

Everybody's Fancy; Everybody's Fine: The Educational and
Emotional Implications of Cursive Writing

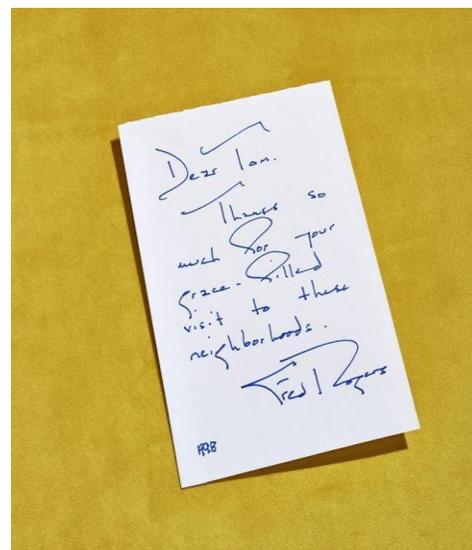
My eyes feel heavier and heavier as I watch this movie with some old guy in a cardigan sweater and blue Keds sneakers trying to put up a big old camping tent. As my eyes close, I ask myself, "Why am I wasting my time watching this movie starring Tom Hanks about a cringey kids' show?" This guy's still pushing and pulling and struggling to put together something that does not resemble a tent at all. He's practically jumping on his tent to hold it together. He stops, looks at the screen and announces that this is a job for two. The producers yell cut, and he goes to the screen to see how the segment turned out. The producers tell him they could reshoot, but he says, "No, I think this is just perfect!" Next, he's behind a puppet theater with Daniel the Striped Tiger on his hand, talking and singing in a high-pitch voice about a smelly skunk and how its stench makes the other puppets sad. I just want to get up and go back to watching Grey's Anatomy or talking to my friends, but my parents keep saying that Mr. Rogers could help me become a better teacher. How is this guy and his tiger puppet going to teach me how to be a better teacher? Finally, what feels like 20 hours later, I look at my parents, "So what was the point?"

"Think about how Mr. Rogers changed Lloyd, the interviewer," my dad said. "That's the point."

Lying in bed that night, it hit me. Mr. Rogers truly knew what it meant to be an educator. He may not have been a teacher in a classroom, but he was a person who really understood children. He knew that teaching children is about so much more than reading, writing and math - it's about educating the whole child and teaching them how to deal with their own thoughts and feelings. He had a way of communicating that spoke directly to children. No wonder he was an

inspiration to so many. When I watched the movie through the eyes of a child, I realized why the movie included the scene of Mr. Rogers struggling to put up this tent. The song Mr. Rogers sang in that scene showing children that everyone fails and makes mistakes; “What do you do with the mad that you feel; when you feel so mad you could bite? When the whole wide world seems oh so wrong. And nothing you do seems very right? What do you do? Do you punch a bag? Do you pound some clay or some dough?” The reason he included the song and dialogue about the skunk was to teach the children that sometimes people hurt us and that everyone copes with it differently.

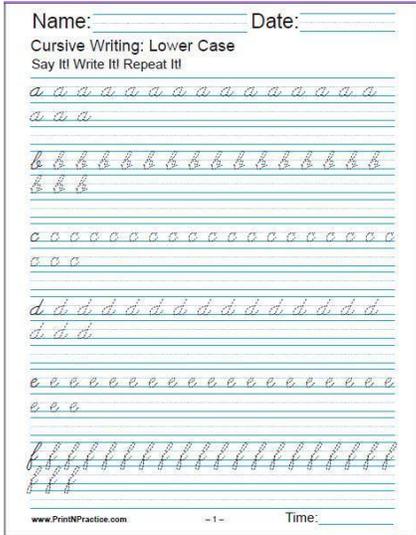
Mr. Rogers could turn any topic into a valuable life lesson, from making an opera to making crayons. On the surface, the things he did on his shows seemed so silly and random, like eating strudel or opening a sofa bed, or



explaining the difference between a person in a dog costume and a real dog. None of his shows were about what they seemed though. They weren't really about a trip to a dairy farm or the sounds the different drums make. Underneath every episode was a meaningful life lesson. Playing the steel drums was really about expressing anger. Visiting the dairy farm was really about work. What about handwriting? One of Mr. Rogers' episodes was about him going to a calligraphy class. On the surface, he was learning how to make pretty letters, but what were the real lessons he was teaching? I'd been thinking about the use of cursive writing in elementary education and wondered why we don't teach it anymore. It was this film about Mr. Rogers that helped me connect the practice of cursive writing to some of the most forward-thinking, holistic theories of education. The ideas of all of it are at the foundation of this iconic children's

television show, the first of its kind. How can Mr. Rogers help us understand the value in teaching handwriting? Why might it be wise NOT to abandon this seemingly old-fashioned practice? What might we learn from looking at the practice through his ethos of care, compassion, and “neighborliness”?

By going to a calligraphy class, Mr. Rogers taught children that there is always



something new to learn. No matter how old, people never stop learning, including himself. When he decided that he wanted to improve his handwriting, he went to a class. There he learned several exercises to improve his handwriting, and even as a grown up, he still needed to practice. “I really like that school, I kept practicing and practicing,” Mr. Rogers said, holding his yellow pad of paper to the camera to show the children the up and down strokes filling each page. He showed how he made the same words over and over again, which is exactly how

children first learn how to write. He showed how many pages and different exercises he did in order to improve his handwriting, teaching children about persistence and trying new things. If even a grown up can keep getting better at something, then a child can always improve. His handwriting was beautiful and nearly flawless, but Mr. Rogers felt that he could always improve.

“Some people write one way and some people write another,” Mr. Rogers said.

Handwriting was another of the many ways he showed children they are unique and special.

“You can often tell who wrote something by looking at the writing,” he said, reminding me of all the beautiful, handwritten birthday cards I’ve gotten from my grandmother over the years. She has the most elegant cursive writing I have ever seen, every letter perfect and flowing smoothly into the next. I know a letter is from her just by way the handwriting on the front of the envelope

looks. Her handwriting is an expression of who she is, neat and organized and always working to better herself. “But, it doesn’t matter what kind of writing that you make,” Mr. Rogers said. “Everybody is fancy. There is no one like you. You are perfect just the way you are.”

I wonder, would Mr. Rogers have thought that teaching handwriting is still important? No one learns it anymore. I did, but by the time my younger brother was in elementary school, Common Core had hit education and eliminated handwriting instruction. To my 13-year-old brother, cursive may as well be a foreign language. I think it is a shame that my brother has to type a thank you note or, worse, can’t read my grandmother’s handwritten one.

When I think about it, there are a lot of other things my brother can’t read - old family letters, the original copy of the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. As a matter of fact, Mr. Rogers' handwriting closely resembled the elegant script of the Declaration of Independence. He might have used that to make a connection between himself and Thomas Jefferson or to point out that though we don’t have photographs of him, we have something created by his own hand. How can I, as a future educator, create a lesson plan that would connect history and handwriting?

It is not just the history of our country that was written in cursive, it is even the history of our own communities, or as Mr. Rogers would say our neighborhoods. “It’s important to note that learning cursive is more than just connecting with the past; it is an important part of being civic-minded to this day...To be an informed, participating citizen sometimes entails taking a look at an old piece of cursive writing and being able to read it, because it won’t always be available in *Times New Roman*.” The name of his show, “Mr. Rogers *Neighborhood*” reveals a lot about how he viewed creating a community where everyone had a purpose and belonged. Every one of Mr. Rogers' shows focused on members of his neighborhood, how they were aware

of what others needed, whether it was a wheelchair ramp or a service dog. His young viewers had a strong sense of being part of his neighborhood. In one scene of the movie Mr. Rogers was on the subway when a group of children spotted him and started singing the theme song to the show. Within seconds, everyone on the subway was singing this song, including the adults. He introduced children to the idea that neighbors looked after one another and could work together for the good of the whole neighborhood. Improving a community for the future often involves looking to the past, and sometimes, reading cursive is the key.

Mr. Rogers was a man who would have preferred touch over technology. According to Laura Dinehart, a fine motor researcher at Florida International University, “Digital keyboards don’t deliver the same fine motor skill benefits as putting pencil to paper.” Mr. Rogers felt that the more hands-on lessons children did, the more they would soak in. So many of his shows involved doing or making something with his hands, like sign language or making a mask or tying a star to a string. When I physically hand write something, I remember the information better. “Studies have shown cursive brings thought to another level; there’s something about a pen and paper that makes learning better,” (“Keeping cursive in the classroom.”). Mr. Rogers knew that, for little children especially, learning happens through touch. Today though, students in elementary schools are doing typing lessons instead of handwriting workbooks. The Common Core Standard “makes frequent references to technology skills, stating that students in every grade should be able to use the Internet for research and use digital tools in their schoolwork to incorporate video, sound and images with writing” (Layton). Well children certainly need to learn typing in a technology-based world, it’s disappointing to see small children being handed electronic tablets to type instead of big fat Number 2 pencils and lined paper.

Cursive is more than just a way to write words, it is a way of understanding. Mr. Rogers constantly emphasized that everyone is unique, and everyone learns in different ways, but the most crucial part of learning is to find the best way to learn for yourself. He understood that learning anything is hard, and for some children, nothing is as hard as learning to read. In Mr. Rogers's series called "Ready to Read?" Lady Elaine wants H.J. Elephant to be on the first episode of her new show, "The Reading Games," but H.J. is nervous and hesitant to join because he has trouble reading. How many children are afraid to read out loud? I was the student who counted ahead to see which paragraph I would have to read so that I could practice it in my head before the teacher got to me. Mr. Rogers used H.J. to show that lots of students feel anxious when their teacher asks them to read out loud.

Dyslexia wasn't recognized as a reading disorder until several decades after Mr. Rogers' show, but he intuitively recognized the shame of not being able to read. Mr. Rogers was never shy about addressing tough topics straight on. No doubt, he would have talked about how people with dyslexia learn in different ways. He would have embraced recent studies that show how students with dyslexia benefit from learning how to write in cursive. Cursive writing helps students with dyslexia form words more easily when they are seen on the page. When Mr. Rogers attended the calligraphy class, he showed children how he practiced each stroke over and over until his pen moved effortlessly across the page. "Continuous flow of cursive ultimately improves writing speed and spelling and helps dyslexics with easily confused letters such as "b," "d," "p," and "q." There is research that shows when the students write letters in cursive, they are "better able to consistently and correctly reproduce the shapes" ("Cursive Handwriting Helps Students Overcome Dyslexia").

Another study showed that cursive “may facilitate the child’s processing of orthographic groups (e.g., bi- and tri-grams or whole words), thus supporting transcription and the use of lexical spelling strategies that are more efficient for orthographically complex words” (Arfé). Cursive letters are physically connected, just as some letters are connected to make a single sound, “tion,” for example. Writing the letters together helps children associate the grouping of specific letters to make specific sounds. Writing is another way of reinforcing and remembering phonograms.

Maria Montessori, an educator whose philosophy centered on building the confidence, creativity and emotional health of a child, was a strong proponent of cursive writing instruction. If she and Mr. Rogers had known each other, I think they would have been best friends. They shared very similar views on the importance of emotional development and hands-on education. They both recognized the importance of tactile learning. “The child needs to manipulate objects and to gain experience by touching and handling,” Montessori said” (“Requirements”).

In the past, children were taught cursive writing as they were beginning to read. Montessori believed that students were able to express themselves more clearly and get their ideas on paper faster. “The hand is the instrument of intelligence,” she said. She also thought that cursive helps students think more critically and creatively, a cornerstone of her philosophy, much like the imagination and creativity were at the heart of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. Also, like Mr. Rogers, she appreciated cursive writing simply for its beauty. "We directly prepare the child, not only for writing, but also for penmanship, paying attention to the beauty of form (having the children touch the letters in script form) ..." said Montessori (“Requirements”). The connection between the movement of the hand across the page and the formation of ideas in the mind is an

illustration of the extended mind thesis, the idea that the mind isn't contained just inside the body.

Thinking back to the question my dad asked me - how was Lloyd changed? - Mr. Rogers had the same impact on him that he did on the thousands of children who were part of his neighborhood. He helped the interviewer be aware of his emotions and connections with other people just as Mr. Rogers helped me think about how I, as a teacher, can support the heart and mind of a child. Everything I teach has a bigger lesson than what it may seem, even cursive writing. Cursive writing is not just pretty to look at, it teaches that practice makes perfect and everyone is unique and different. It is a way to connect to the past and improve the future. It helps struggling readers learn in a different way. It is a practice, but also a mode of communication. Would Mr. Rogers think we should still teach cursive writing? Mr. Rogers would have certainly recognized the value of cursive writing, but like everything Mr. Rogers did, it was just another way to teach the true lesson, "It doesn't matter what kind of writing you make, you know, everyone's fancy."

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