The Story of Handwriting

Is handwriting as a practice still used in Swedish schools?
Abstract

This design project will map, look at and give answers regarding: The story of handwriting from a pedagogical perspective, within a Swedish context. It is primarily based on a great interest in writing by hand, and the effects and benefits it has on its practitioners. Handwriting today compared to before is getting less space in the digitized society, but is handwriting as a practice still used in Swedish schools?

The predicted meaning is that children in school cannot write properly by hand anymore, due to all technologies such as smartphones, tablets and computers. The question is complex and the answer is more than just a simple yes or no, and therefore this investigation in handwriting has been done.

The thesis will look back in the history of handwriting and give answers to the question through both theory and practice. Through research it will document differences and similarities between how people born between 1930-1959 and today’s lower elementary school children are looking at and working with handwriting. To be able to make this comparison—a digital survey, field studies, workshops and handwritten letters and notes from persons within the two defined research groups has worked as research methods to make the result as reliable as possible.

Until recently, the art of writing more known as “Välskrivning” was a very central competence in Swedish school. It was a graded subject where focus was on how to write properly and practice good handwriting. The fact that “Välskrivning” is no longer a school subject means that the children today do not have the same prerequisites for succeeding with handwriting in the long term. They get other opportunities in the digital world, but one does not have to exclude the other.

In my research I have found that despite technological tools and advancements, children still enjoy and value writing by hand, and then it is my task as a change agent to break the norm that handwriting as a practice is disappearing in Swedish schools and give children the tools they need to continue writing new chapters in the story of handwriting. To stimulate learning with joy, work with fine motor skills and strengthen the ability to concentrate amongst children through a handwriting workshop is what the investigation has led to. The answers in this thesis will not change the world, but the handwriting workshop, designed as a pedagogical tool, will hopefully inspire and motivate children to write by hand for a long time to come.

Keywords

Handwriting, Penmanship, Keyboarding, Cursive, Education, Communication, Technology.
Introduction

When I was young and went to lower elementary school around the turn of the millennium, I did not want to go to the leisure centre after school, so I got the opportunity to stay in the classroom instead. Then I usually practiced cursive writing in different textbooks that my teacher provided me with. That was perhaps where my teacher laid the groundwork for my interest in writing by hand that today is greater than ever. Later in this thesis I will come back to the importance of the teacher’s role in the learning of handwriting.

“Throughout history, we have gone through several shifts, but now we are in one where computers, tablets and phones are taking over the handwriting. But then there are those who claim that learning when you are little goes easier if you use paper and pencil, and that is why I care” (Petersson, cited in Sverige!, 2018). My personal interest together with the effects and benefits handwriting has on its practitioners, made me want to investigate the topic further.

My predicted meaning before this project begun was that children in school today cannot write properly by hand anymore, due to all technologies such as smartphones, tablets and computers. The research question is therefore—is handwriting as a practice still used in Swedish schools? I realized that the question is complex and the answer is more than just a simple yes or no, and therefore I started looking more into the history of writing.

Background

The history of writing started around 15,000-10,000 BCE with different paintings in the Lascaux caves in France, but in Africa early human markings were found over 200,000 years ago (Meggs and Purvis, 2016, pp.4-5). Writing, in the sense of actual written words was invented out of practical necessity because reliable records of accounts could not be kept and remembered only orally (Jean, 1992, pp.12).

Cuneiform, hieroglyphics and Chinese calligraphy were additionally highly complex visual language systems that only a few persons mastered and the literacy among people at that time were therefore very low. The huge step in the world of communication through writing appeared first when the alphabet was invented (Meggs and Purvis, 2016, pp.21). According to Meggs and Purvis (2016, pp.32) alphabets remain one of humankind’s grandest achievements.
When Gutenberg in the middle of the 15th century invented the printing press many thought that the time of writing by hand likely was over, but that became in fact not the case. Writing was still the common way of recording thoughts (Jean, 1992, pp.97). It was first when digital technology came most of the writing started to be done with digital writing devices such as computers and mobile phones. The switch from analogue to digital contributed to a huge difference in for example the haptics of writing (Mangen and Velay, 2010, pp.385).

When talking about technology within writing today the first thing that comes to mind is mobile phones, tablets, computers and other digital tools, but the truth is that the pen also is a technological tool that has developed a lot during the history of writing. Risérus and Serin (1992) writes that it started with people carving runes with sharp tools and using goose feathers and ink. In the 16th century the pencil was invented and 300 years later the nib/fountain pen replaced the quill. The ball-pen came first in the 1940’s and were revolutionary, because the mess that was caused by wet ink disappeared.

**Handwriting in Sweden**

In 1842 school became compulsory in Sweden, and then it also became mandatory with handwriting education. During a long period of time after that the education focused a lot on both spelling and penmanship in a subject called “Välskrivning”. The teachers back then could get inspired from different writing style ideals from the past and as a consequence of that the Swedish students’ variation of writing styles were big the following century. Those different writing styles are the ones we can see examples of today in our grandparents’ old letters, notebooks and diaries (Larsson, 2017).

The graded subject in school called “Välskrivning” was about writing beautifully and as similar as an original as possible. The subject was favored by those with good handwriting and a struggle for those with bad handwriting, and it was first in the 50’s the students were allowed to write with both the right and the left hand. Written pieces of text from the ones who went to school over hundred years ago can be hard to read for us today, since their writing styles were more ornate than today’s (Risérus and Serin, 1992, pp.24).

[Old handwriting styles can be hard to read. Wilhei/Pixabay, 2005.](image)

Until 1975 there was a several kinds of writing styles free to choose from, but then the controversial SÖ-style was designed and implemented by known calligraphs in the Swedish schools. The teachers were not asked and informed about the new SÖ-style in advance and saw it as a top elite project. This specific style lasted more or less 10 years and in 1985 it was free to teach and use other writing styles again (Karlsson, 2009).

One of the reasons why the SÖ-style was criticized by a lot of teachers was because it was considered a bad foundation for a personalized handwriting. The style was also very similar to print, which made it difficult to learn a new unified writing style with linked letters (Risérus and Serin, 1992, pp.24). Larsson (2017) emphasizes that, at the same time the SÖ-style was removed, all formulas of cursive writing in the Swedish control documents were deleted. While the detail
management of the school was being reduced, the guidelines regarding handwriting in the curriculum also was.

The knowledge requirements for acceptable knowledge at the end of grade 3 regarding writing today says that the student should be able to write simple texts with legible handwriting and on computer. In the texts, the student should use a capital letter, point and question mark as well as spelling words that the student himself often uses and that is common in pupil-related texts. The narrative texts the student writes should have clear introduction, action and ending (Skolverket, 2018).

Ingrid Essegård (cited in Larsson, 2017) who is a teaching council at the National Agency for Education explains that “It does not have to be a particular style or beautiful and in practice it means that some students get to learn cursive writing while others get to learn print by hand. As long as the students’ handwritten texts can be read in third grade, the knowledge requirement has been reached. How the teachers do in practice to achieve that goal is up to them and not something that the National Agency for Education specifies.”

Context

The two research groups of my project will be elementary school children and their teachers and adults/seniors born between 1930-1959. Cultural aspects, people with other languages as their mother tongue, and people with reading and writing difficulties will be taken in consideration in the research, but would not be my main focus in this project. I have chosen to situate the research in Kalmar and the surrounding area to give the project a clear framework that matches the Swedish context.

Research group 1 – Children born between 2009-2011. Chosen because they are lower elementary school students, in a place where they come in contact with handwriting for the first time and grow up with digital tools.

Research group 2 – Adults born between 1930-1959. Chosen because they have gone through the different stages of the story of handwriting, had "Välskrivning" as a graded subject in school and grew up without digital tools.

Methods

The research I have done looking into the history, and the development of handwriting in the Swedish context is mostly found by searching in OneSearch with keywords such as handwriting, cursive writing, keyboarding and penmanship. The searching for relevant material is made in both Swedish and English because I decided to research the story of handwriting within a Swedish context, and therefore I thought that there might be more suitable data written in Sweden and thereby in Swedish. These searches led me to a several related books, journals and articles, that I have been using both directly and indirectly.

This paper will through both text-based and
visual research provide the reader with discussions and conclusions within the field of handwriting. I will compare research group 1 and research group 2 in the region of Kalmar and the surroundings and try to find similarities, differences and answers regarding the development of writing by hand/keyboarding in school today and in the past. I will interview teachers and students, look in old textbooks and the ones that are in use today.

Natasha Jen states that “good designers surround themselves with evidence” (99U, 2017) and I will therefore use different research methods to collect evidence for my findings. I will do a digital survey, interview students in research group 1 and their teachers and collect handwritten notes from both of my research groups through handwriting workshops and letters. All the methods will together serve as evidence when I later on present my results.

**Design Process**

I started by doing a digital survey with questions regarding handwriting (see questions below) and received approximately 250 answers in total and 37 of those who answered were persons that matched my specified research group 2. Through this quantitative research method, I have got a lot of valuable information, that I will explain more about in the result section.

Questions asked in the digital survey:

1. *In what decade are you born?*
2. *Are you right or left handed?*
3. *Did you have the subject "Välskrivning" when you went to primary school?*
4. *Describe how you experienced learning to write.*
5. *How do you look at cursive writing as a writing style?*
6. *Did you use digital tools (computer, tablet, etc.) when you wrote when you went to primary school?*
7. *Describe the advantages and disadvantages of writing by hand/write digitally.*
8. *If you would like to write a shorter piece of text (about two sentences) by hand to contribute additional material to my survey, enter your email address below. If you do not want to do that, leave the line blank.*
9. *What is your gender?*

Furthermore I visited two classes in two different elementary schools in Kalmar, Funkaboskolan (grade 2) and Vasaskolan (grade 3), to find out how they are working with writing in school today. For the workshop that I did with the children I bought a writing book without lines where the students in the classes that I visited were supposed to write two pieces of text; one decided by me and one voluntary. They were able to decide by themselves what pen they would like to use and where on the blank page to start. I got 44 pieces of text and interview material regarding handwriting and keyboarding from both students and teachers to analyze from the two school visits.
To be able to use the information that I got from my school visits I created individual permission slips for the teachers that I met, where I explained that all personal data will be treated confidentially and that their participation is voluntary.

To be able to get handwritten pieces of text from research group 2 as well, I sent out letters to the ones born between 1930-1959 in the digital survey that announced that they could contribute with handwritten material (question 8). That resulted in 14 addresses to persons that I already knew had an interest in handwriting. I sent them numbered papers where I asked them to write a shorter text decided by me with their personal handwriting. Finally I also asked them to send it back to me in a frank envelope that I attached to the letter. In addition to those I also sent 12 letters to randomly picked addresses with persons in the same target group to see if I would receive any answers that way or not.

The letters sent out to research group 2.

My initial idea with the writing books for research group 1 and the letters for research group 2 was to get answers on the following questions. What pencils do people write with? In what style do people write? What happens when people have to write without lines? Is it possible to see how old a person is and how they have been taught to write through their handwriting? What are the clear features of writing in the different target groups?

Result

Digital survey

Almost all of the ones who did the survey from research group 2 had the subject “Välskrivning” when they went to school. They are careful to point out the cultural aspects of writing by hand, think it is an important competence for kids to have today and are conservative when it comes to cursive writing. Writing with digital tools is relatively new while the handwriting is traditional and everyone does not actually have access to digital tools, while almost everybody has the tools required to write by hand. They see the pros with keyboarding in some specific cases, but they do not think that one needs to exclude the other. Many mentioned the word beautifully when the question about cursive writing came up and personal is an adjective people tend to use when describing handwriting.

“Cursive is the "right" way of writing.”
(woman born between 1939-1950)

School visits

Most kids that I visited from research group 1 in lower elementary school think that writing by hand is fun and they enjoy doing it. They see handwriting as a creative process compared to keyboarding which is more static, but likes to communicate the written word in both ways. They appreciate how they in handwriting are able to shape their own letters and prefer writing school texts by hand instead of on computer. Both students and teachers mention that they think handwriting is important.

The kids are structured and starts writing in the upper left corner of the paper and always with pencils that are erasable. Children with fine motor
skills difficulties sometimes have troubles writing on papers without lines, because in lower elementary schools they usually practice handwriting on linear papers. The kids handled the blank papers better than I expected though. The kids immediate reaction when I asked them to write the note in the writing book was to write in print by hand.

Hålsa dem du möter med ett vanligt ord.

Handwritten note from student in research group 1.

The teachers in lower elementary schools have a great responsibility in the students' learning. As the school's requirements for writing beautifully decreased at the time the SÖ-style was removed, the demands on the teachers increased even more. If they think it is important to teach students to write by hand, they also focus a lot on this in their education. After my school visits to the two classes in Kalmar, I have a great deal of confidence in the teachers and their way of educating good writers, but I do get the feeling that the focus on the actual handwriting gets less space now compared to when "Välskrivning" was a graded subject. Today, it is more about the message in children’s stories and not about how they write visually.

Handwritten note from student in research group 1.

The Stockholm based calligraph and art teacher Hans Presto (cited in Larsson, 2017) states that the fact that handwriting education gets less space in school today is crucial. He thinks that the computer is a better tool for writing long essays but still wants everyone to have the right to learn proper handwriting. Without clear methods and guidelines, that ability is spread unevenly. I do agree with Presto and think that research group 2 were given better prerequisites for becoming good at handwriting.

Handwritten note from student in research group 1.

I sent out 26 letters to people within research group 2 and have by now received 20 of them back, which means that the interest in the topic handwriting is great in this specified target group as well. They think it is important to be able to express themselves personally through handwriting. I have received answers from both the persons that answered my digital survey, and the randomly picked ones so it is a subject that affects many.

Handwritten note from student in research group 1.

Letters

From two of the persons that I sent letters to I got the question if I wanted them to write in cursive or in text. When receiving the answers, it became clear that they are more used to write cursive, since that was the “right” way of writing when they went to school. They do not write as in "Skrivstilsboken" or the controversial SÖ-style.
but their letters are connected with each other in greater occurrence than the children’s.

Handwriting involves complex motor learning, including the integration of visual-perceptual and fine motor skills with cognition (Exner, 1989 cited in Stevenson and Just, 2012, p.50). With keyboarding, although there is motor learning, it is less complex initially, as students make linear finger movements to specific keys rather than letter strokes (Chwirka et al., 2002 cited in Stevenson and Just, 2012, p.50).

Handwriting has proven to have some positive effects on its practitioners and those are important to mention as well, because they make me think that handwriting will exist even if technology takes more and more space. Getting fine motor skills, a good muscle memory and ability to concentrate are some positive side effects worth mentioning.

A list with reasons why people value handwriting:
- Good for the memory.
- Good for motor learning.
- Faster to learn.
- Beautiful and personal.
- Non-dependent on digital technology.
- Cultural and historical aspects.
- Spelling needs to be made properly.

Sahlgren Fodstad (2017) states that “the hand is constantly transmitting information to the brain and it has been shown that children learn to write faster if they do it by hand because the information transmitted to the brain is then richer than digitally”. All this research made by others showing positive effects with handwriting together with my evidence found through the digital survey, the interviews, the handwriting workshops and the letters have made me see my place in this as a change agent.
Analysis and Evaluation of Contribution

This project will contribute to society by spreading knowledge about the story of handwriting from a pedagogical perspective through the findings in this thesis and an explorative workshop done in collaboration with pedagogues in lower elementary school. Despite the fact that the ways of writing and technologies have changed, we as a culture and society still value handwriting, and that is something that I want to make use of through this workshop.

On the topic of where reading and writing will head towards in the future Bromley (2010, p.106) has stated “Picture a world where reading and writing do not remain static. As reading and writing have evolved throughout history, they will continue their transformation into new entities that are beyond our wildest imagining”.

Hans Presto has done one of the few scientific works about the effects of the extinction of handwriting in the form of cursive writing. Presto (cited in Sverige!, 2018) states that “everything that’s dead remains an art form, the black and white photography is taken over by artists and we continue to paint in oil, so I do not think cursive will disappear as craftsmanship. It’s more the general public cursive writing that is threatened.” I do think that handwriting will exist in the future. It has changed between a variety of styles through history and it will continue changing—everything has its time. Handwriting has a cultural and a personal value to people. It does not matter whether children will write in cursive or print by hand, if they continue to appreciate and value handwriting as an individual human expression.

It is not important to follow a uniformed handwriting style. The 10 years they tried to force students to write the controversial SÖ-style the voices were raised from both students and teachers. The personal expression disappeared and by that one of the fundamental strengths of handwriting. The fact that the handwritten word could not be written in the way the practitioner wanted, that it was politicians who decided this specific style without any approval from the teachers and that it was difficult for the teachers to teach the students the style were all things that made the SÖ-style controversial.

From the first research I did I got that:
- Children write in print by hand, not cursive.
- The teachers are very important in how the students learn to write.
- The subject handwriting interests both target group 1 and 2.
- Cursive was the “right” way of writing before.
- Handwriting is more creative and personal than keyboarding.
- Children do enjoy to write by hand.
- Handwriting and keyboarding do not have to exclude each other.
- Children write with pencils.
- There is no more “Välskrivning” in school today.
- Target group 2 write cursive to a greater extent than target group 1.
- Handwriting can deepen the message in a text.
- Children are used to write on linear paper.
Collaboration with society

To encourage the use of handwriting by children in the future I have created material for an explorative handwriting workshop designed as a pedagogical tool to use for teachers in lower elementary school. I have collaborated with a pedagogue who are familiar with the school today, who knows what the children appreciate and what motivates them when it comes to writing.

“There is a purely motor aspect of the whole thing—when we write by hand, the brain constantly interprets the position and movement of the hand and that information does not appear when we monotonically cling on a screen.” (Sahlgren Fodstad, 2017)

Workshop material for lower elementary school students.

One of the findings was that children do enjoy handwriting, but today the school does focus more on the message than the art of writing. By doing this handwriting workshop, I as a visual communicator will stimulate learning with joy, independently train the children’s muscle memory, support the creative identities we have as humans, work with fine motor skills and diligence and strengthen the children’s abilities to concentrate. I created the workshop as a pedagogical tool because as mentioned earlier a lot of responsibility is on the teachers today regarding how children learn to write.

“Since research shows that the handwriting is superior to the keyboard in some aspects, such as when it comes to taking notes at lectures, I find it difficult that handwriting education may look so different. As technology takes more of our time, it is even more important that children get the ability to write by hand from a young age” (Presto cited in Larsson, 2017).

When designing the workshop I worked with short and fun assignments packaged in colorful folders. I created six different handwriting assignments that dealt with for example creativity, fine motor skills, muscle memory and cursive writing in a playful manner. I also added three smileys in the end of each assignment to let the children fill in which smiley that represented their feelings after finishing that specific workshop sheet. To see if the workshop I created as a tool to encourage children to practice handwriting in the future as well, I tried the workshop on a lower elementary school class.

Handwriting workshop

I started by presenting the material for the students who listened carefully. After that they started right away and were really focused and concentrated. Through the workshop assignments they warmed their hands up through warm-up exercises, wrote a story in a small box, wrote wide and narrow letters, linked letters in a cursive writing exercise, wrote the alphabet in upper and lower case letters and tested to write the letter A in different sizes.

The energy in the classroom was high and the students filled in happy faces after about 85% of the exercises. The cursive writing assignments were the one they liked the least and I believe that is the case because that is a writing style
they have not worked with yet, and are therefore not familiar with.

I think the workshop went just as I wanted and I really think the concept worked. Their teacher were happy with how the workshop turned out and thought it was made in a fun and inspiring way. Instead of just repeating letters it combined learning with joy. One student and workshop participant mentioned after the workshop that “This was great fun. I want to do more!” and that is truly a good certificate for me as a visual communicator and change agent.

**Conclusion**

My predicted meaning about kids not being able to write properly by hand anymore, mentioned in the introduction, has through research and my handwriting workshop proven to be wrong. Both my research groups value handwriting, think it is important and writes by hand. Handwriting as a method of communication will not disappear, but as a practice in Swedish school it is not valued as high anymore. Therefore my handwriting workshop, designed as a pedagogical tool, is important for teachers to continue being able to encourage the use of handwriting among children even though the demands from the Swedish National Agency for Education have been reduced.

During this project I got the opportunity to look into a school writing book from 1947 and then cursive was the “right” way of writing. Today people in research group 2 still write cursive to a greater extent according to my investigation methods. They often know both cursive and how to write in print by hand. I myself know cursive, how to write in print by hand and keyboarding. The kids in lower elementary school today knows how to write in print by hand and keyboarding. We are adaptable creatures, and will continue to be so in the future as well.

As I mentioned in the introduction my teacher in lower elementary school played an important role when I started appreciating handwriting, and they seem to play an even more important role today. The fact that “Välskrivning” is no longer a school subject means that the children today do not have the same prerequisites for succeeding with handwriting in the long term. They get other opportunities in the digital world, but one does not have to exclude the other.

Pedagogical tool to encourage children to write by hand.
Children do enjoy handwriting and think it is fun to have the opportunity and knowledge to shape their own personal letters. Along with all the benefits that handwriting actually bring, makes me determine that it is important to break the norm that handwriting as a practice is disappearing in Swedish schools and give children the tools they need to continue writing new chapters in the story of handwriting.

**References**


