

Chapter 30. Writing Across the Lifespan

Articulating the psychological components of my work in relation to other dimensions of writing increased my explicit interest in the lifespan development of writing. Lifespan development focuses attention on how the individual develops as a writer, but the individual lives in a particular time and place, has particular learning experiences, writes for specific challenges, and relies on a limited and often idiosyncratic set of available resources. In short, each individual develops in particular social circumstances to follow a unique trajectory. This is the developmental implication of Marx's famous dictum in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."

Reflecting on My Development and Others'

When I started teaching literacy and writing, I began reflecting on my own experiences, as most teachers do. At first, I wanted to share what I had learned in the way I learned it, but becoming aware of the uniqueness of each student's conditions and trajectories challenged me to find how to serve their particular needs rather than quixotically attempting to replicate my own path. Working at a neighborhood elementary school, I could see the conditions of my students' lives as I walked through the neighborhood and they told me of their daily happenings. Knowing more of their lives gave me clues as to how I could reach them, and what I could offer that would help them address their life challenges. When I began teaching at an open admissions university that drew students from across New York City, I came to know them through literacy narratives and class discussions. I also came to see the way students approached writing assignments and the resources they brought to their tasks. Concern for their future needs led me to enquire into what they would need to write if they were to succeed in the university and the careers that might follow. Research into disciplinary and professional writing was a direct consequence.

Formulating Lifespan Development as a Problem and a Project

Only when I joined an education school in 1997, however, did I begin to systematically read and make sense of the literature on writing development across all ages. The good fortune of being able to teach graduate students who had taught in primary and secondary schools created an opportunity and an obligation to understand writing at all levels of schooling. In order to put together a seminar

on lifespan development of writing I scoured what research there was on writing development at different ages. I was surprised, though, to find how little there was beyond the robust developmental work on emergent literacy in very young children. I was even more surprised to find out how divided the research was by age or school level, as well as by theoretical approach. Further, for children older than five years, much of the research was tied to curricular interventions rather than development situated within the students' understandings, perceptions, and growth, so it was hard to understand development apart from fulfillment of curriculum.

Let me elaborate a bit on this point. Most writing pedagogies (except the most misguided) are successful in doing what they purport to do, and thus can be demonstrated to be a success in their own terms. Students generally learn what we ask them to, as long as we are explicit enough about it, and they engage with the tasks we offer, built on our assumptions of what is important for writing. So, if we test them on the skills and knowledge we value in the curriculum, they show growth in those dimensions over the instructional period. Since there are so many kinds and aspects of writing, the potential lines of growth are as varied as our curricular creativity allows. In turn teachers, noticing the students' responsiveness to their teaching, become ever more committed to their pedagogy and their vision of what writing is and could be. Skilled teachers can create ever more novel curricula and instructional techniques that bring students further along the instructor's desired trajectory—with of course a continuing feedback loop as students followed the lead of the instruction. In a sense writing instruction is potentially a self-fulfilling, self-creating prophecy. This is not necessarily bad. It is even inevitable and valuable as students learn different aspects of writing from different teachers. I certainly did. But this also creates obstacles to understanding writing development apart from the curriculum we offer. If writing is an art, an artifice, it is only what we make of it, and schooling has made particular things of it. This does not mean, however, that all of writing's potential was being taught; nor what might be of most use to the students beyond the particular class; nor what most fit their social, psychological, institutional, cultural, or personal historical conditions; nor what matched students' goals, energies, capabilities, and motivations; nor how students understood what we asked them to do and how they integrated it with other things they had learned about writing. School assumptions and practices concerning writing have given us the appearance of understanding writing development while only offering paths for successful progress through the curriculum. This is why we need to understand the individual writer's development as distinct from the curriculum the students encounter, although that instruction and curriculum are important parts of students' developmental stories.

The first several iterations of the seminar on lifespan writing development were devoted to make sense of the rather disjunct literature studying different ages and educational settings from different perspectives. During the first dozen years the

most coherence I could accomplish was to organize my syllabus and to give a few talks about the importance and puzzles of understanding lifespan development. When I had the opportunity to edit a handbook (Bazerman, 2008b), I made sure it included chapters for every level of schooling along with parallel chapters for each corresponding age, to try to see how development might look distinct from curriculum. But no matter how much I tried to get the chapter authors to talk across the divides among age and school level and make distinctions between schooling and development, little clarity or connection emerged across the levels.

Sharing the Problem and Enlisting Colleagues

An invitation to write an editorial for a Spanish education journal provided an opportunity to stir the lifespan pot (Bazerman, 2013a). The exigency was ripe and I was familiar enough with the literature to comment on its limitations. I started the editorial by pointing out that the same child who struggles to hold a pencil in kindergarten a few years later is organizing a report in middle school, then some years later is writing a critical analysis at the university, and eventually is composing a legal brief or a research study. I then presented the obstacles to understanding this lifespan process as a list with each item elaborated in a few paragraphs each (following a pattern I had been developing for exposition of ideas to audiences that may not be familiar with them): disentangling curriculum and development; research on writing in different life periods; the difficulties of longitudinal developmental research; and separation of research traditions. I ended with, “The challenge of creating an integrated developmental picture.” Each of the sections I had already thought through over the previous years, so once I had the mode and organization of the exposition, I could do the familiar work of crafting the elaborations in readily understood and forceful terms, to create a warrant and energy for others to join in this inquiry.

As I was finishing the draft, I was in fact already enlisting others into a collaborative discussion. Simply having experts write separate statements, as had occurred in the handbook, was not sufficient to lead to synthesis or a more comprehensive view. Scholars needed to talk together. By the time the article appeared, I had assembled nine experts of different theoretical and methodological approaches, who researched writing development at different ages. The initial group included leading scholars familiar with emergent literacy; primary, secondary and higher education; disciplinary, adult and workplace writing; classroom practice; policy; assessment; and multi-lingual writing; namely, Arthur Applebee, Virginia Berninger, Deborah Brandt, Steve Graham, Paul Kei Matsuda, Sandra Murphy, Deborah Rowe, Mary Schleppegrell, and myself. The participants brought perspectives from linguistics, psychology, sociocultural theory, curricular design, and practice—working at local, statewide, national and international levels. This group was U.S. based, because the No Child Left Behind legislation created a particular exigency in formulating a Common Core Curriculum. Fortunately, most

members of the group also had extensive international experience and we crafted our statements to reach beyond NCLB exigencies.

At our first few virtual meetings in 2013 (using recently introduced video conference technologies) we formulated goals, approaches, and processes, while starting to explore funding. We were able to arrange for a small informal grant from the Spenser Foundation to meet face to face for three days annually for the next three years (we were to get an extension for a couple of additional years), with many virtual meetings, email exchanges, and document sharing in between. People gave freely of their time and energy over the five years without recompense, motivated by the value of the exchange, the conclusions we came to, and the strong bonds of respect we developed for each other. During the period of this grant an important member of the group, Arthur Applebee, was gravely ill, though he did not share his illness with us. He wanted to keep his personal struggles from interfering with our ongoing progress. I was very fortunate for at least this brief period to work closely with him and appreciate his great wisdom and broad perspective on literacy education. With his passing, two of his former students (Jill Jeffery and Kristen Wilcox) joined us to carry forward his part of the work.

Although I convened the group, I wanted to keep the organization as lateral as possible so all would have equal voice. While everyone was hardworking, respectful, and motivated, we did need one person to keep the tasks organized and to moderate the discussions. I reluctantly took on that role, but with the understanding I would also maintain my own voice, handing the gavel over to someone else when I was stepping into my participant role (a common committee practice). Over the first year each of us wrote a series of brief summative papers. This helped us become more familiar with the knowledge and views the others brought to the table. These included statements on what constituted writing development, an overview of the research about the age/school group we specialized in, what we each perceived as the points of convergence that emerged over the first year, and how we each now saw the problem of development.

In our second year, we collaborated on a set of principles to guide future studies of lifespan writing development. This seemed to us a significant accomplishment and we wanted to circulate this as a statement from the group. Elaborating these principles in a draft statement became our central focus of work. We were torn between the need to make the statement readily understood and meaningful to a variety of audiences, and to provide sufficient warrant for our claims from the literature. Given the expertise of each of the participants, the citations and elaborations could be massive and weigh the document down. Yet the reviewers of the journals kept demanding more of this despite the journal's word limitations. We finally were able to get a conditional approval of this as an editorial opinion statement, which put an even more stringent word limit while the demands for more discussion of the literature continued. So this revision process became a challenge even for a group where everyone had such long publication experience (Bazerman et al., 2017e).

The radical cutting needed to meet journal requirements increased the group's desire for a book which would have a more complete version of our statement and other collaboratively written chapters (Bazerman et al., 2018e). We each also contributed an individual chapter allowing us to present in greater depth our own perspectives that were not as fully articulated in the Venn intersection of the collaborative statements. We did, however, mutually critique and edit these individual chapters over the last two years of the project. We sought a publisher that would reach teachers, policy makers, and researchers working with all educational levels. While we saw the value in reaching international audiences, we balanced that against the exigencies within the U.S. educational system and the scope of different publishers along with their distribution and price structures. The NCTE Press, although U.S. based, did reach across research, policy, and practice at all educational levels and maintained a modest price structure. Further, the press agreed to open access distribution through the WAC Clearinghouse after a two-year embargo. But this was not an easy choice, and we spent some time discussing it.

Despite my own impulse to move rapidly to a comprehensive synthetic picture, I had to recognize the wisdom in the group's caution that making any substantive claims at this point would privilege assumptions of particular populations or national school systems and would create normative expectations that would not fit the great variability of people's pathways. In this project I came to recognize things I had normalized from my own experience and I had to recognize deeply held assumptions and self-fulfilling prophecies of my own pedagogy. At this point, at least, there was no end to surfacing assumptions. Being in the role of a discussion facilitator pushed me even further to give up assumptions, as I had to appreciate the views being expressed by everyone in order to frame the productive next question and next task. I had to come to see the problem of writing development through the eyes of each of these very knowledgeable, experienced, and smart interlocutors. To keep the conversations going I repeatedly had to step back from my personally invested response to develop a larger frame in which the separate views could thrive and find points of intersection.

In my own chapter for the collection (Bazerman, 2018b), rather than advance any current work or articulate my own prior views about development, I proposed as a thought experiment a massively unrealistic research project of a hundred-year longitudinal study of diverse peoples in diverse national and economic situations, within different schooling systems, career paths, and access to technologies. Many dimensions of quantitative and qualitative data would be collected by teams located in different regions and focusing on varied populations. Perhaps from this massive data we could start to sort out if there were any common processes in writing development or even just common dimensions or variables that would help describe the differing trajectories. In order to sketch some of the problematics and procedures for such a study, I looked in detail to the examples of lifespan longitudinal studies in other disciplines, from physiology and medicine to human development and psycho-social wellness.

We in the group realized that we could not at this point offer answers. At best we could only mark a beginning to encourage future work and discussions. So we designed our article and book with that in mind, as I did in my chapter. We wanted to look beyond our moment to offer a vision for future work that might lead to a more fundamental understanding for writing education. In the few years since, these publications have gotten a modest but growing number of citations, indicating that the ideas have some resonance. Further, a Writing Through the Lifespan research collaborative has formed, led by some younger scholars who can carry forward the endeavor over many years, Ryan Dippre and Talinn Phillips. They have enlisted a growing number of members, held annual conferences (despite the challenges of the pandemic), produced publications from them (to which I have contributed, Bazerman, 2020b and this volume). Other publications are also emerging with a specific lifespan development focus.

I have continued to provide support in other publications for this growing research theme, which I hope will continue beyond my career. A chapter originating in the Dartmouth Conference on Methods allowed me to recount my methodological evaluation of the currently available forms of data available in writing and related studies that could be used for longitudinal developmental studies. I also restated and elaborated the challenges of gathering data that can tell us about writing development (Bazerman, 2021c). I also edited a special issue of the journal *Writing and Pedagogy* on this topic (Bazerman, 2018c). This autobiography is my next experiment about what can be said, at least about my one idiosyncratic case. While a few of the elements I tell in my story may match some experiences of some readers, the particular way they fall together and interact with emerging motives, goals, and discoveries are likely to match with even fewer, if any. But that, I hope is the point: how individual and idiosyncratic our pathways are in writing. I suspect and hope, at least, that some of the kinds of variables that influenced my development, and some of the dynamics that emerged in addressing those particularities will suggest themes that could be followed in contrasting and aggregating different stories of different writers. But I also suspect their stories will raise themes that I was not able to notice in my writing life.