

## **Technophobe:** *fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices and especially computers.*

Last week was 'Literacy and Numeracy' Week, which gave the Minister for Education a media opportunity which he chose to bury in ignorance. Headlines in the Sunday Telegraph on 27<sup>th</sup> August page 29....

'Spell Check confusion highlighted'

'COMPUTER spelling checkers are damaging children's literacy skills, NSW Educational Minister John Aquilina has warned.'

Is the Education Minister a Technophobe?

Of Course the Minister is in Good Company when it comes to making fallacious statements about computers.

Popular Mechanics, 1949, forecasting the relentless march of science:

"Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons."

Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977

"There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."

Bill Gates, 1981

"640K ought to be enough for anybody. "

Students of today will work in a world where computers are not optional but essential. Children can't and shouldn't be protected from technology, they should be educated in its use.

The truth is, all professional writing is done on a computer using spell and grammar checkers. This allows the publication of more accurate and correct information much more easily than in the past.

Mr Aquilina's assertion that spellcheckers will 'confuse children and hamper learning' couldn't be further from the truth. When children learn to use spell checkers they actually find it empowering. Some find the release from the concerns of spelling and grammar allows them to 'just get on with writing it (the story)'. Others love to invent spelling as they go along, guessing the spelling of words and checking the 'suspects' when they are underlined in red or green (this happens on most word processing programs now).

Of course using the spell checker for suggestions is plagued with problems according to Mr Aquilina, "many spell checkers use American spellings and can limit the ability to distinguish between words with similar sounds but different meanings (the word is homophones), such as 'sure' and 'shore'." In fact even 'Aquilina' shows up as a 'suspect' on my computer . In addition to these problems, most children's names will show up as 'suspects', many countries, cities, a lot of animals and many other words, so it is not a hard lesson for children to learn... THAT THE COMPUTER CAN BE WRONG; how comforting.

This brings me to the point the Minister completely missed.....

What is really important is that the computer allows children to take control of their own writing. Even children with minimal typing skills find the task more enjoyable. They can easily produce fantastic results. Children want to write more, and they are not encumbered by the difficulty of writing and rewriting which makes the most inspirational task a bore. In seconds they can correct add or remove text, set a writing style and add fantastic headings, clipart and pictures. And then produce a finished product that looks, well, fantastic.

The conversation between 2 writers, overhead recently:-

*How do you spell elephant?*

*I think it starts with an 'e', let's try that*

*'ele' then an 'l', and and 'e'*

*'f' after that.*

*And then just 'ant, after that.*

*'O, ho', it's a suspect, it's underlined in red. What could we change.*

*The 'f' can be 'ph' let's try that.*

*Woow! Cool it worked.*

*(a supreme feeling of achievement ensued).*

A great way to deal with the 'suspects' is to use a hardcopy of a dictionary or an Australian CD Dictionary like the Macquarie Dictionary. It can be adapted to use in conjunction with MS Word and IE as a desktop Icon and provides a wealth of readily accessible information at the click of a mouse button. In fact this little, (and I mean little, it's the tiniest CD), makes dictionary activities great fun, and provides,

definitions to overcome homophone confusion, synonyms, as well as phonetic pronunciation and colloquialisms.

The classes I work with are so keen to start their next writing task, I have trouble keeping up with them. And the big bonus for me is that there are far fewer errors to correct for 2 reasons

1. Spelling and grammar checkers are used.
2. Everyone else in the near vicinity adds their tuppence worth.

No, there are 3 reasons

3. I can actually read everyone's story, even the worst hand writers are legible.

And students learn extremely well from these activities. Every time they make a correction, invent a spelling that is no longer underlined in red, use the CD Macquarie dictionary, they are learning correct spelling and correct grammar. They are also learning about presentation, letter writing, using various business forms and most importantly, how to get the message across in the best possible way.

It is therefore important to teach the responsible use of all IT equipment. And that nothing is set in stone, motivation is the key, judgement and thought are required for all educational activities, including writing a story in the first place. We need to empower the students with the best possible tools for the future.

**PostScript** I have found that children's handwriting improves when they know that they don't need to do it all the time. If the possibility exists for producing some things on the computer, then they are often prepared to put more effort into the remaining handwriting tasks. Winners all round I'd say.

**Post PostScript** Oh! You might want to try my Spell checker activity to find the real suspects.

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