The Case For Cursive In A Digital World

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With student test scores plummeting further every year, is cursive writing really that important? Absolutely!

Daniel Coupland

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America's education system is becoming a total disaster, but we sometimes forget it's not all bad news. For instance, this year, California will again require its school-aged children to learn cursive handwriting, and other proposals to bring back cursive are popping up nationwide. Cursive is making a comeback.

You might be thinking: With test scores plummeting further every year, is cursive really that important?

Absolutely!

In 2010, the federal government published the national Common Core education standards to help prepare students for college. Cursive was left out. Teachers and parents quickly found that children who never learned to *write* cursive also could not *read* cursive. Gen Z can't even read letters from their grandparents written in cursive. That means much of the Gen Z cohort also can't read primary source documents such as the Declaration of Independence without remedial help.

Scientists have only just started making the case for handwriting, but the data indicates cursive has many knock-on effects, including a better grasp of grammar and spelling. Writing by hand has been shown to improve learning and memory. You think differently when you write by hand than by keyboard. Your thinking isn't as distracted when writing with pen and paper.

Handwriting is also slower. There is less room for error, correction, deletion, or addition. That restriction forces you to really think about the connection between individual letters and individual words.

One little-known fact about students who write by hand: They are demonstrably better spellers. Studies suggest longhand note-takers demonstrate better information retention compared to their peers who use laptops. (Students using laptops tend to take more notes, not better ones.) The slow and deliberate attention handwriting requires plays a big part in that. For that reason alone, it should be promoted.

Yes, becoming comfortable with cursive might take some time initially, but it's also more efficient in the long run. Once students are adept at cursive writing, they can take notes and write essays more quickly than those confined to printing, and they remember more than those confined to typing. Cursive also demands finesse and discipline. It demands hard work and determination every day. It lives where physical and intellectual development meet. That brings me to the most compelling reason for instruction in cursive: It's just beautiful.

If you've been around a classical school for more than a minute, you've probably heard the phrase "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty." Still, some of us more readily apologize for truth and goodness than for beauty. But don't we crave beauty with an equal conviction? The success of the cosmetics industry would suggest as much. Classical educators everywhere shouldn't be shy in promoting beauty like we mean it.

In its focus on beauty, cursive handwriting is an activity more formative to what parents hope for their children than any single standardized test could be. It uplifts a work-a-day practice like writing and recording into a transcendent good. Content mastery is essential, of course, but cursive instills in students an appreciation of craftsmanship and the importance of taking pride in appearance.

My father has beautiful cursive that he learned as a youngster in grade school. Now in his eighties, his penmanship has been perfected over a lifetime of use. He perfected it not only because it was useful, but also because it gives him the satisfaction of creating something beautiful.

As teachers, it's difficult to hear all the bad news coming out of education today. But we know what it takes to turn it around. Cursive starts with asking your students to pick up a pencil and follow your lead. And to its credit, states like California have just made it easier for you to do just that.

Dr. Daniel B. Coupland is the Dean of the Graduate School of Classical Education, the Chairman of the Education Department, and a Professor of Education at Hillsdale College. He is the author of a new book on teaching titled Tried & True, published by Hillsdale College Press.

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