



Spelling out the dangers of a creative approach



IN A recent article on the BBC website it was claimed that poor spelling is costing British industries millions of pounds each year.

Charles Duncombe, a British businessman, was quoted as saying that a single spelling mistake on a website could cut the sales from that website in half.

Since internet sales in Britain are running at more than £500 million (NZ\$1.01 billion) a week, this could add up to a lot of lost revenue. The difficulty is that an internet site has to look reliable.

Users are very wary of paying money to non-existent businesses, and will withdraw if in doubt. One of the things that makes a website look unreliable and unprofessional is poor spelling. Or even a single spelling error. Sending material back for resetting because of spelling mistakes also costs time and money.

Creative spellings, which might win you brownie points when text-messaging or using social media, are clearly not productive in these other circumstances.

We might react in several ways to this news.

We might bemoan the loss of skills among schoolchildren, and wonder why they are not being taught to spell "properly" (possibly making the assumption that earlier generations were taught "properly"). We might

comment unflatteringly on primary school teachers who set a poor example in that they obviously do not care about spelling themselves; my own children used to have arrangements with teachers to correct spelling and apostrophes when they were put up wrongly on the board.

What kind of message does this send? If we make this kind of criticism, we often forget that these same teachers often have skills which their forerunners never needed to consider: skills in Maori language or in film analysis, for example.

Alternatively, we might bemoan the idea that society is so hung up on such a minor problem.

Shakespeare notoriously spelt his own name four ways, but it didn't prevent him from writing the most wonderful texts. The spelling is really a minor aspect of a text in some ways.

The idea that there is a single "right" way to spell a word is also a very new idea, and one which we still do not entirely believe: is it judgment or judgement? Is it hospitalize or hospitalise? Enquiry or inquiry? Draft or draught? Coffee-pot or coffeepot?

All are permissible.

Spelling words the way they sound is simply going back to a slightly earlier way of writing, and perhaps we should not worry.

YET another approach would be to indicate surprise that website writers, of all people, should not be able to spell, given that they have spell-checkers these days to tell them where they have gone wrong.



While there may be a delicious irony in this, we have to recall that a spelling-checker will not object to a sentence like Eye no awl this are wright be coz thee comp pew duh tolled me their were snuff in two change.

One of the great things about predictive text on your mobile phone is that you cannot use it if you cannot spell – which tends to limit the amount it can help you to improve your spelling.

One of the other stories that has been in the news recently is the discussion of the use of

phonics or whole-word recognition for children learning to read.

Fortunately, some teachers were quick to point out that no single method of teaching children to read is sufficient: different children learn in different ways, and children often learn in different ways at different times in their development.

Moreover, some English words, like “their” and “buy” are best learnt by recognising the whole pattern, while others, like “cat” and “indignant”, can easily be

spelt out. Our children cannot be held hostage by theoretical purists who insist on a single way of doing things, when plural approaches are much more likely to be useful to them. Unfortunately, they may or may not learn to spell according to established norms whichever approach is used.

But learning to read well is a prerequisite to learning to spell well, and they require all the help we can give them.

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Quite contrary:
 Rely on the spellcheck at your peril
 Photo: ANDREW GORRIE