

CHAPTER 1.

ACROSS, THROUGH, AND WITH: ONTOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS FOR LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

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ORIENTING OURSELVES TO WRITING DEVELOPMENT

An *orientation* is consequential. The angle from which we witness an encounter like a car crash heavily influences our perception of what occurred. Did the blue car pull out first? Did the red one slow down? The answers to these questions are not just dependent on empirical evidence, but are also based on the relative perspective from which the accident was experienced. Conceptual and ideological orientations operate similarly. When reading the methodologies of a research report, for instance, the findings can often be anticipated. As part of the inherent bias in any research study, the perspective from which the researcher took on the project focused and constrained her field of vision theoretically and methodologically. For these reasons, when it comes to understanding a person's writing over the lifespan, it matters—or rather, it's consequential—what ontological orientations the researcher brings.

Orientation often refers to a person's attitude, beliefs, or feelings in relation to a particular subject or issue—in the case of lifespan writing, their perspectives on aspects of writing development. Do they emphasize product over process? Where do they look for signs of development? How do they feel about composing themselves, and how does that influence what they anticipate seeing and hearing from others? In this chapter, I also want to invoke a second meaning: *orientation* as the relative position of an entity in reference to another. An orientation is a positional and relational construct. Orientation's synonyms—location, position, and situation—are similarly theoretically consequential for understanding literacies activity (cf. Vandenberg et al., 2006). It's consequential, then, how writing researchers are angled ontologically toward lifespan writing and development in research approaches: What is assumed about writing and

its development and how does that play into how we position ourselves relative to the activity in lifespan research? What do these ontological orientations allow writing researchers to see, support, and sustain, and what is obstructed by these perspectives?

In this chapter, I suggest three ontological orientations for lifespan writing research. As a positional question, these orientations are named with prepositions: *across*, *through*, and *with*. For each preposition, I provide theoretical groundings for the orientation and illustrate possible methodological ways forward with examples from long-term, longitudinal, and lifewide writing research to illuminate what comes into the frame with these perspectival orientations. These theoretical and methodological moves, I suggest, assist in embracing the complexity of writing (see Smith, 2018) in lifespan research approaches as they attune writing researchers to mobilities, scaling, and answerability across the lifespan.

Across, *through*, and *with*, as ontological orientations, are presented with the provocation that comparative frameworks have historically dominated methodological approaches in large-scale studies of writing development. Commonly used comparative research designs include setting the work of a cohort of younger writers, say 8-year-olds, alongside that of an older cohort of 12-year-olds, or looking across individuals' development before and after an instructional intervention or school grade promotion. When oriented to the comparative *only* within these designs, however, chronological time, age, or curricular sequence can play an *a priori* determining role in findings (see Smith, Hall et al., 2011); meaning, the later writing or older or more experienced writer is *predetermined* to be the more developed subject. The earlier writing or younger or less experienced writer is then compared against the other, positioning the younger writer and earlier writing in perpetual deficit in relation to the other regardless of the writing practices at play or features of the writing. Across methodological approaches in large-scale writing development studies, from the experiments of Flower and Hayes (1981), to the taxonomy of audiences and functions written by students in high school by the Britton et al. (1975) team, to process studies in writing workshop interventions (e.g., Calkins, 1983), writers' development has been predetermined by being associated with the older student or later writing (see Andrews & Smith, 2011).

Comparative frameworks work well to answer questions regarding *what* is developing—such as differences in the degree of sentence complexity, the number of genres written, or the types of rhetorical approaches tried. If the later, older, and more experienced are assumed to be further developed, however, and analytic attention is focused solely on the comparative points in the design of research, the contours of change in the writing and writer's activity *between* the two comparative points can become occluded. The complex relations of inter-

vening variables, indirect influences, co-emerging life stories, and individuated pathways of development (Bazerman et al., 2017) can be left unexamined. If we merely compare point A to point B on a writer's timeline, we miss the middle. I might go so far as to say we miss the developing writing altogether. A power of lifespan studies is that not only are time and space points A and B within the scope of the research, but so too are points C, D, E, F, G, etc. The lifespan—both radically longitudinal and radically contextual (Dippre & Phillips, this volume)—is a much needed focus in writing studies, because, as argued by Bazerman et al. (2017), research centering writing development that crosses times and spaces are rare and often occur across sub-disciplines, making them difficult to connect with each other. However, a lifespan writing study could still miss the in-betweens and the means or mechanisms of change and stasis in a writer's development, if only oriented to compare points in time and space.

I suggest that one way to work *both* with and beyond comparison is to reflexively consider how writing researchers are oriented ontologically toward the methods and theories taken up in lifespan writing research even, or perhaps especially, when those are comparative. Writing researchers who have been engaged in longitudinal and lifewide studies of writing have most likely grappled with many of the concepts discussed in this chapter. Rather than presenting these orientations as new ways of ontologically positioning ourselves, my intention for this chapter is to present these prepositions as language that can be used to articulate ontological orientations to each other in ways that help us as writing researchers articulate the, at times, unstated assumptions of our research interests. It is a hope of mine that across disciplinary and methodological difference, as orientations are articulated, we may find common ground from which to build collective understandings of writing across the lifespan.

THREE ONTOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

How do writing researchers ensure “development” is not predetermined by chronological time or an existing curricular sequence? How do writing researchers study the dynamic in-betweens and embrace the complexity of writing across the lifespan? How do we as writing researchers account for and attune ourselves to the emergent, multidimensional, and dynamic speeds and rhythms of change and stasis? One way to orient writing research to the in-betweens is to draw focus to the means and mechanisms *through* which writing development is realized. This is not just a question of research methods, however. Rather, it is one regarding what writing development is considered to be, or in other words, our ontologies of writing. Seeing writing development as a continual, dynamic, lifewide becoming (Prior & Smith, 2020), for instance, is an ontological per-

spective that orients the researcher to consider not just what is developing *in* a locale, piece of writing, or time, but *across* times, spaces, and materials. Finally, I suggest we consider lifespan writing research as an activity not just *about* a developing writer, but research conducted *with* developing writers that can draw the writing researcher nearer to the contours of writing development by enabling intimate perspectives on writers' lifespans. Each of these ontological orientations can position researchers toward the in-betweens of development across a lifespan, helping us to embrace the complexity of writing development.

MOBILIZING RESEARCH *ACROSS* THE SPANS OF LIFE

When ontologically oriented to the social and situated nature of literacy practice, writing studies is very good at characterizing writing *in*—in a site, community, workplace, home, etc. In addition to an *in* orientation, I suggest writing researchers purposefully orient their work to studying *across*. An *across* orientation assumes writing—its writers, artifacts, practices, etc.—are in constant motion (Kell, 2009), and that writing in one location and time is not tethered or isolated to that context; rather, writing is a widely distributed, highly complex phenomenon (Prior, 1998; Shipka, 2011). The concept of *across* seems at the heart of *lifespan* writing research. Looking across the span of life—be it locations, genres, times, etc.—orients the researcher to how writers become across contexts, across practices, across identities, across modalities, etc. (Prior & Smith, 2020), as well as how those becomings are enabled and constrained as writers move across life. Orienting ontologically to writing's crossings mobilizes the researcher's gaze and methods. For instance, a mobilized gaze on writing is one that is always looking for writing's next crossing, following its lead where it wends its way Nordquist, 2017. Such a gaze is inclusive of lifewide writing across the lifespan. Everyday writing across contexts—lists, text messages, social media posts—are brought into the frame of interest. Naftzinger (this volume) argues that taking this type of orientation with methods such as time-use diaries not only accounts for writing across the life, but also serves to broaden conceptions of writing and who is a writer.

One way to orient methods toward how writing is mobilized across is by taking up a transliteracies approach (Hawkins, 2018; Roozen, 2020). A transliteracies approach is a flexible heuristic focused on “tracing connections and boundaries . . . [in] the activity of creating, maintaining, and disassembling associations across space-times” (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017, p. 73). In my work with colleagues Amy Stornaiuolo and Nathan Phillips in developing a transliteracies framework, we highlight that the modifier *trans-* signals attention to mobilities or how things are enabled or acted on to move across, as well as the interrelationships of people, material, and power on the move through social,

political, and material networks built into everyday life. We offer four “thinking devices” (Gee, 2014) or moves researchers can make to attend to change and stasis across phenomena—emergence, uptake, scale, and resonance (or the nonlinear, non-causal, and indirect relationships across time-spaces). To think about the (im)mobilities of literacies (inclusive of writing) we suggest questions for each of these moves. Derived from these questions, I suggest that an ontological orientation to across leads to trans- oriented questions such as: How do the writing, writer, and writing practices shift and travel over time and spaces in relation to differently available resources? What are the developmental pathways that emerge as a writer interacts within and across spaces? What are the developmental trajectories made possible across institutions, situations, and the writer’s lifespan? How do writing practices become shared and circulate across spaces and times? Attending to how people make meaning across sociomaterial interactions through such questions, we suggest, can “foreground how people and things are mobilized and paralyzed, facilitated and restricted, in different measure and in relation to institutions and systems with long histories” (Stornaiuolo, Smith & Phillips, 2017, p. 72).

These types of questions are oriented to following the lead of the writer as they make their many life crossings—as they move across grades in school, as their practices travel from home to work, as their writing circulates online, as they compose across modes, etc. This presents a clear challenge for the lifespan writing researcher who, for practical and logistical reasons, can’t follow every lead. This is, perhaps, why the emphasis in this chapter is on having an ontological orientation rather than any one particular method or approach. If researchers are anticipating ontologically that writing development is a mobilized phenomenon, then they’ll approach each method and study design with this in mind. Take, for instance, the research of Wynhoff Olsen and VanDerHeide (2020), who were studying the development of students’ argument writing essentially *within* a single classroom and genre. Oriented to writing’s mobilities, however, they introduced an intertextual method of analysis that they used to trace students’ writing across curricular opportunities, classroom conversations and interactions, and students’ lived histories and potential futures as discussed in interviews. This method entailed a backward mapping from a final written artifact across not just drafts, but observation notes, transcribed interviews, and anecdotal details gathered over the study. By orienting to writing across, they were able to trace the ways a shared curriculum diverged in the uptake across four young people’s writing practices, calling into question the fallacy of the standardization of writing. Such analysis does not just paint a picture rich in detail of students’ writing, but draws lines of connection across moments, locations, practices, and artifacts that fill the lifespan.

THROUGH: GETTING AT MEANS AND MECHANISMS

In discussing approaches in longitudinal studies Saldaña (2003) shares that he intentionally uses the terms of “through” or “across” time instead of “over time,” explaining that “over time . . . suggests a sweeping temporal leap, while ‘across or through’ suggests a more processual immersion throughout the course of longitudinal research” (p. 8). Saldaña is suggesting that orienting toward *through* and *across* are ways to attend to developmental processes or the *hows* of change and stasis in a phenomenon. Since the preposition “across” was used to mobilize a perspective on writing across the lifespan, here I will employ the preposition “through” to orient us to the “processual immersion throughout” or the means and mechanisms of development. As an incredibly complex activity, just tracing what is changing across time and contexts is daunting. Because of this, many methods have been developed to characterize the “whats” of writing—products, processes, practices, craft techniques, etc. This complexity is increased as attention is angled to how that change is accomplished through time and activity. This goes for stasis as well; writing researchers not only trace what stayed the same, but ask: How did intervening factors through time and spaces influence, support, and sustain particular writing processes or practices or craft techniques across time, genre, writing situation, etc.?

There are many ways to orient toward the throughs of writing development. One particular place to look that has proven to be generative in long-term and longitudinal literacy studies is to sociohistoric and sociogenetic scaling activity (see Compton-Lilly, 2017). Lemke’s (2000) notion of temporal or timescales, for instance, is one particularly helpful construct to orient the researcher to consider how one space-time is co-produced through another space-time (or Point A and Point B). Lemke argues that different scales of time—from a moment to a class hour to a lifespan—make up and are made of each other. For example, an elderly woman attends a writing group at a café and brings a poem she wrote as a hymn for church for feedback. This activity is just a moment in time, but the activity is drawn from several histories of practice on longer timescales: writing groups, hymnal writing, schooling feedback practices, and the accumulation of her own writing experiences. Her activity is, at the same time, contributing to what writing means for each of those histories. Thus, paying attention to how writing activity scales through moments to longer timescales can help reveal how a writing practice, process, or pathway takes hold or is sustained or changes across the lifespan.

Long-term and longitudinal studies provide a special perspective as a form of lifespan research. In such studies there are either and/or both sustained embedded study alongside participants, and/or long expanses of time between data gathering. This “long view,” to borrow the term from Bazerman et al. (2017), provides an

opportunity for researchers to draw connections between events, practices, and artifacts through time to identify mechanisms of change that can be less directly observed at a shorter timescale. Researchers are also positioned to trace scaling activity, change, and stasis through timescales that are typically out of reach. In my work with Paul Prior (Smith & Prior, 2020), for instance, we used the concept of the laminated assemblage as a sociogenetic scaling construct to analyze and articulate the development of writing at Urban Word NYC, a Spoken Word and writing-focused out-of-school organization I was privileged to work with across several years (see Dippre & Smith, this volume, for more on contexts as protean). Orienting to the means and mechanisms through which writing developed at the organization and for four focal young men who frequented the out-of-school organization, I traced through scales of activity—from particular events and moments for the young men (such as a poetry performance that occurred spontaneously inside a Burger King one night) to the practices and participation structures that had become typified chronotopically (like poetry slams and writing workshops)—to reveal chains of writing activity through time resonant with activity that might seem distant in times, spaces, and even tenor.

For the young men with whom I worked over the years, they too engaged in temporal scaling practices to effect change in their writing development. David, an Afro-Latinx young man for example, engaged in recurring temporal practices of reminiscence and anticipation (Smith, 2015) around the idea of “the same” to propel his writing across spaces and time. At the beginning of the study David called his early writing “vague teenage banter,” which he described as nonspecific, conceptual messages about what was bothering him. He mimicked the writing as, “Teenagers should speak up and say something.” Laughing, he shared in a confessional tone that what teens should say or why they should speak up was not explored. To compose these pieces, he had the practice of writing out loud and in his mind while on trains and at home. He wrote print text as a post-composition transcription practice to keep record of his compositions. David also had a visual aesthetic commitment to transcribing the text as closely to a square shape as possible.

One day he had a seemingly innocuous interaction with a friend in a cafeteria. She told him all his personal writing was “the same.” This memory crystallized in his mind, and he reminisced on it several times over the next couple of years in order to counter that depiction of his writing. Starting that very night he went home and composed on the page for one of the very first times. He used both Spanish and English in specific, descriptive language to describe a scene and varied the line lengths—breaking the mold of his previous square texts. Such a drastic change in his writing approach was simple to capture empirically as from one day to the next there was an observable status in writing practice to a triggering event to a different writing approach. However, through the temporal scaling practices

of reminiscing on this event and anticipating the characterization of his writing as “the same” in the future, he sustained—or scaled—the moment to having lasting effects years later. Now an award winning writer and teaching artist whose writing spans genres, platforms, and modalities, he still refers to this moment in media interviews and talks about the importance of always looking for the ways to think of writing and lives as hybrid, liminal, and divergent—i.e., not “the same.” Orienting to the means through which his writing was developing as it scaled across time drew analytic attention to these temporal practices, just as orienting to the mechanisms through which change was occurring for Urban Word NYC provided access to seeing how the organization’s typified practices scaled to other disparate traditions such as both schooling and Hip Hop.

Scales and scaling activity (both timescales and sociolinguistic scaling)—and the converse, what does not scale or is left in ruin (Tsing, 2012)—are just one way that change and stasis can be traced *through* Point A to Point B and beyond, or in other words, how writing researchers could orient attention and approaches to how writing development occurs through time and spaces. The invitation here is to consider how approaches in lifespan writing research can be oriented to both what is changing across time, as well as how changes in practices, processes, participant structures, etc. through long timespans and across spaces come to be.

A *WITH* ORIENTATION ALONGSIDE A LIFE

The final orientation to consider is how the research endeavor itself is conceived with this key question: Are writing researchers conducting research on, research about, or research with people? Beyond the critically important argument that researching *with* is potentially a more humanizing orientation than researching *about* (Paris & Winn, 2014), there are fundamental implications for the phenomenon of study. Researching with a developing writer and with their families and communities makes writing researchers privy to critical *in vivo* insights and provides proximity to practice that cannot be otherwise articulated. In recognizing participants’ impressions, intentions, and affect, writing researchers can better discern how understandings of experiences across contexts inform actions and impact developmental pathways (see also Knappik, this volume). As Wilkinson (1986, p. 67) quipped, “Development obviously takes place, but it does not take place obviously.” Indeed, engaging in a *with* orientation can facilitate the orientations of *across* and *through*.

A parallel question can be asked: When conducting lifespan writing research are we studying the written products, writing processes, writing practices, and/or the developing writer? As a question of *lifespan*, it might seem obvious that the focus is on a developing writer (Dippre, 2016), but this is not a given with some

methods or research designs. With a *with* orientation, however, we might imagine how to augment and pair methods, to be reflexive and engage in a responsive praxis to better trace the developing writer across and through comparative points.

One way to orient to researching *with* is to consider Patel's (2016) call for *answerability* in decolonizing educational studies. Being answerable, she explains, "includes aspects of being responsible, accountable, and being part of an exchange" (Patel, 2016, p. 73). In this case, researchers see themselves and their research as part of an exchange wherein they are not just *accounting for* their influence in the study, but act *accountable to* participants. Orienting toward answerability with research partners positions writing researchers to "maintain coming-into-being with, being in conversation with" (Patel, 2016, p. 73) relations that keep researchers answerable to the individual or individuals, and to learning as dynamic, responsive, and constant across contexts. Rosenberg (this volume) suggests the method of revisiting as a way to not only account for participants' perspectives across time, but to elicit the "interconnectedness (or lack thereof) between researcher and participant networks of texts, tools, actors, and activity." Methods of this type position the researcher alongside writers as co-producers of the research by maintaining exchange and continuing in conversation with participants. Likewise Knappik (this volume) argues for an embrace of retrospective interviewing, arguing that a writing life lived is informed by the writing life as told. In this method and others such as the time-use diaries employed by Naftzinger (this volume), writers are made central and partnered with researchers rather than positioned as subjects of the researcher who is, in turn, positioned to define development for the partner.

Patel (2016) suggests a few areas that need attentive care when working to be answerable in research. First, she suggests that writing researchers hold themselves answerable to learning, meaning embracing its complexity, inclusive of the aspects of writing beyond inscription. She quotes Ellsworth (2004) who argued:

Learning never takes place in the absence of bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history. It always detours through memory, forgetting, desire, fear, pleasure, surprise, rewriting. And because learning takes place in relation, its detours take us up to and sometimes across the boundaries of habit, recognition, and the socially constructed identities within our selves. (p. 55)

In a study of writing development, being answerable to learning insists on a flexible, inclusive, and widening lens. If the major thrust of a study focuses on a person's written products across time, for instance, a researcher is want to trace the written product across time, space, and meaning for the writer. Patel (2016) also encourages researchers to be answerable to the contexts within and across which learning

is studied. Compton-Lilly (2017), for instance, discusses the unique perspective on children's writing development that she gained through negotiating such answerability while researching with children and their families in her 10-year longitudinal literacy development research. By maintaining relationships with children and their families for several years she could trace not just the children's individuated writing activities, but how parents' experiences and expectations across longer timelines became indexed in their children's writing and learning pathways.

This came with a particular intensity as Compton-Lilly worked to maintain "coming-into-being-with" (Patel, 2016, p. 73) relations with her participants. For one young child, for instance, she was privy to know the parents who, during the course of the study, passed away while the child was too young to recall details about the parent. Researching with and being answerable to that child and their family meant staying in relationship with the family and passing along impressions, memories, and stories about the child's parent. Instead of distancing from research participants, as is often advocated, orienting toward researching with instead of about suggests maintaining proximity through responsive flexibility in the modes of research (Smith, West et al., 2019). Endeavoring to engage in lifespan work, writing researchers will be studying with individuals whose "bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history . . . memory, forgetting, desire, fear, pleasure, surprise . . ." (Ellsworth, 2004, p. 55) through time and across contexts become laid bare—a perspective on their learning pathways that no other individual has. This positions lifespan writing researchers not only with special insights, but more so with special ethical responsibility to tend and care for the relationship with participants (see Adsanatham, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The complexities and mobilities of writing practices across time and spaces challenge writing researchers to consider how we are ontologically oriented in researching lifespan writing development. In this chapter, I have suggested theoretical and methodological orientations that could assist in considering how writing development occurs through and across space-times, modalities, genres, communities, generations, etc. as we research with writers. These orientations embrace the complexity of lifespan writing by attuning researchers to aspects such as scale, mobilities, and answerability as we work toward coherence across, through, and with writers and writing.

The examples in this chapter are predominantly from an ethnographic and interpretive set of methodologies with research designs already focused on development *across*, *through*, and *with* but these orientations can be taken up with other methods and in methods combinations. Across this volume, the range of such approaches

can be seen. For instance, Bowen (this volume) suggests a mixed method approach to lifespan writing research that features an observational “literacy tour” which emphasizes the spaces and materials across which writers write. A challenge offered to lifespan writing studies scholars then is to consider and perhaps reconsider how these orientations are applicable and would influence chosen approaches. Take, for example, longitudinal statistical approaches: How might a through orientation—that embraces the widely variable experiences of writers through time—inform the statistical modeling and interpretation of the inevitably uneven statistical distribution? Both Zajic & Poch (this volume) and Costa et al. (this volume) take up statistical modeling for writing research in ways that contribute to this conversation. Writing researchers might also consider how these orientations might change as we think across the various disciplines, methods, and participant ages, generations, and populations that can sometimes be overlooked (see Bowen, this volume; Poch et al., this volume; Lee, this volume) and which lifespan writing research represents.

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