

Section 3 Concerning the Nature of the Learning to Write Process

Chapter 19, A Common Sense Approach to the Teaching of Handwriting

When I first began tutoring dyslexics years ago, I quickly realized the advantages of reading upside down. First of all, I personally could never stand having somebody look over my shoulder when I was reading. Secondly, I like to watch a student's facial expression for cues and clues. So, I tutor with my student sitting across the corner of a table from me.

was/saw - spider/rapids

While perfecting my ability to read upside down, I made some very simple discoveries. I, too, made reversals in reading. I read *saw* for *was* and *was* for *saw*. Once I even read *spider* for *rapids*.

But most embarrassing was my failure to read the word *shoe* in context. I struggled to sound it out. "SH-OH" was the best I could do, and I knew that it couldn't be the word *show* even if the sounds of "SH" as in **sh**ip and "OH" as in **toe** were there. The proper pronunciation just wouldn't come to me until I turned the book right side up. Did I ever blush! My face turned beet red. Here am I, a reading expert, unable to use properly the context clues that were there in front of me. I couldn't figure out the simple word *shoe*. How utterly embarrassing!

context clues not enough for an expert!

Then it dawned on me that if I, the research director of the AVKO Foundation, can't correctly use context clues to read a very common word in a simple sentence, then just having an emphasis on "whole language" and "context clues" can't possibly be enough for many students.

But it wasn't until I taught myself to write upside down that I was really humbled and really began to learn something about the learning-to-write process. I too printed *d*'s for *b*'s and *p*'s for *q*'s and my *s*'s were sometimes backwards as well.

How could that be? Here I am, a self-confessed expert in the field of reading, listed in *Who's Who in Education*, recipient of dozens of awards, and author of over forty books in the area of reading and spelling. How could I?

stick + ball = b or d?

How could I make such elementary mistakes? Even more frustrating to me personally was that I should have known better than to teach myself using the stick-ball manuscript printing that is so commonly taught in elementary schools across our country. I just did what seemed to be the easiest. Yes. Sure. It was easy enough to make the balls and place the sticks. Except, if I didn't concentrate on which side the stick went, I often got it on the wrong side. And that is embarrassing when you are supposed to be teaching a dyslexic, not *being* a dyslexic!

Sorry, Don I knew better.

Why should I have known better? Very simple. Donald Neal Thurber, the originator of D'Nealian® manuscript handwriting is a close personal friend of mine. The moment I heard of his new printing style that utilizes the kinesthetic (muscle movement) memory in continuous strokes that lead right into regular cursive handwriting, I recognized it as a logical common sense approach that eliminates much of the unnecessary hassle in teaching.

I preached the gospel of D'Nealian® to teachers. I convinced many that it would help prevent reading and spelling problems. Yet, when it came time to teach myself, I didn't use D'Nealian®. Why? Well, I

little time with his chart in front of me. And heavens to Betsy, I might have to practice the strokes! With stick-ball, there's nothing to practice. Just put the stick to the left of the ball and you have a b. Put the stick to the right and you have a d. Uh, huh. Reversing that to write upside is no problem. Right? Are you kidding? Try it.

But you know, now I'm glad I was lazy. Because now, I really know that the D'Nealian® continuous stroke concept is far superior for the teaching of writing than any other. Now, I feel that all those ivory-tower professors who preach the stick-ball theory as the way to teach handwriting ought to be forced to learn how to write upside down and with their opposite hand! Then they might just know first hand how frustrating learning to write can be.

Common Sense Concept #1:

Teach the sounds of the letters and the words that the letters make
AS you teach the alphabet – not after.

Not long ago, my first grandson, my pride and joy, was in kindergarten. He had tested out as gifted. Was I ever proud. But then, by January the school informed his parents that he would have to repeat kindergarten because he hadn't learned his alphabet well enough!

Something was wrong. A "gifted" child unable to learn! If he was a behavioral problem, we might have understood. But he wasn't. According to his teacher, he was a model student. Naturally, his parents took him to an ophthalmologist to have his eyes examined. No problem there. They had him tested for learning disabilities. No problem was uncovered. Finally, they brought him to his grandpa.

Before I tested my grandson, I told my son and his wife what I was sure the problem was. It was simply that the stick-ball letters (b d p g q) were improperly taught. I was sure that he knew the other letters.

But to make sure, I created lists of letters written in all sizes and styles of type. Sure enough, grandpa was right. The only letters he couldn't correctly identify 100% of the time were the stick-ball letters.

What his teacher did with the information I provided, I don't know. At any rate, he didn't make sufficient progress from January to June. The last day of school a special individual educational planning committee meeting was held for my grandson. The recommendation was for retention. I was asked to attend by his mother who couldn't believe that one more year of the same instruction would benefit her son.

After hearing my testimony, the committee reluctantly changed its mind. He wouldn't have to repeat kindergarten if his mother promised to teach him at home during the summer.

I provided her with exercises based on a simple concept: As you teach letters, teach words!

abc will give you *a_cab*. Add *d* (*abcd*) and now you have *a dad add* and *bad*.

She only worked with him 30 minutes a day during the summer. Fall came and he entered the first grade. His first report card came and the young man who was supposed to be retained was now on the honor roll. And he has been on the honor roll ever since!

Common Sense Concept #2:

Teach at least the reading of cursive at the same time that you teach manuscript.

Traditionally, children get locked into printing manuscript during the first two or three years of school. But they see people writing cursive. They want to write, but teacher says no. We must learn printing first. Wait until you get to the 3rd or 4th grade (as the case may be).

By the time cursive is introduced, many students have lost their initial enthusiasm. Still others have become so comfortable with their printing, they resist change.

Common sense says that this confrontation need not be. It would not be if both manuscript and at least the reading of cursive are taught at the same time!

Let's look at just the first five letters of the alphabet and some of the words that they make:

D'Nealian □ Manuscript slants + connector = *D'Nealian* □ Cursive

<i>a b c d e</i>	+ connector =	<i>abcde</i>
<i>cab</i>		<i>cab</i>
<i>bad</i>		<i>bad</i>
<i>bed</i>		<i>bed</i>
<i>bead</i>		<i>bead</i>

Stick ball Manuscript has no slant No connection to Cursive

<i>a b c d e</i>	<i>ÀçàãîÂîÑîá</i>
<i>cab</i>	<i>îÂçàí</i>
<i>bad</i>	<i>çàâÄÁíá</i>
<i>bed</i>	<i>çàâîÂîá</i>
<i>bead</i>	<i>çàâîÄÄîá</i>

Common Sense Concept #3:

Legibility should be the objective of handwriting.

No matter what style of manuscript or cursive is utilized, grading is almost always based upon how close a child's handwriting is to the model being taught. But should it be? I think we give too much lip service to the concept of individuality and not enough true assistance.

There are many acceptable ways of printing (manuscript) and writing (cursive), just as there are many different styles of print used in magazines and newspapers. Students have to learn to read these different styles. So, why can't we help students learn to read other styles of handwriting? As long as a letter is made in such a manner that it cannot be confused with another letter, and as long as anyone who reads that letter can read it quickly and correctly as the intended letter, why bother marking a student down for not properly following the model being taught?

What is unacceptable? Any writing that causes deciphering problems to a reader who is not familiar with the person's handwriting is unacceptable. For example, I am positive it was the sloppy handwriting of a doctor (or nurse) that gave a very unique spelling to a very common name. Years ago, at a national PTA convention I met a woman whose first name on her convention badge was :



Being an "expert" in reading always poses new challenges. How was her name pronounced? How would you pronounce it? Keen, Queen, Kee Enn, Kee Ann, Kwee Enn, Kwee Ann, Gwen, Kwhigh Enn, or Kigh Enn?

My guess was Kee ENN. What was yours? If you guessed Gwen, you were right. And Columbus discovered electricity, too.

How did that spelling come about? My guess is her mother had a friend named Gwen. She wanted to name her child after her. In the hospital, she decided to ask her doctor how to spell GWEN. And so she wouldn't forget the spelling, she probably asked the doctor to write it on a slip of paper. Down came a quick flashing prescription-scrrawl that might have looked something like this:

The sloppy G could pass for a Q. For the w to look like a ui, all it would take is to have the ball point pen skip just the slightest bit. Then the -en is clear enough. Now Gwen is spelled Quien. Isn't that cute? I'm sure you know some horror stories of your own concerning spelling and handwriting. I haven't met an educator who hasn't.

Legibility. Legibility. Legibility. Make letters that people can read. Individuality is fine as long as everybody can read it. Teachers should not accept the following arguments in defense of illegibility.

- *Well, that's the way my 2nd grade teacher taught me.*
- *Well, that's the way I've always done it.*

Common Sense Concept #4:

Practice of letter patterns should be used to teach indirectly:
Spelling (Encoding) and Reading (Word Recognition or Decoding).

Legible handwriting (either manuscript or cursive) makes clear distinctions between such words as **clear** and **dear**, **clean** and **dean**, **close** and **dose**, **such** and **suck**, **much** and **muck**, **Card** and **Carol**. Consistent spacing and attention to letter formation avoids the following problems:

My clear Card:

It is dear that a

clean can dose

clown a clorm

if heeping a

room dean

is too muck

for stuclents.

My dear Carol:

It is clear that a

dean can close

down a dorm

if keeping a

room clean

is too much

for students.

How best to achieve legibility? By practicing the problem patterns. Although drill is the dreaded word today of whole language advocates, we all recognize that some drill is necessary. There isn't a single winning coach in the United States that doesn't insist on the members of the team practicing (drilling) on fundamentals. So why not use the necessary drills in penmanship to lead to better understanding of the structure of our language without any preaching?

Here is a sample exercise in cursive handwriting:

Today we are going to practice making our h' and our k' . We don't want our h' to look like k' or our k' to look like h' . When we make our h' remember the concept of the hill. When we make our k' remember to tuck in our belly really tight. I'm going to give you a word. I'll use it in a sentence. Then I'll give it again. You spell it. Then to show you how nice a teacher, I am, I'll let you correct any mistake you might make in spelling it. Okay? Ready?

h words:

itch

ditch

pitch

stitch

latch

patch

match

crutch

clutch

k words:

tick

stick

Rick

trick

tack

stack

pack

tuck

stuck

While students are concentrating on making their h's and k's correctly, their computer brains are locking in on the patterns of the letters and the sounds that they make. No academic knowledge of phonics is necessary on the part of either the teacher or the students. It just comes naturally. For example, little Johnny hears the teacher say "itch." When I itch, I scratch. itch." Johnny misspells the word as *ich*. Not a bad misspelling, by the way. After all, the most common words with the "ICH" sound are *rich* and *which* and *sandwich* and they end in *ich*!

Now, the teacher writes the word *itch* on the board calling attention to the letter *t* and how it must be crossed properly. Little Johnny erases his misspelled word and writes it correctly. Now when the teacher gives the word *ditch*, he will most likely use the correct *-itch* ending and just put the letter *d* in front of it. If he does, he feels good about it. He spelled a word correctly that he had never studied! The word *ditch* is in his real world vocabulary. Yet, it is a word that most whole language approaches are liable to miss!

Repetition Repetition Repetition

One of the oldest methods of teaching spelling is having students write a word fifteen or more times. Research (Fitzsimmons, Loomer, 1978) clearly demonstrates that this method has never worked and probably never will work. Yet, it seems so logical that it's almost impossible to fight it. But why doesn't it work? It seems that learning takes place with the **concentration**, not the unconscious unthinking repetition. Notice in the examples above the word and sound **itch** is written four times: once by itself and three times buried inside the words, *ditch*, *pitch* and *stitch*. When students **concentrate** on *one* whole word and repeat specific patterns within words, learning takes place rapidly. But don't take my word for it. Try out this concept for yourself. See page 235 on how to construct your own sequential spelling tests. Or you can write for an AVKO catalog in which you will find a short set of lesson plans with a method of testing out whether second or third graders can learn a big and very, very difficult word like **beginning** without ever once studying it.

The difficulty of the word **beginning** is reflected in the study conducted by the University of Iowa (Greene, 1943) in which it was found that only 8% of 3rd graders could correctly spell the word, only 10% of 4th graders, 34% of 5th graders, and only 39% of 6th graders. Yet, sneaking spelling in through the backdoor of handwriting exercises can produce competent spelling with no formal studying by students and little or no correcting of papers by teachers.

References:

- .Fitzsimmons, Robert J and Bradley M. Loomer. *Spelling: Learning and Instruction*, Iowa State Department of Public Instruction and the University of Iowa, 1978.
- Greene, Harry A. *The New Iowa Spelling Scale*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa, 1954.