

## The Spell of Technology

RUTH MCQUIRTER SCOTT



I have been sitting at my laptop lately, designing exercises for an upcoming spelling textbook. For the past nineteen years I have done this, one student text and teachers' guide after another, until all grades in the series have been completed. Then a few months off to take a breath, and back to the drawing board to begin a new series. Thirty books at last count, with seven more in the future.

I don't need to consult the publication dates of my early books to know how long I have been writing textbooks. I simply need to check the age of my daughter. Just after signing my first book contract, I discovered I was pregnant with her. When I brought the matter up with the publisher, she said there was nothing in company policy preventing authors from having babies! What she didn't count on was an editorial meeting in my living room nine months later, with me nursing an infant while negotiating deadlines.

The technology of writing textbooks was fairly simple in those days. I would scratch out an idea on paper, type it up on my Smith Corona typewriter, the nifty machine with the pop-out correction tape. Then I would bundle up the manuscript, a few lessons at a time, and send it off via snail mail to the company. There it would sit for a few weeks while the editor shuffled other manuscripts. In the intervening weeks, I could get on with other work. The marked-up copy would return, I would re-type everything, since of course, there was no such thing as a word processing program with memory, and in about a year the text would be complete.

Fast-forward to 2004. My co-author and I juggle two or three texts at once, planning one grade level, writing a second, and responding to an editor's comments on a third. As soon as we write a unit, we share it with one another by e-mail, then forward it instantly to the editor. Her comments are often given the next day, with revisions expected within the week.

The spelling system hasn't changed much in twenty years, but the background research in putting a text together certainly has. I find myself regularly surfing the Internet for interesting websites on language, checking curriculum documents across Canada, ordering books online to use as references.

The educational community has also dictated major changes in how authors approach a text. In the "olden days" we tended to deal with spelling as an isolated skill. Now, thanks to advances in knowledge about how children learn, we link spelling with writing, grammar, word games, and reading. It is a demanding, creative process that requires focused thinking on the part of authors.

My focus was lost the other day while I was working on a new lesson. At the bottom of my screen I noticed a flashing sign inviting me to a "conversation" with my daughter.

The baby in the living room nineteen years ago is now in her second year of university. She has initiated me into the world of Microsoft Messenger, and we have online chats daily.

Although I'm delighted that we can connect without incurring long distance charges, this communication form has me wondering about its impact on the spelling skills of our students. I am careful to check my spelling on e-mails, but when I am online with my daughter, speed of typing trumps spelling accuracy. I try to record my thoughts as fast as I would speak, and this leaves little time for asking, "Is it occurred or occured?" I notice that I frequently make keyboarding errors, but seem to be bothered less and less by them.

When the invitation to join my daughter in a conversation came this day, she was in a high-tech lecture hall, taking notes on her laptop. She decided she was bored with the history lecture, and could tell that I was working on my computer.

As I rather sheepishly joined in her diversion, I entertained myself with the image of her professor, droning on at the lectern, his notes perhaps no different than when he first created them long before the advent of wireless technology. No doubt he thought his students were recording his wise comments, just as my professors had thought some thirty years ago. More often than not, I was writing letters to my boyfriend at another university, or my obligatory weekly letter home. Today, the same undergraduate could be playing video games, buying goods on e-bay, or connecting with strangers around the world. Occasionally, she may even be chatting with her mother!

As an educator, a writer, and a parent, I struggle to keep up with the dizzying pace of technology. There's a revolution taking place under my nose and trying to understand it is like taking aim at a moving target. I don't dare stand still, since this generation of children will simply move on without me. I'd hate to miss the show! ★

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