

Spelling: Blame It on Technology

We can place the blame for all of our students' (and our own) spelling problems squarely on the shoulders of technology. If it weren't for the technology of alphabetic written language, we wouldn't have to worry about whether *i* comes before *e* or whether an *e* gets dropped before adding *-ing*. Since technology is to blame, you'd think technology could help remedy the problem. It does. And it doesn't.

Like so many of you, I was overwhelmed by the television advertising during the recent holiday season. I saw advertisements for products I'd rarely seen advertised before—food choppers, clothing steamers, fancy pens. But one ad that came on again and again truly intrigued me. It showed two children intent upon a green gadget in their hands. The ends twisted back and forth and the two children seemed so involved in what they were doing, they could have easily blocked out the rest of the world. The viewer was supposed to initially believe the children were enthralled by some electronic game. A father then walks into the scene and tells the children to put the game away. They obediently set it aside. Then the father tells the children to do their homework. The children pick the game up and begin playing with it again.

It turns out the game is really a gadget that, according to the ad, will improve student performance in spelling. Children can even download spelling words from the company's "curriculum-based weekly spelling lists." Through the magic of elec-

tronic play, students can supposedly study spelling words, improve their scores on spelling tests, and effortlessly become better spellers. The game-like gadget bills itself as a clever graphic- and sound-rich innovation.

Though we cannot dismiss the power of play when it comes to literacy and learning, such uses of technology are misguided and will probably not bring about any significant change.

And that's too bad.

Though technology created the problem with spelling, the solution will not be found in a souped-up version of a traditional approach. In other words, the power of computer technology in a language arts classroom cannot be realized if we continue to practice the same old tasks with new tools. Spelling lists, whether generated by a textbook company, a teacher, a testing program, or a learning-game manufacturer are not likely to have much impact on student spelling proficiencies. Computers challenge us to rethink our definitions of literacy and approach such literate tasks as writing from new perspectives. Remember that the goal of spelling lists and tests is to help writers, not to create spelling bee winners or students who can spell isolated words upon command.

Years ago, when I first started using computers in my classroom, I had a student who only read reluctantly and rarely wrote. It turned out that he had some serious problems with spelling and a huge distaste for anything related to traditional language arts. Much of his distaste was a result of his dismal failures on spelling tests and his poor "mechanics" scores on pieces of writing. English orthography made no sense to the boy, and he was apt to misspell the same word several different ways in a single para-

graph. In fact, the boy's problems were so severe that, when he lived in a different district, there was talk of placing him in a special education classroom. What no one knew was that, lurking behind all those garbled, misspelled words, was some beautiful writing—creative, finely wrought, and cast in a strong voice. In fact, he remains one of the finest student writers I've ever had. He also became a voracious reader. Much of his change in attitude came about because of a word processing program. Once the boy was able to compose his pieces of writing on a computer, he could let his writing talents shine. And the more he wrote, the more he wanted to read. A spell check program helped with many of his spelling problems, and his helpful parents picked up where spell check left off. The boy ended up graduating from high school, going on to college, and today he is a teacher. He still struggles with spelling, however. But he refuses to allow his difficulties with spelling to define him as a writer and a teacher.

No number of spelling lists could have helped this boy. No admonitions to take more time or be more diligent about looking up possible misspelled words in a dictionary would have worked. An electronic speller had not worked for him either. He needed to write as authentically as he could and allow a smart tool to do what he had difficulty with—catch spelling errors for him, alert him, and suggest possible alternatives.

Just a few weeks ago, I was again reminded of the power of word processing programs and their spell check features when it comes to student writers. A seventh-grade boy, one who struggles mightily with spelling, turned in a picture book, illustrated by hand, and typed. There was not one misspelled word in his book. I praised his work enthusiastically. The story was darling, and, of course, I was impressed by the lack of spelling errors. When I asked him how he had done this, he shrugged as if the whole thing was no big deal, and said that he used spell check. And then he added that his mother helped him, too. But he apparently was not quite as nonchalant as he appeared. I heard from two other teachers that day about the picture book and the boy's obvious pride in turning in, perhaps for the

first time in his life, a piece of writing that did not have one single spelling error.

Such is the power of the computer in the classroom.

I know that spell check programs are faulty tools—in more ways than one. They mark a step that some students don't want to take. I've asked more than one student whether he or she had used spell check before printing. The answer is often "no." My students can be blissfully oblivious to those red squiggles under words. They are often more intent on turning something in than editing it beforehand. And we all know that spell check won't catch homonyms or misspelled words that look like other perfectly good English words—"cot" for "cat," or "sign" for "sing."

But the answer to that is not jazzy green spelling machines. The answer is far less gimmicky and far more complicated. And it is far more time-consuming than a twisting toy that beeps and burps cute graphics.

Ironically, one aspect of computer technology has been blamed for setting the cause of correct spelling back several centuries. In the casual world of e-mail correspondence, spelling sometimes seems to take a back seat. Even on e-mail discussion lists haunted by English teachers, one can see multiple "variations" of good English words. Part of this has to do with the informality of e-mail, the fact that e-mail messages are often written quickly and not subject to the scrutiny that would go into more formal pieces of writing. Another reason e-mail is likely to harbor more spelling peculiarities is the fact that many people still use early e-mail programs like Pine that do not allow readers to go back and edit what they have written. A writer's spelling, then, is only as good as his or her typing.

Still, the Internet has provided us with some interesting information regarding spelling, some news about efforts to change English spelling, and, for those who still teach in more traditional settings, spelling tests and immediate results. Below is a collection of Web sites that teachers might find interesting, amusing, or alarming, depending on your perspective.

Spelling Reformists

Some people believe the answer to spelling the English language is to rewrite the rules, to simplify spelling so that words are actually spelled the way they sound. The following Web sites suggest possible ways to reform English spelling.

The Unifon Alphabet

<http://www.unifon.org/index.html>

This interesting Web site takes a somewhat “tongue in cheek” look at English spelling, including a look at the history of spelling and an explanation as to “Why English Is Absurd.” It also suggests ways in which the language and the alphabet can be modified so that English spelling makes more sense, to the authors of the Web site, at least.

Literacy for the Millennium

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/spelling.htm>

Another somewhat “tongue in cheek” site that asks the interesting questions, “Why doesn’t everyone enjoy reading books? Why has English spelling become a social screening test, instead of a user-friendly tool? How does English spelling keep the workers down? Why are adult literacy programs so expensive, slow and unsuccessful?” It proposes some alternative spellings (as seen in the questions above) and rationales for changing how we spell.

Research on Spelling

In the past couple of decades, more and more research has been conducted on the spelling. The sites below reflect some of that research.

From NCTE-Talk

<http://www.ncte.org/lists/ncte-talk/oct97/0441.html>

One of the best resources on research and practice is NCTE-Talk, NCTE’s e-mail discussion list. Spelling is one of those conversation threads that pops up periodically and prompts knowledgeable teachers to share their knowledge, not only with others who subscribe to the discussion list, but eventually with a larger audience on the World Wide Web. This link is to the archives of one such conversation

on spelling. Remember that e-mail reflects quick writing on the part of participants who often don’t have time to proofread their posts. So don’t be surprised if you encounter a few spelling “variations” in this online conversation about spelling. Had these been formal pieces of writing, the authors would have taken time to edit, but in the heat of discussion, those formalities are often set aside.

Developmental Stages in Spelling

<http://www.uccs.mun.ca/~p25jmm/Introduction.html>

This explanation of the developmental stages children go through when they learn to spell is provided by Memorial University of Newfoundland. The site provides some background regarding the research on spelling and focuses on spelling as a constructive developmental process. On this site, you will find a discussion of invented or temporary spelling, explanations of formal and informal instructional strategies, and a large reference list that will help readers further investigate the issues surrounding spelling.

Reading and Spelling

<http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/edu/school/TomN/lectures/Lect12.html>

This essay, which appears on the University of Auckland (New Zealand) Web site, discusses various approaches to spelling, including invented spelling, and concludes that, though spelling and reading have a great deal in common, they do not necessarily involve the same skills and processes. The essay argues that invented spelling has a number of advantages, and, when coupled with other lessons, can help students become effective writers, readers, and spellers.

Spelling Lists, Tests, Tips, and Games

The following sites approach spelling rather traditionally, more as an isolated skill than a meaning-making process that has developmental stages. These sites seem to have been created by people who assume spelling lists and spelling tests are the most efficient way to teach spelling.

Spelling Test and Tips

<http://www.sentex.net/~mmcadams/spelling.html>

This site, which seems to be put together by someone working for a communications company, provides a spelling test and then tips on how to become a better speller. The Web site author discusses how he improved his spelling through the use of mnemonics and offers some of the ones he developed during his days as a journalism major.

Help Your Child Ace His Next Spelling Test

<http://www.familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,1-21084,00.html>

Though the practice of giving spelling tests as a means of assessing spelling or as an incentive to make students better spellers is questionable, many teachers are required or pressured to continue doing so. This site, though it bends itself to an outmoded classroom practice, may be of use to teachers and parents who find themselves in a situation where spelling tests reign.

Spelling Test Generator

<http://www.stickybear.com/tools/stg1/stg.html>

Again, though spelling tests often have limited value

in the classroom, there might be times when a teacher needs to create a test. This site draws from about 3,000 commonly used words and allows teachers to create custom spelling lists based on grade levels, diphthongs, starting or ending sounds, or even languages of origin.

University of Ottawa Spelling Site

<http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/writcent/hypergrammar/spelling.html>

Students in the United States are not the only ones who have difficulties spelling their language. This Canadian site, sponsored by the University of Ottawa, provides a resource for teachers and students regarding common spelling rules. The site also provides information regarding grammar and usage.

Funbrain Spell Check

<http://www.funbrain.com/spell/index.html>

Though it is really nothing more than a collection of spelling lists and activities that involve selecting a correct spelling, a few students might improve their abilities to take computerized spelling tests through practice on this site. In the guise of a computer game, this site may become stale for students before any benefit can take place, however.

Langston Hughes Poetry Day: April 2, 2002

The Academy of American Poets is partnering with the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project (based at the University of Kansas) and the National Council of Teachers of English to sponsor a number of special events, including a Langston Hughes Poetry Day on April 2, 2002. On this day, millions of men, women, and children across the country will become part of the world's largest poetry reading group as they gather together in schools, libraries, community centers, churches, hospitals, bookstores, or anywhere else they choose, to read and discuss the poetry of Langston Hughes.
