

Slippery slope of ending cursive

A professor at Shandong Normal University in Jinan, China, confided to me over lunch after my morning lectures at his college last year, "Our students are forgetting how to write!"

The culprit was the new electronics. The Chinese-language input system for handheld smartphones as well as for computers uses an efficient system to prompt the next-most-likely character. For instance, you want to start a message with "I want...." You key in the sound of the word for "I" and the many Chinese characters that have that sound are lined up with the most common word first. You merely press 1 and that complex character is selected. But before you can key in the sound for "want," the next-most-likely characters are lined up for selection. And "want" is the most-likely second word. Click!

The result is that the user merely recognizes the Chinese character by overall "looks," or what we call Gestalt or pattern.

"The students are forgetting how to write the characters stroke-by-stroke because the computer brings it up for them," my colleague said.

Today, our cell phones are making texting easy for American children by using this same next-most-likely-word input system.

Students are trained to write without elegance or creativity. They are copying the most common and simplistic way of saying things.

Reading researchers have documented the lack of deep reading among the techie generation. We are now experiencing a similar lack of "deep writing" as teens and tweens send an average of 200 text messages a day, often using a program that narrows their literacy by offering convenience.

Even adults can feel the pull to shallow reading on an electronic screen. I find myself skimming online documents, barely reading the first line of each paragraph, something I never do with printed pages. This drop in comprehension from scrolling (in comparison with page-by-page text) by students has been solidly documented by Sanchez and Wiley in the journal *Human Factors*. But a decade of documented research means nothing to the computer enthusiasts: Anything digital is always "better."

And it gets worse. A year ago, one high school teacher pointed out that some of his students could no longer name the months of the year in order. January-February-March no longer came in that order because at any time, a student can reach for the smartphone and read the date. Like a phone number that you look up and repeat to yourself as you dial – but then never move into long-term memory, many students today never look at a calendar. They no longer have the month sequence in mind, although they did know it when they graduated from kindergarten to first grade.

Nor does the techie generation think they need to know anything if they can access it by smartphone. Their memory is more and more stored on their belts or in their purses.

The consequences are far-reaching. For the first time, China entered the international PISA competition and scored a jaw-dropping hundred points beyond prior winners in mathematics. While in China this spring, I asked my Chinese students when were they allowed to use calculators in math class: "Never before sixth grade."

What about electronic dictionaries? The limit on English was the same as math. But electronic Chinese dictionaries had to wait until later. To put it simply, Chinese students know what division and logarithms mean; American students just hit a key on the keypad. There is a reason that nearly 90 percent of graduate degrees in U.S. university engineering programs go to foreign students.

Down the road, techie futurists have an even bigger dream.

Forget cursive writing. Why are we even teaching reading? We can put books under a scanner and the computer will read them to us.

And why teach writing? Record into DragonSpeak and it will write for us. Getting rid of cursive is just the first step.— John Richard Schrock

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.



Comparing kids and politicians

Each particular age of children presents its own challenges. The sleepless nights of infancy, the terrible twos, and then, what I like to call, the tattle tale fives. Today's current political climate seems to mimic the latter, particularly in the following ways; Five year olds seldom hold themselves accountable, they are always the victim, they do not hesitate to lie or blame others, and even if the other side won the game, they should get their own way.

A bit like Washington, wouldn't you say?

Neither side acknowledges responsibility for the current fiscal crisis. The Republicans seem to have forgotten when George W. took the reins from Clinton, we had a budget surplus. Two wars and eight years later, the second Bush had increased the total

Phase II Mary Kay Woodyard



national debt by 86 percent. That said, under Ronald Reagan it soared over 200 percent. In President Obama's first two years, the debt grew 34 percent. Neither party has found ways to cut entitlements, without raising the fear card of Social Security or Medicare reductions. There are plenty of other ways, such as ferreting out government fraud, i.e. tax evasion, Medicare fraud, etc.

If you listen to politicians, it is always, woe is me. Look what they are

doing to US. Each side points to the other. Republicans fail to acknowledge Obama won the White House and Democrats won the Senate. Yes, the House is in Republican control, but those were individual elections, as was the Senate. The country, as a whole, re-elected President Obama on his theme of taxes. Each party seems to feel they have their finger on our pulse, a false arrogance about their role.

Sometimes we just have to accept the fact, in a democracy, we are not the keeper of everyone. We may not like the outcome, but we need to respect the institution. So grow up, get over it and let's move on. If you don't get it resolved, you have to stay in from recess, do not pass go, and do not collect \$200. Mail to: mkwoodyard@ruraltel.net

Missing getting the mail the old fashioned way

To date we have received very few Christmas cards. They are probably going the way of the dinosaur. One Facebook friend has posted greetings and for several years we have received e-mail cards.

That's okay, but I love mail. Something I can hold in my hands and keep forever if it touches my heart.

I delete most e-mail as soon as I read it. About 70 percent (ads and such) goes directly to the trash. I keep "paperwork" on cyber transactions until the merchandise arrives and is deemed satisfactory. I keep recipes and links to awesome videos, photos or music.

I have been reading David McCullough's, "John Adams". Just to keep from being labeled hopeless about all things technological, I'm reading it on a Kindle!!!!

David McCullough wrote this book after gleaning information from countless letters, court documents and political tracts written by Adams, his friends, foes and family; especially his wife Abigail.

In 250 years will our electronic musings be available for historians to mull over?

Part of me hopes the answer is no. What has 2012 produced of note? "Gangnam Style?"

The proliferation of electronic media allows us to put a lot of stuff out there with very little thought. Sometimes I can't help myself and respond with very little thought. Just yesterday I saw something suggesting those wishing to

This Too Shall Pass Nancy Hagman



become American citizens turn back until they learned English.

"Did your forefathers speak English when they arrived at Ellis Island?" I queried.

The lady took it graciously. "Good Point....."

Some of my forefathers did speak English, because they were Englishmen. They came to America not by way of Ellis Island but pre-Revolutionary War.

What do you suppose the Native Americans were communicating, via smoke signals, when they first saw my great-great-great (who knows how many greats) grandfather? "Come back when you speak Mohican?"

My Facebook friend went on to say that she was just tired of hearing the option "Press one for English" on automated answering machines. She uses the phone a lot for work.

I understand, though pressing one for English is hardly the thing that disturbs me the most about automated answering.

I've been getting some serious flak about my refusal to text. I just don't feel the need. If I want to tell someone

something, I want to know they are listening. I call. I rarely even carry a cell phone because we don't get many calls on our house phone. Why would I need to carry a cell? To be reminded that no one wants to talk to me?

Maybe if I were nicer on Facebook and quit bragging about my ancestors people would be friendlier. So----I am directly descended from a guy who was hung for murdering a neighbor. However, if he had a better lawyer he would most certainly have gotten off. Because the guy needed killing or so the story goes! Do you like me better now?

My son-in law tells me there is new technology that allows you to speak into your phone which turns it into a text.

WOW!
What will they think of next? It's almost like leaving a message on an answering machine, except you have to read it.

I appreciate technology, I ordered Christmas stamps on-line, but I haven't done my cards. I can't install the printer to this computer because it can't read the CD, or some such manner of nonsense. So I can't print a letter.

I could do the letter on the old computer but this Windows 8 thing is seductive! It is like a spaceship versus Model T. Who wants to get out and turn a crank before they go somewhere!

Still part of me wishes for, maybe not quill and ink, but at least a mailbox full of Christmas cards!

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E-mail: nortontelegram@nwkans.com

ISSN 1063-701X

215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, KS 67654

Published each Tuesday and Friday by Haynes Publishing Co., 215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, Kan. 67654. Periodicals mail postage paid at Norton, Kan. 67654.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Norton Telegram, 215 S. Kansas, Norton, Kan. 67654
Official newspaper of Norton and Norton County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, and the Nebraska Press Association

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