

INTRODUCTION.

CONDUCTING LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THE STATE OF A RADICAL RESEARCH AGENDA

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While studies of writers over significant periods of time have long been of interest to researchers in writing studies, literacy, and education, thinking about writing as something happening throughout the entirety of a lifespan has been a recent, emerging research agenda. As Charles Bazerman has said in various venues, there is an “intuitive obviousness” to lifespan writing research (LWR) in that we recognize that people write in all kinds of contexts and ways which change over the course of one’s life. Yet this obviousness also has distinct limits, some of which are tied to markers such as race, socioeconomic class, gender, age, and cultural context before we even consider the complications of work, hobbies, education, etc. We may all effectively be writers now, but we’re hardly writing in all the same places, in the same ways, with the same tools, or for the same reasons. A fuller, more accurate picture of the ways in which writing and lives intersect potentially has profound implications for how societies create public education curricula, for how institutions and employers prepare people for new writing tasks, for how communities engage people in writing for their own and the public good, and perhaps, most profoundly, for how ordinary people understand themselves as writers. This diversity of both writing and life necessitates multiple ways of studying the writing people do as we move deeper into the 21st century.

In 2016, responding to Bazerman’s call to look toward the entirety of the lifespan at the Dartmouth Summer Seminar in Composition Research, we began the *Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration*, an international assembly of writing, literacy, and education researchers interested in exploring what writing

looks like from the cradle to the grave. In 2019, the Collaboration defined lifespan writing research as something that “examines acts of inscribed meaning-making, the products of it, and the multiple dimensions of human activity that relate to it in order to build accounts of whether and how writers and writing change throughout the duration and breadth of the lifespan” (Dippre & Phillips, 2020). This definition served as a focal point for our first edited collection, *Approaches to Lifespan Writing Research: Generating an Actionable Coherence* (Dippre & Phillips, 2020).

Since the conceptualization, development, and publication of *Approaches to Lifespan Writing Research* (Dippre & Phillips, 2020), a lot has changed, not the least of which has been a multi-year global pandemic. Throughout it, however, the work of studying writing through the lifespan has carried on, though not unchanged or unfazed. The Collaboration held two online conferences in 2020 and 2021, and the WAC Clearinghouse now has a dedicated book series, Lifespan Writing Research (<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/lwr/>).

We hope that this current volume will move the field forward in response to the needs that lifespan writing researchers have identified in recent years but also encourage—both in the methodologies shared in this book and the broader message we hope to convey in our editorial work—the continuation of an expansive, welcoming vision and implementation for studying writing through the lifespan. At this point in the trajectory of LWR, a sustained discussion of methodological approaches is one of the most powerful ways to expand that vision.

For while LWR has grown rapidly in the last ten years, we are also the first to acknowledge that this growth has not been what anyone would call “regular” or in many cases even “planned.” There are too many people involved with too many constraints and aims for any rigid planning. We believe that creating room for all comers is essential to tackling something as ambitious and complex as LWR. Creating space also comes with some costs, though, including research that may appear rather diffuse in some key areas but extremely dense in others. The metaphor we find most apt for LWR’s recent growth is *rhizomatic*. Soledad Montes and Karin Tusting’s chapter in this volume brought this metaphor to our attention as a means of understanding transition. We find it to be similarly powerful for LWR. Though perhaps some research agendas are more like trees—a thick trunk of linear research with some related areas branching off—LWR is like a rhizome, spreading mostly underground and popping up in unexpected places.

Unlike a tree with one primary root burrowing deep into the soil, rhizomatic plants like irises have underground, horizontal stems with a shallower root system and nodes that are always shooting off in new directions to grow more

plants. In consequence, there may not be a lot of visible rhyme or reason to where the next plant pops up. Is there space (instead of a wall or large rock)? Is there fertile soil? Then a node may grow in that direction, developing a new plant even in unexpected locations.

The growth of LWR has been similar, occurring where the researchers and nutrients are and where growth can occur unrestricted. The shape of LWR today is simply a reflection of who has been interested in LWR so far; today's shape doesn't prescribe its shape tomorrow or in a few years when the "soil" may change, or obstacles may be removed that allow new researchers and new directions to flourish.

This book is thus our effort to remove some obstacles to new researchers joining the work. We've made our central object of analysis and discussion in this text *methodologies*: the disciplined ways in which we engage with inquiry and how talented researchers improvise methodologies over time in order to account for writing through the lifespan. In this book, we'll talk about *methods*—that is, the particular tools that people use to collect and analyze records—but in the context of the logic of inquiry, or *methodologies*, that those tools are used with/in. *How shall we best study lifespan writing research? How must methodologies be adapted to account for lifespans of writing? How do we engage in rigorous methodological improvisation as projects, participants, and data possibilities change over time?* These are the essential questions that these chapters pursue.



Figure 1. An illustration of an iris rhizome, showing horizontal growth.

In this volume, we attempt to carry the conversation we began in *Approaches to Lifespan Writing Research* further by not only examining methodologies for LWR, but also clarifying the details needed about those methodologies for future investigation, revision, and (we hope) multidisciplinary work on writing through the lifespan. We aim to show here that writing through the lifespan is, at its heart, a multidisciplinary, multimethodological endeavor, requiring all manner of approaches to studying writing, all of which must be highly adaptable as projects evolve over time.

This single volume, of course, cannot capture the incredible variety of approaches that LWR can and will take. While methodologies like the case study are well developed for LWR, others like ethnography or corpus analysis haven't taken off yet—not because they shouldn't but because the right researchers haven't been able to join the work yet. We hope that this volume will serve as a methodological introduction to a collection of LWR approaches that might remove obstacles for some novice researchers and create fertile ground for additional approaches that carry the conversation forward.

THE NEED TO EXPLORE METHODOLOGIES IN LWR

To say that we need to discuss methodologies is not all that radical of a claim. Over the past two decades, there have been both calls (Haswell, 2005) and attempts (Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Nickoson & Sheridan, 2012; Powell & Takayoshi, 2012) to talk methodologies in ways that are specific to writing research: the philosophical underpinnings, the particular methods, the ethics involved, and so on. Within Composition Studies at least, researchers learned early that they would need to chart their own paths in order to account for the complexity of writing as a research object. The field borrows freely from other disciplinary/methodological traditions, but rarely does so wholesale. Thus, as composition specialists who now simultaneously work in the wider field of writing studies, methodological innovation and improvisation is a comfortable space for the two of us. Yet to research lifespans and to do so in multiple cultural and national settings makes the subject of methodologies considerably more complex. Nevertheless, we argue that *methodological dialogue is at the very core of LWR because mutual methodological understanding and collaboration is essential to our radical aims* (Dippre & Phillips, 2023). We simply can't talk LWR without talking methodologies. And as a research agenda that is both emergent and radical, LWR needs to talk methodologies in the kinds of detailed, pragmatic ways that interested researchers can then take up and adapt. This volume is designed to offer researchers just that. However, we are not encouraging researchers to check their critical eye at the door: rather, we aim to present, in these pages, not just

how we might *conduct* LWR in a particular way, but *why* we might do such a thing, what particular methodologies afford, what we take on when we work with certain methodologies, and how we might challenge the assumptions of some of these methodologies.

LWR is—and fundamentally has to be—a multidisciplinary endeavor: we need every tool that we can get our hands on if we want to understand how people engage in writing throughout their lives. To do this multidisciplinary work, it is certainly helpful to be aligned at the level of *method*. An ethnographer and a grounded theorist, for instance, might make useful sense of interviews, and therefore be able to pool resources, time, and attention. Such alignment can be helpful particularly now, when we have to do more with less time and money. However, we argue that such alignment is only one of many ways in which we need to bring multiple disciplines together to study writing through the lifespan. We need more than just shared transcripts, surveys, etc.: we need critical and frequent discussions about not just methods, but the broader logics of inquiry that shape our methods—the epistemological underpinnings, the realities of methods meeting materials, the ways in which we shape records into data and craft analyses from that data, and more.

Not only multidisciplinary and multimethodological, LWR is also inherently improvisational. Studying such diverse groups of people over long spans of time prevents “the method” from staying “the method” in some static sense. Instead, lifespan writing researchers evolve, adapt, and improvise their methods to meet their participants and situations as a matter of course. Ultimately, the authors of this collection create a collective argument that radical, rigorous improvisation is at the core of LWR. While improvisation sometimes connotes “slapdash” or lack of preparedness, true improvisation is a specialized ability that people develop over time with intensive practice. And so, we use that term *improvisation* in its most powerful sense—an intentional, deep engagement with openness and possibility and leveraging the available resources for the most powerful outcomes.

At the heart of improvisation is the idea of “yes, and . . .”—a commitment to taking anything that comes at you and forging it into something new and better. Improvisation requires quick thinking, embracing of a challenge, and continuous, successful, productive adaptation to one’s situation. While improvisation artists always have agency in their situations, they are also clearly in contexts that they cannot fully control. Research improvisationists are thus not unprepared, inept researchers who didn’t plan projects properly; they improvise because they recognize that *there are limits to the power of planning*. In LWR, those limits may include the complete collapse of a project if a researcher refuses to change course. Thus, the fact that lifespan writing researchers are pursuing a radical research agenda (Dippre & Phillips, 2023) places us in a context in

which it's frequently essential to modify methods and plans. Lifespan writing researchers are (and are becoming) talented improvisation artists who skillfully use their expertise to adapt to new research situations. It's this becoming—this improvisation—that this collection ultimately explores and advocates.

OVERVIEW: SETTING A STAGE

We've developed this book with two main audiences in mind: experienced researchers who seek to develop more robust, "lifespan-ized" research projects as well as novice researchers who are just learning about research methodologies and who also have an interest in writing through the lifespan.

Part I, "Rigorous Crafting + Radical Improvisations: LWR Methods in Action," includes five pairs of chapters from authors whose first chapters offer a detailed overview of a particular methodological tradition—its history, essential features—with an emphasis on what this methodology affords lifespan writing researchers. That's the "rigorous crafting"—the how-to of developing a powerful project within a particular methodological tradition.

Then in the following chapter, each of those same researchers put those methodologies into action and share cutting-edge LWR projects. They pull back the curtain, show how the sausage gets made, or any other metaphor you like for the hot-mess reality of writing research in action. Our authors reveal what happened when their methods collided with actual writers and how clearly delineated methods were upended as writers, contexts, and writing changed over time. These collisions caused course corrections and, in many cases, exciting methodological improvisations that can now be employed to research lifespan writing more effectively. Thus, Part I of this volume provides clear, generative starting points for taking up *some* methodologies in LWR.

We'll note here that the methodologies in Part I are first and foremost those for which established lifespan writing researchers were willing to write a paired set of chapters. We don't see these methodologies as "the best" or even "better" than other possibilities for LWR. Part I certainly does include some well-known and wide-reaching methods—discourse analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis—but is by no means exhaustive. More than just a convenience sample, though, the chapters in Part I offer a range of methodologies from different disciplines and with different aims highlighting the breadth of knowledge needed to study the whole of the lifespan. We introduce individual chapters in the Part I introduction.

In Part II, "A Selection of 'And's': Imagining Methodological Futures in Lifespan Writing Research," our authors take a much wider view, identifying important considerations in methodological design and examining a range of methodological possibilities. The final chapters consider more carefully the social and

policy implications of not just our research, but these very methods we employ. For as lifespan writing researchers, we are rapidly approaching a point where we can no longer wait: although we have much to learn about writing through the lifespan, we also have much to offer *now* to make writing and literacy education more inclusive and accessible, and it's time we start saying so.

Improvisations is, at best, a rough and approximate starting point for the next decade of lifespan writing research. We could not adequately capture, nor richly detail, the many and varied possibilities of lifespan writing research that exist. It is our hope that the chapters of this text provide readers with helpful, detailed starting points for their own journeys along the difficult and messy road of studying writing through the lifespan. But, furthermore, we hope that they encourage the kinds of rigorous, radical improvisations of the methods discussed throughout as detailed research plans give way to the rich, exciting, and unexpected lived experiences of studying writing throughout the lifespan.

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