

Is cursive cursed?

Written by Darci Tomky

Holyoke Elementary third-graders filed into their seats Tuesday morning, Jan. 14 for another lesson on cursive in Nicole Churchwell's classroom.

"Third grade is really excited about doing it," said Churchwell, who teaches them cursive for 30 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The students' faces lit up as Churchwell, at the front of the classroom, introduced their new cursive letter—a capital "O." They laughed as she explained the little "Curly Q" at the top of the letter, demonstrating it using an electronic tablet and electronic board.

Gripping their pencils, they each practiced the "O" with a big swooping motion in the air. Worksheets were then passed out, with focused concentration as each student repeatedly practiced the new letter, eventually adding it to words with the cursive they had mastered earlier in the year.



Holyoke third-graders are excited to learn a new letter in their cursive lesson with teacher Nicole Churchwell Tuesday, Jan. 14. From left, students Ashton Robles, Piper

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McConachie and Mariana Varela use their pencils to trace a capital “O,” complete with its “Curly Q” at the top.

—Enterprise photo

“It was something to look forward to,” said retired teacher Justine Likens, who has over three decades of experience in elementary education, 23 of which were in the second grade.

Learning cursive, she said, was a little milestone for her second-graders as they began the second semester with something a little more relaxed and fun than their other coursework.

“The kids actually like learning cursive,” said Lynn Schneider, who is in her 12th year in Holyoke’s third-grade classroom, with 12 additional years in fifth grade. “This is grown-up writing we get to do.”

Despite the excitement on the kids’ faces, it’s up to the school district to decide whether or not to continue with cursive instruction. Schneider said at this point, Holyoke School District saw cursive as valuable enough to still incorporate its teaching in the classroom.

Schneider explained that about four to five years ago, Holyoke moved the introduction of cursive from the second to the third grade where it is now taught with additional reinforcement in fourth grade.

The recently adopted Common Core Standards—used in all but five of the states—does not require cursive instruction.

A recent national survey conducted by Really Good Stuff, a teacher supplies retailer, found 65

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percent of second-grade teachers and 79 percent of third-grade teachers still teach cursive.

Another 2007 study by Vanderbilt found 50 percent of teachers in the second grade and 90 percent in the third grade taught cursive in the U.S.

Many schools are devoting the time for things like computer keyboarding or even the core subjects, as a lot of emphasis is placed on standardized testing.

Holyoke Elementary technology teacher Laura Loutensock said she spends at least 30 minutes each week with students on keyboarding. Informal instruction begins in kindergarten as students begin to recognize the letters on the keyboard.

By the second half of second grade, Loutensock is teaching formal keyboarding, emphasizing accuracy and correct fingering. "Typically, I expect students to increase at least five words per minute per grade," she said, noting kids should be at 25 words per minute in the sixth grade. Some excel, keyboarding more than 40 words per minute by the time they leave elementary school.

"Keyboarding is an essential skill that students will need as they move into junior high, high school, college and careers," said Loutensock.

Like many teachers, Loutensock still believes that students should learn at least enough cursive to read it, write their signature and even read their birthday card from grandparents.

"There's a piece of me that doesn't want to give it up," said Schneider. "But does the amount of time justify it?"

She explained teachers are often more focused on the content of an assignment, essay or test than the handwriting used to complete it.

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Some adults will remember how cursive was usually required on all assignments or tests through a certain grade. Now, beginning in fifth grade, Holyoke teachers are just asking for the students' best legible handwriting, whether it be cursive or printing.

For example, JR/SR high language arts teacher Angela Powell estimated that less than 10 percent of her students use cursive on day-to-day worksheet-type assignments for her class.

"Most times, as long as it is a short constructed response or an essay, I am requiring them to type their work instead of writing it out by hand," said Powell, noting most kids prefer to type their work.

"Very few students use cursive for their assignments—maybe one out of five—and those that do use more of a print-cursive hybrid than formal cursive," said Heather Bieber, another language arts teacher in Holyoke.

She's noticed how primarily all seventh-graders handwrite their homework, but by their sophomore year, about one-third of students are typing work on their own laptops, with that number increasing as students progress through school.

For essays and research papers, Bieber requires typed work, although she gives students in-class time to use school computers.

"Since so few students seem to use cursive, it seems that the time could be spent elsewhere," said Bieber. "In today's technology-driven society, it is more likely that students will be required to type or use technology than to write in cursive."

"I think it's a lost art," said Churchwell, adding that she thinks most of her students, who are so excited about cursive now, will eventually go back to printing.

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With the increase of computers, emails, texting and other technology over the last few decades, adults also find themselves turning to an electronic device to type out notes, lists and letters. Their signature might be the only thing they handwrite in a week's duration.

While some say there is no need to learn cursive anymore, there are still many who argue its benefits.

Cursive a skill society would hate to see lost

"It has a place in society," said Mary Kay Davidson, a former Holyoke teacher with 42 years experience in elementary and junior high. "If I were still in the classroom, I'd be arguing for it."

Cursive writing is great brain training for students. It teaches muscle control and hand-eye coordination, using both mental and physical processes from both sides of the brain.

That flowing movement in the thought process is a benefit for some kids, said Davidson.

The University of Washington found handwriting is developmentally important to the writing process, affecting ideation, planning, text production, spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Ever wonder why teachers always make students write vocabulary words over and over again? Writing words down on paper increases a person's ability to remember those words.

Cursive may be slower than keyboarding, but it gives students—and adults—time to think, reflect and form sentences.

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While it takes a lot of time and dedication to learn the loops and curves of cursive, once learned it can speed up writing as all the letters are connected together.

One might also ask how the next generations will be able to read cursive if they never learn how to write it themselves.

Document forensics, handwriting analysis and historical/genealogical research will be affected, not to mention simply reading a letter from a grandparent or other relative.

Likens said she prints letters to her grandkids now because they can't read cursive. But at the same time, for her, seeing her grandmother's cursive writing is very sentimental.

Penmanship correlates to history, added Davidson. "That's part of my heritage. It's something to be proud of," she said, remembering the handwriting of people in her own family.

The artistry of handwriting is a way for someone's personality to shine through, almost giving a history of that person just through the style of words on paper. "What's coming is an outflow of you," said Davidson.

"It's like the melody of a song," she said. "The words are beautiful, but once you put the melody to it, it comes to completion."

Many people don't want to lose the personal touch of cursive writing and, like Davidson, never print or type a letter. How many emails are printed off and cherished for many years to come?

Signatures are also usually in cursive, whether it be a coveted signature from a celebrity or a signature on a check. Cursive is harder to copy and forge, and it again provides that personal, unique touch.

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Cursive evolves over centuries

If someone looked at the cursive taught in the classroom today, they might notice it is a bit different from the cursive taught 25, 50 or even 100 years ago.

Schneider said there is a choice between a more traditional or more modern form of cursive. The method Holyoke teaches is closer to the modern form, making the transition easier from print to cursive.

Churchwell uses a combination of D’Nealian and Handwriting without Tears methods. For example, as she taught the letter “O,” she gave students the option of making the loop at the top or simply an extra stroke without the actual loop.

“I was trying to find a cursive that works for them,” said Churchwell, whose two goals are for students to be able to read cursive and use it in the future, if they choose.

Some of the students have better handwriting in cursive and others in print. This way, they will always have two options, she said.

Back in the mid-1800s, Platt Rogers Spencer kicked off the golden age of writing with his Spencerian method of cursive writing used in textbooks. This form was elaborate and ornate compared to what people usually see today. (Think of the Coca-Cola and Ford logos!)

Then, by the turn of the century, Austin Norman Palmer had introduced the Palmer method, a simpler and faster way of writing cursive. Kids all across America were practicing loopy

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characters between horizontal lines on a chalkboard.

The method developed by Charles Zaner and Elmer Bloser also dominated textbooks in the 1900s, followed by the D'Nealian form in the 1970s, promoted as an easier transition from printing to cursive.

Teachers in Holyoke have seen cursive instruction evolve over the years and will no doubt see more changes in the future.

National Handwriting Day is next week on Thursday, Jan. 23, celebrating the birthday of John Hancock, who was made famous by his iconic signature on the Declaration of Independence.

The Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association is sponsoring National Handwriting Day, and as described on their website, "There's something poetic about grasping a writing instrument and feeling it hit the paper as your thoughts flow through your fingers and pour into words."

Take advantage of this holiday, and whether in print or cursive, use a pen or pencil to rekindle that creative feeling through a handwritten note, poem, letter or journal entry.

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