

## Electronic Connection: Handwriting vs. Keyboarding, Fountain Pens vs. PDAs

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by Marshall L. Smith, Ph.D., and Robert Rivas, MSW

Okay, time to ask questions about where all this technology is leading us! Have students who rely on e-mail and text messaging lost their ability to express themselves through writing? Recently, the SAT exam, which is taken by millions of high school students hoping to be accepted to a college or university, added handwritten essays to the usual multiple choice questions. Only fifteen percent of the million and a half exam takers wrote their answers in cursive longhand. The rest of the exam takers printed their essays in block letters.

Why, you might ask, is this a problem? Well, for one, it takes longer to write out the same text in printed block letters than it does to do it in cursive handwriting. Further, research has shown that the students who print their essays produce simpler, less complex and shorter compositions. Essays written in longhand for the SAT scored higher than those that were printed in block letters, suggesting that this theory is true. Apparently, it is more difficult to express complicated thoughts and ideas when they are put on paper using block letters

What has replaced students' ability to write cursively? Obviously, it is keyboarding. On one hand, it is essential that students pick up good keyboarding skills as early as possible in school, but if one has never developed the flow in one's thought process that comes from writing cursively, is it possible to develop this flow during keyboarding? Can one learn to "think with one's fingers" the way our elders learned to "think with a fountain pen"?

A good friend of mine (Marshall's) teases me unmercifully when we meet at conferences: When we need to check what sessions we are going to, or when I just need to make a note, I reach for my PDA, remove the stylus, open to the right screen, and start using "graffiti." He, long before I have completed this process, reaches for his "BadDogShark," a 3x5 card that looks like a PDA on one side, and is a blank card on the other. By the time I have recorded the information on my PDA, he has written what he needed to record (in cursive), returned his BadDogShark back into his pocket, and taken a couple of sips on his cup of coffee. He enjoys making this point about the inefficiency of technology. Of course, I argue that at least my data is recorded and can be recalled from my database at a later time, but he just laughs at "unthinking dependence on technology." He has a point, and probably so do I.

In the end, the time gained because of the use of technology may very well be equal to the time lost because of the same technology. For example, how much time do you spend waiting for your computer to boot up each day? Waiting to deal with spam and annoying unsolicited e-mail? Waiting to update the planned obsolescence of software? Waiting to scan your computer for viruses, spyware, tracking bots, unwanted cookies, and so forth?

Then, there's data loss due to technology. At one time, we thought that by digitizing every important record, we could guarantee the preservation of information. But this guarantee could easily be compromised by the planned obsolescence of our hardware technology. For example, people from past generations remember recording TV programs on Betamax recorders and recording music on a variety of now obsolete devices such as reel-to-reel tape and cassette recorders. Unless one has these devices stored in an attic, access to these recordings is difficult at best. Many people still have their vinyl LP album collections stored somewhere. Try to find a good 33-45-78 rpm turntable these days! For our personal computers, even the floppy disk has run its course (both the 5¼ and the 3½ inch). Important data needs to be saved in several formats, and even then, the saved version might outlive the devices that can access the data.

And, what about our recent elections? New voting machines have appeared since the 2000 and 2004 election fiascos, but we still can't produce a paper trail to confirm the results of our voting. Even some digital voting machines have recorded the wrong vote—right in front of the voter's eyes! Aside from the corruption that may or may not be behind the scenes, we do not yet have voting procedures we can count on. A noted computer scientist remarked in response to the voting irregularities of these elections that this was an embarrassment to his profession and an indication that something other than programming quality has been influencing vote counts.

Lest I begin to sound like a Luddite, I use my computer for practically everything that calls for accuracy—remembering large amounts of data, tracking my financial records, managing the public information of the Distance Education Program of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and communicating with almost everyone in my life (including my 96-year-old mother). But, I still take notes in meetings in a notebook with a pen, occasionally printing in block letters, but usually writing cursive notes. I'd prefer to use my favorite fountain pen, but paper is now made to favor the ink of ballpoint or roller-ball pens. Paper is now so thin that the liquid ink flowing from a finely tuned fountain pen with the nibs carefully worn in and tailored to my own hand will bleed through to the other side quite easily. It is very rare for paper to remain opaque with notes written in fountain pen on both sides.

One final question seems appropriate: what do we gain and lose by relying on technology to express ourselves to others? Our handwriting is unique. It expresses our emotions with our own unique writing style. It is often perceived by the reader as more "personal" and can more deeply reflect our personalities. It tells the reader that we

have taken time to consider and fashion our communication. In contrast, keyboarding takes those personal aspects of our communication and standardizes them into an impersonal format. Keyboarding sanitizes the "metacommunication" (communication about how to interpret a message) that cursive handwriting so aptly expresses to a reader (just think of the computer symbols we have had to rely on to express our emotions, ;-). On the positive side, keyboarding provides us with immediacy. E-mail and text messaging allow us to be in instant and constant communication with those who are important to us. If we rely on keyboarding to express ourselves, will we lose our ability to be "personal" in our communications?

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