

June 12, 2014

Please print this letter to correct factual errors in “What’s Lost as Handwriting Fades,” by Maria Konnikova, June 2, 2104 regarding NICHD-funded University of Washington writing research.

First, dysgraphia is not the result of brain injury. It is a developmental handwriting disorder that can affect spelling and composing. Katusic and Colligan’s groundbreaking research at the Mayo shows about one in six school-age has a specific learning disability (SLD) in written expression, of which dysgraphia is one cause.

Second, we never reported evidence that printing, cursive, and keyboarding have distinct brain pathways. Rather, brain imaging studies identified differences between 5th grade students with and without dysgraphia during idea generation, spelling, novel and familiar letter formation, and finger sequencing. Printing the alphabet (sequencing component strokes), spelling (sequencing letters), and composing (sequencing words) outside the scanner were correlated with five brain regions during finger sequencing.

Third, we never claimed that cursive writing is better than printing or keyboarding. Rather, our research supports creating hybrid writers with expertise in printing (transfers to format most often encountered in written texts), cursive (links letters into word units and may speed up writing), and keyboarding (used in word processing). Steve Jobs, an accomplished calligrapher before making seminal contributions to developing laptop computers with multiple manuscript and cursive font styles, exemplifies the contributions of hybrid writers.

Fourth, although elementary school children composed longer texts faster with more ideas in handwriting than by keyboard, their parents reported computers were used for homework rather than in classroom instruction. Our current research shows value in combining writing by pen and computers in implementing evidence-based writing instruction for letter production, spelling, and composing.

Fifth, educational policy specialists not classroom educators authored the Common Core and included handwriting only in kindergarten and first grade. When teachers’ jobs depend on students’ scores on tests linked to Common Core, if a skill is not tested, it often not taught. Hopefully, researcher-educator partnerships can inform future Common Core guidelines for early identification of weak handwriting, and provision of evidence-based handwriting, spelling, and composing instruction by pen and keyboard across the grades as the curriculum requirements increase and the nature of writing changes as shown by the Spencer LifeSpan Writing group headed by Bazerman.

Sincerely,

Virginia W. Berninger, Ph.D., and Todd L. Richards, Ph.D., University of Washington