Writing very useful method for learning math, other subjects

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Guest columnist

Were the Romans on to something when they created their numerical system based on letters? Or did these letters only represent a quick fix when they were building fortresses, calculating the date of Easter, or selling a shipment of wool?

People went on using Roman numerals for hundreds of years after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Romans were active in trade and commerce, and from the time of learning to write they needed a way to indicate numbers.

As we start another school year, we return our focus to TAKS scores. Those of us who have children who have passed the TAKS issue a sigh of relief, but those of us who have children who failed ask ourselves, why? Is it a wonder that students score lower in the math TAKS test than in the reading and writing tests?

Math has historically been one of the subjects people most fear. Could it be that math seems more foreign due to the lack of letters?

Absolutely!

The frustrations that come with this unfamiliar and irrelevant dialect are many. So why do we not familiarize society and make math more proverbial by writing about it?

WAC (Writing across the Curriculum) -- what a concept! It's a concept that has been around for years but yet has not been given the recognition it deserves.

It serves as an educational reform movement that gained momentum in the U.S. in the 1970s and has given impetus to a number of curricular innovations. Writing is seen as a method for encouraging learning in all areas of education.

Informal writing assignments such as journals, learning logs and poetry in mathematics courses often ask students to apply currently studied concepts to concrete "real life" situations. We as human beings best communicate in writing, so why can't we best speak mathematics by writing about them?

Understanding how to solve mathematical problems is not enough. Memorization is not the key to success when it comes to mathematics.

Fully understanding the concept through writing will lead to permanent learning. After all, isn't the mathematics TAKS test based on word problems?

Rather than asking ourselves why our children failed, we need to ask them how much writing they are doing in their class.

Due to the state standards that direct us, we educators continue to lean toward the more traditional teaching methods. As students continue to study mathematical skills the conventional way, they are taught how to work out problems and are not expected to explain, and analyze them. So are they really learning or just committing to memory?

Letters once made up the language of mathematics. A language that now has only specialized uses: chapter headings, numbers that make distinctions when children have the same name, copyright dates, and to denote film sequels such as "Shrek the III," or sports events such as "Super Bowl XXI."

Seneca, a famous Roman philosopher, once said, "I am a book, with pages that have stuck together for want of use: my mind needs unpacking and the truths stored within must be turned over from time to time, to be ready when occasion demands."

Could it be that our solution is but a pencil away? Yes! It's called writing!

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