

Coordinators Discuss Keyboarding

Technology Coordinators share their experience and views in regards to keyboarding
Tim Landeck – tlandeck@alaisal.org

When I was first hired as the Coordinator of Education Technology for a school district I shared a detailed and comprehensive master plan with the governing school board. The plan was composed of the various approaches that were to be taken in regards to staff development, technical support, grants and funding, and numerous other areas critical to establishing and maintaining a viable educational technology department. At the end of the twenty-minute presentation, none of the board members had any questions or concerns, except one: “What about keyboarding?” I was surprised that after the detailed explanation of the various aspects of the program the only question or comment was specific to something that I figured was not a large concern for many, especially in relation to the numerous responsibilities and projects that I was about to embark upon. I was wrong. Four years later the discussion continues, and this time I bring to you a spirited conversation that recently graced the digital freeway of the Technology Coordinators’ Listserv (<http://www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/snorkel/listserv.htm>).

The Conversation Continues

A technology coordinator sparked the conversation with a question pertaining to when would be the best age to teach keyboarding. There were some coordinators who were concerned that students are not developmentally ready for keyboarding prior to the third or even the fourth grade. However, it was clear that many coordinators saw the value of not waiting too long for students to begin acquiring this skill because old habits are hard to break and that typing for some kids is easier than writing by hand. “We have found that students get so much more writing done when they can touch type” explains David Guernsey of El Gabilan Elementary School in Salinas, CA “They are not spending their time hunting and pecking, but rather on the writing process.” Alice Labay, the Computer Resource Technician at Robert Semple Elementary School in Benicia, CA agreed that students who are proficient keyboarders “find it easier to compose their written assignments on the computer [because when they are] freed from the slow process of forming letters with a pencil, they write more, faster, better, and enjoy their writing assignments more.”

Paul Jackson, who is a coordinator at Bishop O'Dowd high school in Oakland, CA, shared his insights by exclaiming “I implore all of you elementary school technology coordinators to expose your students to typing skills as early as is practical. It is amazing how many students come to school here and have to learn how to type.”

One technology teacher, Linda Toqe from Del Rey School in Orinda, CA, expressed her belief in covering the students’ hands or the keyboards to assist the students with avoiding the temptation to look at the keys when typing. “It keeps me from having to act as a policeman and actually they make faster progress if they have a way *not* to look at their hands or the keys.” Linda also emphasizes the need for teachers to support the keyboarding learning process by not assigning lengthy typed assignments in the earlier grades. “Kids under pressure to finish an assignment will get it done any way they can. I

hate to see kids turn out things that look wonderful yet reinforced poor skills to get them done.”

Type That Tune

“Many children in my school also study an instrument.” Remarked Kerri Richardson, a technology coordinator from Brooklyn Heights, NY “Those who take a string instrument or the piano are more ready for touch typing than those who do not.” This certainly makes sense when you look at the coordination needed to place fingers in the proper location. Kerri finishes up her email by explaining that by sixth grade, boys and girls are all equally developmentally ready to learn keyboarding.

State Exams to follow suit?

Cindy Morus, a technology coordinator from Hood River, Oregon, identified another issue that relates to reinforcing keyboarding skills. “The problems here is that our state writing tests require hand-written writing. By the fifth grade those who have been typing do not want to hand write and re-write for editing.” The writing process is reinforced with word processing as a tool for easily editing and re-editing documents without having to re-write each revision. Hence, more effort can be placed on the content rather than the actual mechanics of writing.

Voice Recognition to the rescue?

“IMHO, teaching keyboarding to elementary students is a waste of time and resources.” argues Mark Wenning, a technology coordinator from San Francisco, CA “By the time they reach the age where they will be doing serious amounts of typing, voice recognition software will be a viable option.” Other Coordinators agreed with Mark by emphasizing that there is much more that can be done with computers than typing labs and that both the technology and the time is not well used when typing skills are the focus.

However, as for voice recognition, there were a few coordinators that commented on the feasibility and reality of voice recognition in the school system. “Remember thirty or forty years ago we were told that by now we would all be flying around with jet packs on our back,” cautions Doug Prouty of the Contra Costa County Office of Education “so I am not convinced that voice recognition will be the answer in the near future.” Others highlighted the *verbal* difficulty of voice recognition. “I can picture it now” commented Carla Schulte, a technology coordinator from [LOCATION] “thirty students in a room all talking out loud to their computers!” And Joanne Helmig, a technology coordinator from [LOCATION] added, “Think about the business world where data is private. Can you picture the maze of cubicles where many data input people work? It could sound like an asylum. Schools have announcements coming over the PA system and lots of ambient noise in the background that affects voice input devices.” In addition, Joanne continues with other concerns with voice recognition “Unless and until all voice recognition input devices recognize anyone’s speech pattern who happens to use the computer, the technology will not go far in schools. Educators know how many different students use the computers daily, how students shift from work space to work space due to a system being down, etc.”

Spell Checkers

The keyboarding discussion led to another discussion about spell checkers and their place in the educational environment. Many coordinators believed that spell checkers had their place in the school setting, however some disable the spell checkers and offer students a dictionary instead. “Students right-click on the word that’s [spelled incorrectly and] underlined, and possible choices are there so kids can see the way the word is supposed to be spelled.” Points out Donna D. Barwald, a technology coordinator in Pacific Palisades, CA.

A Balanced Approach

“I always promote a balanced approach.” Explains Marcia Russell, the Technology Coordinator at Rancho Romero Elementary School in Alamo, California “As a school technology coordinator I always tell [teachers] that technology is not the ‘be all end all’. Of course we are still teaching writing in schools, and of course we are not relying on the spell checker alone.... There are some students, especially those with special needs, who find it less laborious to type. They are still required to do a lot of writing, but typing is a way to meet their needs.”

So, take it from a technology coordinator who still needs to look at the keyboard to complete this article, old habits *are* hard to break. The irony of writing an article about proper keyboarding skills without once resting on the home row brings visions of my high school teachers shaking their heads as I once again hadn’t completed my typing homework assignment.