**Let’s hear it for Keyboard Training**

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According to Trubek (2009) “Writing words by hand is a technology that’s just too slow for our times, and our minds.”  Tim Ingold’s (2010) ‘In Defence of Handwriting’ highlights the cause of the two fingered keyboard user versus pen and paper writers arguing that the conversion of ideas into written words, whether on paper, into  a book or on a cereal packet is best.  This is because, as he freely admits, his clumsy untrained fingers lead to a joyless soul destroying, heartless activity.  The hard backed book is also lauded as a vital tool for the successful writer.

Most researchers who do not perform the classic office task of taking someone else’s dictation or draft and ‘typing’ it onto paper or of course more usually ‘keying’ the words into a word processor, is bound to find ‘typing’ laborious.  They are not trained typists or keyboarders.  The trained typist will not necessarily gain a joyful, full hearted and soul enriching experiences from the mundane task of producing typed work (usually someone else’s).  However there is no clumsiness in the posture, hand positioning and keyboard stroking of the trained touch typist as she (or he) effortlessly scans the draft and almost unconsciously allows the visually acquired letters, words and figures to flow from the eyes to the brain down the arms into the fingers and onto the keys.  Indeed the trained and experienced typist/keyboard operator will almost certainly be quite capable, at the same time, of making plans for the weekend; even holding a conversation with a colleague.

So, I would argue that using a typewriter or word processer is not in itself the creator of a barrier to creative thinking, to the development of ideas and carefully crafted sentences and clever prose.  The problem is more akin to trying to formulate one’s ideas on the perfectly good substrate, a cereal packet affords but by using a blunt pencil. The mind is diverted to the ‘process’ of converting ideas to symbolic representation on the carton board in whatever language is being used.

The simple solution is to sharpen the pencil or use a different one, or a pen or chalk or whatever, not blame the pencil!  The solution for the non professional typist, the budding or experienced academic social science researcher is to take the blunt instrument of inadequate keyboarding skills and get them sharpened.

How to do this? The best approach is NEVER to use a keyboard without first undertaking some sort of keyboarding training.  The difficulty here of course is that whilst most of us probably learned to ride a bicycle with ‘stabilisers’ attached, which were eventually dispensed with as one’s balanced was gained and riding skills improved; once having started the time consuming and physically aggravating almost random process of searching for the desired key on a keyboard to create words, the damage to ever gaining the valuable skill of touch typing has already been done.  Finding time to train the brain, the eye and hand to do all the right things to get words on paper efficiently, accurately and quickly is difficult enough without having to un-train those processes and senses first.  However, given the pretty standard requirements for essays and dissertations and the like to be ‘word processed, I contend that even the most experienced two finger keyboard user will find benefit in setting aside time to get to know the layout of the keyboard and which hand and finger is ergonomically best suited to which letter or figure or symbol.  There are a host of proprietary software packages available for just this purpose.

Eventually, with practice, words will begin to flow effortlessly onto the page; not necessarily leading to feelings of joy but certainly to allow the brain more time and space to think and develop ideas rather than controlling the eyes up and down and the fingers everywhere seeking appropriate keys.  This is not however to argue for total dedication to ‘new technology and the exclusion of other media.

I also champion the use of a journal, a feint ruled hard backed book as a repository and constant aide memoire. I recommend this useful tool to my post graduate MSc students, as the place into which can be scribbled those brilliant thoughts that occur as one rises from slumber, a great phrase heard on the radio, a clipping from a newspaper, a reference, a note on what informed a decision to change from a positivist position to a more interpretive approach.  The book, the pen and pencil, eraser perhaps and for the lovers of mind maps, codes and patterns a pack of highlight pens complete the ‘always with you’ writers’ annexe to memory.

At some point of course the qualitative researcher has to arrange, shuffle and edit collected data and apply some sort of manipulation and analysis.  Cereal packet based index cards are probably great, cheap and easy to use but recording and examining thousands of words of transcribed interviews is much easier and quicker using a computer aided qualitative data analysis software, such as N-Vivo and here again accurate and skilled keyboarding will allow a lot more time for grouping nodes, seeking out patterns and finding repetitions.  Months later as the writing up of some research or an assignment essay gets underway, that great thought, that great sentence or cunning structural use of a quote as a lead in, which one might otherwise not recall, is there in ‘the book’ ready to be keyed in and transformed from a scribble to Aerial point 12 – quickly and accurately for those who have troubled to train themselves to keyboard or painfully and slowly for those who have not.

**References**

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Trubek, A (2009) Handwriting Is History. Writing words by hand is a technology that’s just too slow for our times, and our minds. Miller McCune-Turning Research into Solutions, on line magazine Available at http://www.miller-mccune.com/culture-society/handwriting-is-history-6540/?article\_page=2 (Accessed 12 March 2010)