

Reading, writing, 'rithmetic & a whole lot more

by **Jim Newell**

I was talking with someone in July, someone who was surprised and upset by the fact that students today are unable to write legibly. She had been assisting two young university students who were filling out forms to sign up for summer jobs. She discovered they were both unable to write the necessary information so it was legible. Not only that, but she has also been disturbed lately by the way young cashiers in grocery and other stores are unable to make change when a customer prefers to pay cash rather than use a credit or debit card. "They can't do simple arithmetic in their heads," she said.

I wanted to ask, "Where have you been lately? That's not a new phenomenon. Ever since students began using computers in schools, they haven't been required to write very much, and when calculators began to be sold at an affordable price, mental arithmetic has been a lost cause."

I taught High School English for a number of years in the 1960s and '70s. That meant essays. Essays must be read and marked. Those essays were always handwritten, because even typewriters were too expensive for many of the students where I taught.

Some of the students' handwriting back then was difficult to read, but not nearly as difficult as it would be now. Not that there's a problem with today's students – everything must be typed on a computer.

150 essays a week!

From a teacher's point of view I can see the work load would be much easier if every assignment were written on computer. One year I had five Grade 10 classes. That meant more than 150 essays every week and the same number of exams. Reading them all was a major cause for headaches. I would have really enjoyed reading the computerized versions - had they been available.

I can see a need for some handwriting work as well as the computer variety. How to go about it? I haven't a clue. Nor have I any idea how to have today's students do arithmetic without using calculators.

More to teach more to learn

There is so much more to be taught in the classroom today. Teachers face demands for presenting so much new material the only way to get through it all is the fastest way. There just isn't time for the old-fashioned way of using a rod to beat out the times tables as the class goes through the drill in unison.

One practical example: can you imagine a fighter pilot trying to do the calculations he must do by mental arithmetic while flying at twice the speed of sound? If he can't do them by punching a few buttons on a computerized calculator, he couldn't fly the airplane. And that's only one example.

If I had to write this column by hand and have somebody type it into the form in which you are presently reading it, you very likely would not be reading it.

And please don't say, "Hurray!" That would really hurt my feelings.

August 22, 2011

Today is August 22, and I cannot let the day go by without mentioning this is Dorothy's and my 59th wedding anniversary. I have attached the photo which of all those we have had taken through the years I like best. It was taken in 1980 when I was 50 years old, and Dorothy wasn't.

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