

CHAPTER 21.

# RADICALITY IN THE SHORT TERM: GENERATING STRUCTURAL CHANGE

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From its inception, lifespan writing research has worked to take a big-tent approach, inviting and encouraging researchers from multiple disciplines and with multiple methodological orientations to contribute knowledge. Bazerman's initial work and his formation of the Lifespan Writing Development group made clear that a research object as ambitious as LWR would require many hands and many forms of disciplinary and research expertise. As Bazerman asks in the penultimate chapter of *The Lifespan Development of Writing* (Bazerman et al., 2018), ". . .how can we understand the complexity of even one individual's idiosyncratic pathway to the mature competence that provides a confident, strong, and unique written presence within the individual's lifeworld?" (p. 327). In our first edited collection we also address this explicitly:

how can we mobilize the various traditions, methods, and understandings of writing in these pages (and beyond) *together*, in ways that build on convergent themes, theories, methods, and stances but also take advantage of the divergences of each approach? (Dippre & Phillips, 2020, p. 247).

If there ever was a sense that LWR is a simple research problem to solve, the wide range of adaptations and improvisations represented in this volume are quite definitive. It's not just that a wide variety of knowledge bases and methodological approaches are essential for lifespan writing research: it's that even those may not be enough. The methodological improvisations that these authors have demonstrated suggest that even now, writing studies may lack the methodological infrastructure to support projects of the scope and duration required to understand writing through the lifespan. We are also very aware that there are

other important, relevant research methodologies that aren't represented in this volume at all. Yet, from quantitative analysis to poetic inquiry, what *is* represented reveals nearly 20 different approaches to lifespan writing research which form several collective arguments about how lifespan writing research moves forward.

We have argued for some time that LWR is an inherently radical endeavor (Dippre & Phillips, 2023). Specifically, it is radically *longitudinal*, calling attention to the fact that LWR is “taking longitudinal research to its extreme by studying writing from cradle to grave and, where appropriate, across generations” (p. 156). But it is also radically *contextual*, attending to writing as “occurring with, in, and through the construction of context over time” by writers (p. 157). As this volume makes clear, lifespan writing research is pursuing timelines, contexts, methodologies, and even working with participants in radical ways that then differ from other approaches to researching writing, even when the same methodologies are being used. As Compton-Lilly's dissertation research morphed into a longitudinal, ongoing project, she developed new methods for data analysis that could account for those longer timescales. Her relationship to participants also changed significantly over time as young children became young adults who had new insights into their own literacy development and into the research project itself. Cain, Childers, and Ryan also make visible the ways that research projects shift course and develop improvisationally over time, necessitating new methodological approaches, while Fulford and Rosenberg as well as Workman show the power and transformation that come from revisiting a project. For Fulford and Rosenberg, revisiting participants led to important changes in those participants' roles as McGowan and Long transition into co-authors. For Workman, returning to data with hard-won new knowledge of both her self and methodology led to a revitalized project that does more to account for the entirety and complexities of participants' experiences.

This collection also highlights just how vital cultivating relationships with participants is to much of our research—and “cultivate” is a fairly inadequate term in this case. Duffey, Compton-Lilly, Workman, Fulford, and Rosenberg are all working with participants over multi-year and even decades-long spans. The knowledge that these researchers have helped to create is impossible without their participants' willing and ongoing participation. We have always known that keeping participants involved in our projects was key to lifespan writing research success, but these researchers' projects begin to make both the stakes and paths to more substantive, complex relationships with participants visible. As we see these valuable insights into writing lives that can only come with long periods of research, our larger, collective work to understand writing across the lifespan takes on greater importance. In addition, these researchers are beginning to show the rest of us how we might do it—how we might grow and deepen

and mature our relationships with participants over time by “dwelling together” (Fulford & Rosenberg, this volume).

The radicality of the lifespan writing project also necessitates the kinds of methodological improvisation that spark across this volume. Many of the chapters here make clear that effective LWR is not choosing a methodology and clinging rigidly to it until the bitter end. The timescales and complexities of LWR will force change, adaptation, and improvisation. And again, we use *improvisation* not to mean half-assed, but, as several of the aforementioned contributors demonstrate, to represent the skilled, considered changes that talented researchers make as the contexts of their projects and their participants change. But while many of the authors in Part I focused on improvisations to established methodologies that have deep roots themselves, the authors in Part II take a broader look.

Part II offered an expansive perspective on methods, methodologies, theories, and approaches to LWR as researchers engage and develop new methodologies. Cain, Childers, and Ryan along with Workman address new imaginings of established methodologies, such as autoethnography and institutional ethnography, both of which have wide application to LWR. Zajic and Poch remind us of the power and unique affordances of quantitative methods in LWR, a collection of methods that are particularly salient given Levine’s challenge to develop the kinds of research that policymakers will engage. Lunsford, Alexander, and Whithaus and Tarabochia suggest quite new methodologies that were developed in response to particular research goals, while Montes and Tusting and Cirio and Naftzinger ask us to reconsider and deepen the commonplace concepts in LWR of “transitions” and “memory.” And again, many of these researchers reveal improvisation in action as methodologies shift in response to new contexts. Cain, Childers, and Ryan; Workman; Lunsford, Alexander, and Whithaus; and Tarabochia all demonstrate methods and methodologies evolving in quite surprising ways. Together, these authors establish new vistas from which future research can develop. These authors can help us improvise further in response to our research questions, our research sites, and the needs of the emerging research agenda that we call lifespan writing research.

## LIFESPAN WRITING FUTURES

As we sit poised on the brink of our second decade in this absurd project called lifespan writing research, this collection—particularly the final chapters of Part II—challenges us to think about our future work in terms that aren’t just methodologically and disciplinarily radical, but to also take a more explicit outward or even political focus. For all of our radicality, many chapters in Part II also point

to an underlying conservatism in our collective work thus far. Aryal, Levine, Workman, Duffey, and Fulford and Rosenberg all challenge us to ask ourselves, *What are the larger policy implications of methodologies for our work?* And perhaps more pointedly, *Are the research and methodologies that we pursue positively impacting the material lives and emotional wellbeing of the writers and populations we research? What is the relationship between research and activism?* In the remainder of this concluding chapter, we consider these questions as both editors and as the co-chairs of the Writing Through the Lifespan Collaboration (<http://lifespan-writing.org>). We see the important issues raised in these final chapters as helping us to chart a course for the future of our collective work.

### **WHAT ARE THE LARGER POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF METHODOLOGIES FOR OUR WORK?**

To date, LWR has had little engagement with education and education policy. The original volume by the Lifespan Writing Development Group (Bazerman et al., 2018) thought through some policy problems in its formulation of guiding principles and offered a concluding chapter with suggested forms of development, variables, and dimensions of writing development that can guide education policy, as well as some starting points for lifespan writing researchers to begin engaging with education policy. Several years later, however, that branch of the lifespan writing research mission remains underdeveloped.

Levine's chapter offers a useful jump-start to this work. Levine notes the "unexamined assumptions about writers and their growth" (this volume) underpinning many school standards for writing, but also—and importantly—highlights that lifespan writing researchers need to attend carefully to the "legal, political, and organizational obligations of policy action" (this volume) that shapes school writing instruction. How might we attend to the legal, political, and organizational obligations of policy actions while, at the same time, advocating for the insights that our research is showing us—insights that may, in fact, challenge the nature and understandings of such obligations of policy action? What does such policy work look like for us as lifespan writing researchers?

As LWR moves into its second decade, we suggest that shaping education policy become a distinctive element of the work that we do. Some of our professional organizations already have major policy arms, including the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project. Joining with their existing policy work can help all involved in the policymaking around writing operate within a richer context of people's writing lives. For if legislators shared an understanding of transitions as rhizomatic (Montes & Tusting), how might that help them to abandon an obsession with unidirectional growth?

Or what might happen if policymakers entered the room not just with data from the latest standardized tests, but also with the writing trajectories of Gabby (Compton-Lilly), Adam, (Compton-Lilly), Chief and Gwen (Rosenberg, 2020; Fulford & Rosenberg), Adrienne (Fulford & Rosenberg), Kim (Duffey), and Don (Bowen, 2020)? The work of lifespan writing researchers has made clear that adults continue to develop new, successful literacy practices throughout adulthood and outside the context of formal schooling. Can seeing successful writing trajectories of older adults like Shirley and Kim lower the stakes (by which we mean the desire for unidirectional growth) within the K-12 system? Perhaps Chief's (Rosenberg, 2020) particular challenges with literacy learning and the poignant images of Compton-Lilly's students who are abused by notions of "educational rigor" might prod policymakers to see the consequences of narrow approaches to literacy development? Perhaps Kim, as Duffey suggests, might help us to reframe national conversations about schooling, completion, and "dropping out"? And perhaps composite narratives (Sanders et al.; DeFauw et al.) might be one way to scale up our individual research projects so that we could rigorously represent the experiences of more people more powerfully to legislators and policymakers.

But Levine's chapter also strongly suggests that making policymakers aware, for instance, of existing lifespan writing research will not be enough to generate structural change in national writing policy—that policymakers are predisposed to value particular kinds of methodological choices. Levine argues that if lifespan writing researchers want to see structural change, then we will have to give more attention to methodological design as we plan our studies—that we must design not just for ourselves, but also for our target audience. This would seem to call for the kind of methodological improvisation and innovation that many lifespan writing researchers have pioneered, perhaps by developing more mixed-methods, collaborative studies that use quantitative methods (Zajic & Poch) to generate the kinds of large data sets which are persuasive to policymakers but which are richly contextualized through, e.g., parallel case studies or focus groups. Jacques et al.'s comprehensive examination of longitudinal writing research helps to make the landscape of such collaborations more clear.

**ARE THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGIES THAT WE PURSUE  
POSITIVELY IMPACTING THE MATERIAL LIVES AND EMOTIONAL  
WELLBEING OF THE WRITERS AND POPULATIONS WE RESEARCH?**

Throughout this volume, we have seen deliberate care and attention taken to understand the lives of writers (see Duffey; Compton-Lilly; Fulford & Rosenberg; Aryal) as well as the lives of us as researchers (see Workman; Tarabochia).

These chapters help us to focus on both individuals and communities—in short, exactly who we’re hoping to support in and through our research. Unlike the larger issues of policy that are traced in our first question, this question brings us to the level of the individual and the community. How might we explore the ways in which our research and methodologies are positively impacting the lives and emotional wellbeing of the writers and populations we’re researching? As Aryal points out, these are important considerations for any researchers who seek to engage in decolonizing the processes of academic research and ensuring it benefits more than just researchers.

We can imagine exploring this question in several ways. First, we can think about—as Fulford and Rosenberg do—how we are positioning ourselves in relation to those we are studying/studying with. How we build that relationship, how that relationship shapes our research, and how it is articulated in the research we produce for publication are all important questions that several chapters in this volume can help us consider. Is there a way that we can build off of the language of Fulford and Rosenberg, the considerations identified by Aryal, the challenges set forth by Duffey, and Sanders et al.’s composite narratives to generate more shared language, policies, and approaches for working with and representing research participants in future lifespan-related work?

Second, we can imagine the consequences of publication for those we work with. How might participating in or being published about materially impact the lives of our research participants? How might we make the consequences of the research they participate in impactful beyond a gift card? How can we identify, document, and build on the positive impact that our work with people on their writing has on those people’s lives? Fulford, Rosenberg, Long, and McGowan offer a powerful model for this. As Rosenberg’s work continues to develop, she writes with McGowan about the events impacting McGowan’s life and not only in service to Rosenberg’s own project. Fulford and Long interpret data *together*, drawing on Long’s particular knowledge. As these two projects continue to develop, we expect they will give other researchers additional insight into how co-authoring with former participants might be valued by the co-authors themselves.

Third, we can imagine the consequences of research on not just individuals, but the wider communities of language users that those individuals are part of. How might we be able to generate new insights that can be positively taken up by these communities—and, furthermore, how might we make sure that these positive take-ups can also benefit future research, making the work we do more generative for the future communities we work for and with?

Issues of race, racialization, and language resonate throughout this volume, most powerfully in the chapters by Compton-Lilly, Fulford and Rosenberg, Workman, Tarabochia, and Aryal. Additionally, the early work of the Lifespan

Writing Development Group (Bazerman et al., 2018) set the stage for a deliberate challenge to normative (and problematic) pathways of development in its statement of lifespan writing research principles. However, contemporary research on race and racism in writing, the teaching of writing, and policy/ies around writing remain under-addressed in our current conversations. Anti-racist research in writing studies has produced thoughtful challenges to the subtle ways in which writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment have been and remain racialized (e.g., Inoue, 2015) along with anti-racist methodological insights and approaches (e.g., Lockett, Ruiz, Sanchez, & Carter, 2021; Aryal, this volume). How might lifespan writing researchers use these resources to question, unpack, and revise their methodological, theoretical, and philosophical assumptions about language and writing? What new methodologies may emerge? Furthermore, how might lifespan writing researchers invite anti-racist writing researchers into lifespan writing research projects?

Certainly, anti-racist, translingual, and de-colonial approaches are not the only ones that could benefit LWR: this radical research agenda has much growing to do and many more methods, methodologies, theories, and philosophies to explore in order to tackle the massive research object that is writing through the lifespan. Reading into, thinking about, and researching through such anti-racist approaches, however, can challenge lifespan writing researchers to explore new sites and methods, to question their assumptions, and, in the process, reach new vistas from which they can get a better glimpse of the complexity of writing through the lifespan.

### **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUR RESEARCH AND ACTIVISM?**

Since the inception of the Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration, our focus has been on research on building a body of work that we can use to better understand how writing works throughout the lifespan. We deliberately set aside activism, operating on the twin assumptions that (1) it's a little difficult to engage in activism through a lifespan lens if we don't yet know what we can see through that lens and (2) research can generate activism, or at least support current, ongoing activist efforts. Now that research is emerging on writing through the lifespan, and now that principles, methodologies, and lines of inquiry exist for us to pursue, we can begin to imagine the ways in which we might go about using LWR to both engage in new activism and further contribute to ongoing activist efforts.

Although the output of research on writing through the lifespan is still relatively small, there are sufficient findings we can point to so that we might begin that work. Bowen (2020) and Rosenberg (2015; 2020), for instance, help us to understand how we might understand the writing lives of older writers which

could set the stage for engaging in activism to support older writers through university centers on aging or nonprofit activities. By drilling down into the material reality of literate acts through, for instance, Bowen's (2020) methodology of literacy tours, we can start to build understandings of the literate lives of older writers that can shape how these organizations advocate for them.

Activism based on LWR could also be used to support local efforts for literacy programs unrelated to schooling, such as reading and book groups, writing groups, and nonprofit literacy centers. Lifespan writing researchers can look from broader findings to specific applications that work for particular communities and bolster the visibility of those communities' literacy needs. We encourage lifespan writing researchers (and others, of course) to think about how such research could be used to productively engage with activist work.

## **LINES OF INQUIRY: BRINGING OUR THREADS TOGETHER**

We find it difficult to conclude a volume that we have spent so much time imagining as a beginning: the beginning of a book series, new conversations about methodologies in lifespan writing research, renewed attention to a "big tent" vision for studying writing through the lifespan. The themes we traced in this chapter have provided us with some avenues for moving forward in the coming years. As the project of LWR moves forward, we can ask ourselves how these themes can intertwine. How might the lines of inquiry we pursue inform our engagement with educational policy? How might transformed understandings of the relationship between race and language also transform our research methods, sites, and conclusions? And how might we be able to draw on our policy work, our research, and our understandings of race and language to engage in more visible activism that benefits our co-researchers and research participants?

In the conclusion to our previous volume (Dippre & Phillips, 2020) and elsewhere (Dippre & Phillips, 2023) we suggested lines of inquiry as a way for researchers to come together to investigate writing through the lifespan in a coordinated manner. We suggested some potential lines of inquiry that might allow for the coordinated study of writing via different methodological and theoretical approaches at different points in the lifespan as a starting point:

- Agency
- Context
- Identity
- Semiosis

These lines of inquiry can serve as the starting point for developing shared research initiatives across methods, methodologies, theories, and research sites.



This current volume offers a range of methodologies for studying writing through the lifespan, and that might productively be aligned and improvised by different researchers at different research sites to pursue, through funded research, these and other lines of inquiry.

Much like our suggested lines of inquiry, though, the methodologies present in this volume are just the tip of the iceberg: there are a range of approaches that this volume does not address and that can be valuable for lifespan writing researchers to pursue. Even the chapters of Part II, which offer a collection of “Ands,” just begin to uncover the variety of options lifespan writing researchers can have at their disposal. We suggest, then, that lifespan writing researchers use the lines of inquiry presented in our earlier work, along with the methodologies presented here, not as the totality but as the start of assembling research teams, applying for grants, and conducting methodologically innovative and diverse studies of writing through the lifespan.

These lines of inquiry can also help us to think through the implications of our work in a broader context. How can we use productive methodological overlaps and divergences to help us critique, expand, and revise our approaches to studying writing through the lifespan? How might, say, agency look different to grounded theory (Dippre), or temporal discourse analysis (Compton-Lilly), and what might we learn about not just our approaches but our understanding of agency by bringing the two together? Furthermore, how might these understandings shape our relationships with our participants, as well as our engagement with larger communities of language users? As the Writing Through the Lifespan Collaboration nears its tenth anniversary, we hope that these lines of inquiry will provide us with powerful and thought-provoking paths forward for not just research, but also activism and education policy.

We close this text by returning to the title: *improvisations*. The deep, multi-disciplinary knowledge that gets coordinated through lines of inquiry allows us to improvise—meaningfully, rigorously, and radically—not just with our methods and methodologies, but with education policy, activism, and our engagement with the richly literate lives of the populations we work with. Among many other things, we hope that this book has encouraged researchers—especially novice researchers—to recognize that pursuing writing research throughout the lifespan is engaging, important work, while also making clear that rigorous improvisation is an important part of many research projects. The people we research change, as do their contexts. In many cases our methods must also change in response. Yet, as novice researchers, we often are afraid of making changes to our research methods, afraid of backlash from IRBs or dissertation committee members. We hope that our contributors have made clear that some level of improvisation is part of the work and that they have

empowered you to advocate for the methods that will best suit your research aims and the people you study. *Yes, and . . .*

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