

CLTopic: Different Strokes for Different Folks

Handwritten Chinese is, in itself, a thing of beauty, but not every one of your students will be inspired to learn to write characters. And let's face it, learning to write correctly, with balance, and the correct stroke order requires commitment, and a lot of practice.

Today, there is a great deal of debate around how technology is influencing language learning. In the digital age, with everyone using computers and smartphones, students may start to ask themselves is it really necessary to learn to write by hand? Isn't reading and being able to type enough? As a teacher, you may ask yourself, how much time should I devote to hand-written work?

The truth is all of us write less and less these days. In fact, if you think about what things you might actually do as an adult with pen and paper, the list is likely very short: brainstorming ideas, a shopping list, or a reminder on a post-it note!

In reality, students can actually acquire the language without spending much time on traditional handwriting. One can even go through every level of the HSK exam without writing a single character. As a result, more and more Chinese programmes now focus on alternative computer-based forms of writing.

Teachers of Chinese need to ask themselves two things: What are the needs of my learners? What are the benefits of handwriting in relation to my learner's needs?

Regardless of what your students want to achieve with their Chinese, there are some very clear benefits to learning how to write, for example, about 1000 of the most basic, common characters. In learning to write, students begin to understand the components of characters which is an essential skill as they continue on their studies. If they are only doing computer-based writing the characters remain 'whole' - that is a single image of what will always be lots of confusing, arbitrary lines. Writing shows students how to decipher the pictorial and

phonemic elements of characters which will help them as they encounter more complex vocabulary.

As students move on with their studies, they will soon have a better idea of what they want to do with their Chinese, and that may help determine how much further time they should spend on handwriting. For example, a student who just wants to communicate with friends or visit China, or even one who might work in a business environment, probably doesn't need to spend hours and hours mastering how to write every character they learn.

Conversely, a student who wants to go to do studies in a higher education setting in China, or even teach Chinese should be investing lots of time in learning to write accurately.

So, if we agree that there is some benefit to handwriting early on in a course of study, then what's the best way to encourage students to do it? Clearly writing a single character over and over 100 times isn't fun, but students do need to understand that there is a systematic way to write, and they should be encouraged to follow the rules. Their writing may not be particularly beautiful, but it should be accurate. Students will need to understand what kinds of strokes are used, how the strokes relate to one another, and the order they are written in.

Take time to go through the basics with them, and the order. Macmillan Education now has a resource available on the *Discover China* website for **Basic Strokes and Stroke Order** – this can be used as a reference for teachers and students.

Introducing students to the art of calligraphy very early on is a great idea. This might be an activity that you organise yourself, or a visit from someone in the community. It might involve just observation, or actually having a go themselves. For a start, it's a great entry point into Chinese culture – that is, having an appreciation for calligraphy as a traditional art form. Beginners will, of course, need to understand that there is simple writing and cursive writing, but that shouldn't be a barrier to having a go with basic characters.

There are also many online resources and tools for students to practice writing and stroke order in a more engaging way. *Skritter* is a great tool for learning new vocabulary, but also

practicing stroke order. *Yellow Bridge* also provides students with animated characters to show the order. These tools give students an opportunity to approach something very traditional in a more modern way, which is bound to be more engaging.

Teachers of course need to make their own judgements around handwriting with students, but no matter how much time is devoted to it, the trick is making sure it's both accurate and enjoyable.