.

Also, there is some research to support the idea that cursive can increase left/right brain coordination, having a positive impact on mental development. "The swirls and curls and connections of cursive handwriting activate parts of the brain that lead to increased language fluency." Some compare the act of printing versus cursive to dot-to-dot painting by numbers "versus the flowing rhythmic brush strokes of the artist." I am always a little skeptical of "brain research" in education, but I am not skeptical of the value and benefit of cursive for our students. It is something that our teachers and our students have experienced personally.

There is something pleasurable about cursive. I enjoy it. It flows and looks pretty, much more so than print; it looks more personal and sophisticated than print; it gives a disciplined scope for creativity and individuality. Haven't we all marveled at the beautiful cursive letters in programs like the PBS's *Civil War*? I am not very craft-minded; I don't have many hands-on skills like my mother, who made beautiful quilts. But I do like creating a page of cursive when writing a letter, or just for no reason at all—just as I enjoy doing long division. I could do a page of both every day. It's therapy. It's one of the few arts I do with my hands, and I do consider a page of cursive an art. Doing anything with your hands in an orderly and beautiful way is physical and mental therapy. The mind and hands need to work together because we are unique mind-body creatures.

What would an emphasis on penmanship and especially cursive do for our disadvantaged children who have so many obstacles to overcome? How would a child and his parents feel if he brought home a page of beautiful cursive every day (not original, but a copy page of the great words of others—our Founding Fathers, Scripture, poetry, great speeches, inspiring thoughts)? Would this not be a meaningful and productive use of academic time and a change of pace in our loosely structured and often chaotic public school classrooms?

The next time you see a picture of students engaged in hands-on learning, see if they have their hands on pencil and paper. That is the real hands-on learning that counts. And here is a way to improve education that will cost very little. Ask your teacher or school if they require neat, legible penmanship in all written work, in every grade, in every subject. You could even ask if they teach cursive!