

CHAPTER 6.

REVISITING PARTICIPANTS AFTER PUBLICATION: CONTINUING WRITING PARTNERSHIPS

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Chief, an adult learner who has been negotiating changes in his literacy practices, reflects on his decision to switch from one learning center where he studied for many years to a different informal educational site. His remarks offer a snapshot of how an individual who is continuing to develop as a writer later in life maintains a commitment to studying while also facing the complexity of assimilating new knowledge. Chief's ongoing relationship to literacy education, and the ways that I learn about his process from my perspective as a writing researcher doing longitudinal work, are the center of this chapter in which I look at the potential of revisiting research participants as a methodology for lifespan studies. He reflects:

Say you doing math. . . . You didn't get one thing that you're learning. . . . They push you on to something else. But, hey! I learned a lot. But I had to rush. . . . You know, uh, when you get home, you got to study. . . . You want to learn, you really got to study at home. . . . But the reason I went down to [a new learning center] was because of up there [previous learning center] you could be missing so many hours [referring to attendance]. And the [new learning center], you go down, you can get one-on-one; and you don't even have to worry about timing. . . . Till you get that subject down pat.

Chief's experiences as an older American who has become literate through informal education later in life offer lifespan researchers an opportunity to challenge presumptions about formal schooling. In the third principle for lifespan studies, established in "Towards an Understanding of Writing Development Across the Lifespan" (Bazerman et al., 2018), the authors assert, "Writing development is variable; there is no single path and no end point" (p. 28). Though they recognize diversity of educational experience, the authors nevertheless assume that schooling is central to—and shapes—writing experience. They admit:

“Poverty and other marginalizing social factors, although they may be overcome by individuals, may limit resources and development opportunities as well as create stigmatizing social attributions that affect writing development” (2018, p. 30). I argue further that, for writers whose racial and economic experiences place them outside of the mainstream culture of schooling, there is no predictable pathway toward writing development. Traditional schooling with its benchmarks and grade levels determines, and thus limits, our idea of how learning is supposed to progress. By looking at the trajectories of people whose literate experiences are not typical and studying the choices they make, we can get a fuller sense of writing pathways as idiosyncratic.

Therefore, in this chapter, I introduce a methodology of revisiting that evolved from my experiences reconnecting with former participants. When I saw the people who had worked with me on a qualitative study of writing ten years after the original research and a few months after their words (spoken and written) had been published, the participants led our conversations in new directions that reopened the research and caused me to challenge my own assumptions about the researcher-researched relationship. Though much of the chapter focuses on constructing a methodology of revisiting, during the second half I reflect on an encounter with Chief that illustrates what he taught me about the value of revisiting and what it can look like as a research practice.

THE IDEA OF REVISITING EMERGES THROUGH PARTICIPANTS’ NARRATIVES

In 2015, I published a monograph based on a study of four people (including Chief) who attended an informal adult education center in Springfield, Massachusetts where they were learning to read, write, do math, and use computers (Rosenberg, 2015). I learned from the participants that motivations for becoming literate were more complicated than amassing skills or meeting school and workplace demands. Particularly for people who had not acquired literacy through compulsory schooling, the decision to become more proficient readers and writers later in life was a blend of personal and social impulses. They wanted to disrupt the autobiographical scripts that had written them into the position of “illiterate” and redefine their roles for their own purposes.

After the book came out, I contacted the participants to give them each a copy. Although I had hoped for such reunions while I was writing the book, I hadn’t imagined what those meetings could be like. This was partly because of my fear that the participants might have died (none of them was young, and some were in poor health), and partly my inability to imagine such scenes. Would the four people be as I remembered them? Would they want to speak

with me? I deliberately visited without a recorder or prepared questions, without the premise of approaching them as research subjects. As a responsible, feminist qualitative researcher, it was part of my ethic to go back and share results.

The participants in the study that led to my book, adults who were acquiring new literacies, were not concerned with the ways they would be presented in a published report. The idea of working with an academic researcher was new for them, and nothing in their experience had prepared them to question how I might represent them. Their unawareness of the perils of representation at the time of research reinforced their vulnerability in the project; therefore, it was my responsibility to treat their testimonies and written texts with respect and to work towards presenting their narratives with a conscious effort to resist appropriation.

Other researchers who use ethnographic methods express similar concerns about appropriating participants' experiences. Problems of ethical representation are not limited to the write up of the researcher's findings but can involve additional aspects of the researcher-participant relationship, including its closure. The promise to return to the research site to continue interactions after the research period has ended can be disappointing and confusing for participants when researchers break that promise. Haitian anthropologist, Gina A. Ulysse (2008) grapples with the surprising response she received when she returned for follow up visits with her participants, Jamaican traders and organizers for the United Vendors Association. They were accustomed to the presence of academic researchers who would record them and publish their words and then never return to Kingston. Ulysse's participants knew that the researcher would gain career benefits from the published products, which would not benefit those who had been researched. In contrast, lifespan research seeks to challenge the fixity of research that Ulysse's participants identified by maintaining collaborations between researched and researcher, avoiding the re-subordination of participants. The researcher has a responsibility, as Ulysse puts it, "to write culture against the discipline's hegemony" (2008, p. 98).

I argue that revisiting participants and reflecting with them after publication can be viewed as an important part of the research process that has not been considered in writing studies and that can offer a valuable lens for lifespan research. Through revisiting, researchers and participants can work toward undercutting a one-way knowledge-making tradition that privileges the researcher's findings at the moment of publication as final, limiting possibilities for partnership. Participants' responses to the published text contain possibilities for expanding the way they continue to interpret their stories. We can challenge the conventions of research when we foreground the insights of participants as they continue to reflect on and analyze their experiences.

I propose that we extend the research tradition by paying greater attention to the ways we are informed by the people we study. Researchers can learn from

participants about how they value the published text and how it might potentially circulate within their networks in ways unknown to academic researchers. We can deepen our research and our understanding of the nature of writing partnerships by following pathways that are determined by participants' interests and life course. Anna Smith suggests in this volume that we can "consider lifespan writing research as an activity not just *about* a developing writer, but research conducted *with* developing writers" (p. 17).

Thus, I advocate for, and this chapter will demonstrate, a kind of writing partnership rooted in ongoing interactions between writers and moments of collaboration that create possibilities for engagement. I am not literally speaking of composing together or of my writing inspiring research participants to produce on their own; rather, my view of partnership is relational and organic, following the events and patterns of our lives as they intersect with the research. As Smith (this volume) describes it, "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" (p. 22). It is not unusual for ethnographic researchers in writing studies to involve participants in their work; feminist qualitative researchers in composition have long claimed that "we must be prepared to make the case for new forms of research and writing in our discipline" and that "we need to continue experimenting with new ways of reporting research" (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 24). In this chapter, however, I refer to a different situation. The participants in my research were all adults who developed new literacies later in life. None of them was a mainstream learner; only one person identified as a writer. It would not have been possible for them to participate in conventional collaboration because of their literacy histories and orientation to formal education. Further, it could be insulting to ask adults in the process of acquiring new literacies to read an academic text and offer feedback, as it might remind them of being gazed upon as "stupid" or unable to learn. Instead, I chose to connect with former participants by reading together and listening to their interpretation of the text. I didn't know that their commentary would lead us back into the material, nor could I have guessed that their reflections on their own literacy would prompt me to examine the research process as I do now.

EXTENDING THE RESEARCH PROCESS THROUGH ONGOING COLLABORATION

My motivation to meet with participants was personal; I was not collecting data. What I realized about the limitations of research came as a result of the revisits. Going in, I could not have known that the act of revisiting would be so powerful, or that it would teach me to examine the research process as I do now. The

perfunctory statement of the original IRB approved study, in which I promised to follow up by sharing drafts and inviting feedback, led to the more serious commitment to reopen the research process, guided by participants.

My interest in revisiting began with the participants' narratives. Afterwards, I searched for scholarship on the subject. When I approached other researchers in writing studies, no one I spoke with knew where to turn. Our unawareness suggested that returning to participants after publication has not yet been valued as part of the process of creating scholarship. The revisits allowed me to understand that interacting with participants after a period of time has passed can take both researcher and researched to another level of collaboration in response to the document that already exists. Participants cycle back through their own narratives and add to them based on the literacy agency they have continued to develop. They restate, verbally revise, and reflect on their past comments in light of recent experiences.

Longitudinal researchers, in contrast with those conducting shorter span work, value extended, personal engagement with participants, emphasizing time as significant to writing development (Bazerman, 2018; Bazerman et al., 2017; Bazerman et al., 2018; Compton-Lilly, 2014; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Smith, this volume; Sternglass, 1997). Linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath devotes an entire book to the research that resulted from the researcher returning. In *Words at Work and Play* (2012), Heath continues relationships with the children and grandchildren of two communities that she studied during the 1970s and 1980s. Although she never directly states what motivated her work with participants and their families over more than thirty years, Heath implies that there is tremendous value in maintaining the research connections that became central relationships in her life. For example, in the first chapter, she references the epilogue of *Ways with Words* (1983), quoting her own closing line: "what seem limits or losses can be beginnings as well as endings" (p. 376), suggesting that her inquiry into the lives of participants must continue. She concludes the Prologue to *Words at Work and Play* (2012) by concentrating on the importance of analyzing stories:

Human beings hold primary interest in two things: reality and telling about it. . . . Any story differs with each passing moment, new purpose, and favored vantage point. Neither the whole story nor the true one ever exists, however much we may wish for it. If we could achieve wholeness and absolute truth in our stories, we would have no more stories to tell. And tell stories, we must. (p. 7)

It is through the personal that Heath extends her research process and creates new partnerships. Her data collection and analysis over three generations show

that a longtime commitment to participants allows for the research process to travel along unpredictable pathways. She remarks:

We all want to find out what happened to those who will forever be part of our lives. We want to understand how they develop new roles, economic alignments, and rearrange their ways of socializing the young in the ever-evolving frameworks of time and space. We want to learn from their processes of adapting, improvising, and creating. (2012, pp. 183-184)

Together with Heath, the children of Trackton and Roadville reflect on the progression of their lives. They listen to recordings of their past and make comparisons of then and now. Grandchildren of the original participants are folded into the data collection process when they are given “activity logs” and instructions by Heath on how to do anthropological research by documenting conversations and experiences. Through layered informal and formal interactions, the research partnerships extend, following the unpredictable direction of additional players and their experiences.

Time isn't the primary feature of my analysis, as it is for Heath and other scholars cited here. I wanted to reconnect with the people whose literacy experiences were the core of my research and get a sense of them in the present moment in relation to the literate lives I had explored years earlier. I was also curious about ways their writing might correlate with other ordinary life practices. As Brandt (2018) notes, “While often congruent with certain stages of life (i.e., youth, middle age, old age) the multiple and simultaneous roles most people play in families, communities, and workplaces condition developmental trajectories and possibilities even as they interact with one another” (p. 251). Shifting stages of life, responsibilities, health, roles in family and work situation, all contribute to an individual's ongoing sense of self as a writer.

Compton-Lilly's (2003) work on the reading practices of urban children makes a similar case for the “contradictions and complexities” (p. 110) that not only surround but significantly impact literacy practices, which studies across time can help researchers to identify more clearly. The first of Compton-Lilly's books, *Reading Families* (2003), lays the groundwork for an extensive study of “the ways parents and children in one urban community conceptualize reading” (p. 10) that Compton-Lilly then traces through her ongoing research. In a 2014 report on her decade-long study of one student's writing development, she concludes, “While longitudinal research can be targeted to explore particular questions, its longitudinal nature increases the propensity for research to take new directions and uncover unanticipated findings” (p. 30). The fluid, unpredictable quality of this kind of research makes it compelling. The researcher can't know

what turns participants' lives and choices will take. Compton-Lilly's study reflects on her participant's school performance as well as his "long-term trajectory of becoming" (2014, p. 29). She found that, "becoming a writer was a longitudinal journey that entailed dispositions that extended across home, school, and peer community involving both writing practices and a broader set of tangential dispositions" (2014, p. 30).

Through the act of revisiting participants and contemplating their narratives with them after the results are published, we might become more open to changes in our research methods, so that participants figure more prominently in our future scholarship. If we are to maintain relationships across time, and if our work is to reflect the decisions participants make in regard to literacy shifts and life changes (both major and ordinary), we must follow their lead, watching the turns that mark new writing pathways. By extending our interactions, we might add a layer of collaboration that can increase both of our knowledge, a change that is important for the future life of the published project and for future research. Reflecting together on the finished document and the research process itself can lead to deeper thinking from a different angle. By consulting with participants after research, I have learned that knowledge-making is never static; rather, it keeps going, steered by their insights.

REVISITING CHIEF

At this point, I shift the focus of this chapter from theorizing a methodology of revisiting to offering an example of revisiting in practice. I tell a story of the visit with Chief to characterize the interaction with my longtime participant and show that it expanded our research trajectory. The visit also gave me the opportunity to get to know Chief's wife who has since become a participant in my research. This experiment with revisiting opened a new avenue of research that I have followed in my ongoing longitudinal work with Shirley and Chief. Through our interactions, I learned more about the possibilities and limitations of writing partnerships as they continue to develop.

As a seventy-seven-year-old African-American man who was raised on a sharecropper's farm in rural South Carolina during the 1950s, Chief had limited exposure to formal education, although he always craved opportunities to read and write. Despite his occasional access, and the segregated conditions of schooling when it was available, Chief was able to make a decent living because of his extensive early work experiences and the skills he developed as a laborer. During his long career, he worked as a welder and a forklift operator. He owned his first home at the age of seventeen and sent his children to college. Only after he retired following a motorcycle accident that injured his back, did he seek

informal education at a number of adult learning centers. Since then, Chief has become an avid writer and reader. He was editor of the newsletter at the literacy center where I got to know him, and he was involved in a family literacy program there. He has been committed to circulating his writing among known and unknown audiences so that more people can learn about the importance of education based on his example. And, he is a singer-songwriter who has recorded and toured with nationally recognized men's gospel choirs.

We reconnect at his home so that I can deliver my book. After chatting about our lives over the last few years, our discussion turns to the text. I am sure Chief will read it on his own because of the way he holds the book gently in his hands and gazes at its covers. He tells me, "I'm going to give this to my teacher over there [at the literacy center he attends] on Monday, and she can read it. I told her about 'Chief and Rabbit,'" which is one of his favorite stories that he wrote while he was a student at the literacy center where we met. For consistency, I use the approach I have developed with the others of reading aloud and marking passages, but I get the impression when Chief gazes away that he would prefer to read alone. Still, I show him his interview extracts, his essays on Jim Crow and domestic violence, his editor's letters, and the story of "Chief and Rabbit." Every so often when I glance at him, Chief is holding the book in his hands and whispering, "I am so proud of this book." Our revisit gives me the chance to witness Chief's pride over a text he literally claims as his own—he refers to it as his book.

When Chief holds the book and murmurs about his pride, it takes on "the status" of a "social actor" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 348) imbued with the ability to act upon him. In re-spinning the literacy event to a "literacy-in-action" concept, Brandt and Clinton claim (referencing Bruno Latour), that the objects which surround our literate acts are a significant part of our literacy interactions: "[But] we also want to consider the additional question of how literacy acts as a social agent, as an independent mediator (i.e., literacy, itself, in action)" (2002, p. 349). When I observe Chief's connection with the text, I see what Brandt and Clinton consider an expression of the "ontological relationships between people and things" (2002, p. 353). Chief is a human agent with his own complex relationship to literacy; yet, his handling of the book reveals how the book acts upon him as well, mirroring his idea of literate achievement and affirming Brandt and Clinton's (2002) point that, "When we use literacy, we also get used. Things typically mediate this relationship" (p. 350). The pride Chief speaks of is in his own ever-developing relationship to literacy. The object represents literacy itself, something I understand after our visit that would have been impossible to know while writing *The Desire for Literacy* (Rosenberg, 2015). His comments demonstrate that ownership does not reside solely with the author. In claiming the

text, he can use it for his own changing literacy purposes, purposes that exceed what either of us could have imagined while discussing interview transcripts or when I wrote alone. Chief's choices about the book, combined with his continued literacy education, open up new spaces for him to contemplate literacy, and for us to mutually contemplate (an idea I first proposed in *The Desire for Literacy* [2015] and develop further in "Listening to research as a feminist ethos of representation" [Rosenberg & Howes, 2018]). He directs the research as it is relevant to him. By following Chief's lead as someone who knows more about literacy education from his experiences than I ever can, it becomes possible for us to disrupt the usual path of research, to thread back into a project that was closed by publication, and to re-open it for further exploration. In this way, we push back against the confines of traditional research. We can define our writing partnership so that it reflects the situation that exists for us as researched and researcher relating to a published text and to one another. Our interactions with a common text show the intersections of our literacy communities and become the topic of future research.

Midway through the visit, Chief's wife arrives. This is the first time I have spoken with a participant's family member. She reclines on the sofa behind us, talking about the morning run at the food pantry where she volunteers, and then she joins the conversation about literacy. "I love to read," Shirley says. As I speak with them, I realize that Shirley has always had something Chief wants. I wonder whether Shirley's literacy practices were what drew Chief and her together. We discuss the tension that occurs among some couples when one partner is more literate than the other.

A few months after the visit, Chief invites me to the literacy center where he studies once a week so that his teachers can see his book. Initially, he went there for help studying for his 7D bus driver's license. His varying interests and needs have led him to select different learning environments at different periods of his life. When he comments, "I'll probably be going to school for the rest of my life because I have to learn so much," I am reminded that Chief will always seek informal education as a way to maintain agency and dignity. He steers our writing partnership, restorying it by asking me to experience literacy education on his terms. My knowledge of adult basic education changes when I join Chief at this small social service agency that offers one-on-one tutoring. He introduces me to an educational model that he believes better suits him as a learner. In this setting, his teacher prepares individual lessons for him and shifts her expectations in response to his learning. By taking me to this place, he is preparing me for our research to come. During the study that develops as a result of these interactions, Chief will contrast the educational styles at the different literacy centers where he has studied, as he demonstrates in the opening quote.

PARTICIPANTS EXTEND OUR WORK IN NEW DIRECTIONS

Revisiting came as a surprise. I was not expecting to find the kernel of a new methodology when I met with Chief and his peers, but our interactions revealed something substantial about the nature of research relationships and how they change focus and character based on the directions that participants take them—if we remain open to participants leading the research. When we meet, it is to contemplate literacy together. Another surprise was finding out how my future intentions for research, and the methods I will use, take shape because of these encounters.

For example, after the visits, I receive holiday cards from Shirley, then lengthy handwritten letters. And, once my partnership with Chief expands to include Shirley, I design a project that concentrates on Chief and Shirley's trajectory as a couple that is continuing to develop as writers (see Rosenberg, 2018). The project responds to an unexpected turn in my interpretation of Chief guided by him and Shirley as knowledge-makers. Their example demonstrates how revisiting opens new pathways for research not already predicated by the researcher's intentions. Rather, it is what I learn in the moment of the revisit when I listen to Chief and Shirley that causes me to fold back into my study of Chief's literacy development and envision it differently.

As I write this, I am thinking ahead to the next phase of this work, which will be with Shirley. Now that I am aware of my research changing methods, methodologies, and purposes based on participants' initiatives, I can take more of a spectator's role to observing where Shirley directs us. While my work with Shirley and Chief ultimately leads to new publications that will give me academic credit in my field, the process of creating texts also offers Shirley and Chief opportunities to participate in an ongoing writing partnership that they interpret and reflect on individually, as a couple, and with the researcher. The benefits for them may not be the same as those that I gain professionally, yet they matter. Our ongoing discussions of literacy are part of their lives and mine.

Revisiting participants challenges lifespan researchers to examine our compliance with disciplinary hegemony as we (perhaps unwillingly) perpetuate an academic tradition that locks the people we research into the role of subject. A goal of lifespan writing research is to push back against assumptions about what writing does and what writers can achieve throughout the course of their lives. By looking across time and the material and social conditions of our lives, research becomes more relational, responding to various situations rather than adhering to a single pathway. Led by participants, researchers learn to be flexible in our approaches and methods.

The four participants from my original study engaged willingly in the revisits. They were not doing it out of obligation; their obligation to my research had

ended years earlier. I had the chance to witness them taking in the contents of a book about acquisition of literacy whose subject was their literacy. Revisiting gave us the opportunity to contemplate their spoken and written words at a time beyond the period of the study. Reflecting together, reading aloud, marking passages for future reference, and discussing their current life experiences provided a new lens for evaluating research. The book became a social actor (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) that was part of their ongoing pursuit of literacy. They could extend the conversations in contexts that matter to them now and that are shaped by their literacy agency. Participants' expressions of their ongoing relationship to their own literacy taught me to investigate the value of literacy in people's lives in ways that I could never know from my position as an academic researcher.

Interactions like the ones I describe here are significant for exploring what literacy means and how we understand collaboration. This curious, listening perspective is especially important for researchers in lifespan studies as we figure out new possibilities for collaboration and how we can better understand writers' experiences. Lifespan studies can benefit from the insights of people outside of academic settings who embody literacy differently from those of us who are informed primarily by our academic reality.

Chief's reactions to the book reveal that the production of knowledge does not end with publication. It continues as researcher and participants keep learning from one another in real, ongoing relationships. The participants' involvement in research interactions keeps the conversations open and fluid so that their positions do not remain fixed. This is how participants continue to become knowledge makers. Together we contemplate and create knowledge.

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PART 2.

LEVERAGING OUR TRADITIONS

We encouraged the authors of Part 1 to be bold—we wanted to see the new vistas that opened up by innovating well beyond the disciplinary boundaries that often constrain. In Part 2: *Leveraging Our Traditions*, we return to more familiar methodological and theoretical approaches and consider them through a lifespan lens. The authors of Part 2 thus work within the boundaries of a variety of established research traditions, sharing research projects that feature focused innovations to their methodologies to better equip them for lifespan writing research. In so doing, their research suggests new pathways that these traditions might (and perhaps need to) explore.

The first chapters in Part 2 do this while focusing on specific segments of the lifespan. These chapters give readers from Composition Studies a glimpse into writing at other stages of life, but they also operationalize lifespan writing research by demonstrating how to add a lifespan lens to ongoing studies. Lauren Bowen takes a sociohistoric approach with novel methodological choices by diving deeply into the complex literate actions of one senior writer in order to uncover the sometimes-unimaginable complexity of a literate life. Yvonne Lee then expands our attentions beyond a lifespan segment by considering the writing lives of not only one writer across a lifetime, but of several writers across multiple, overlapping, and related lifetimes. This exploration of new innovations within particular disciplinary traditions continues with an autoethnographic investigation of how one author—Zebroski—negotiates the complex writing tasks demanded of him during the challenging social and emotional work of retirement. Costa et al. then employ the Structural Equation Modeling that Zajic and Poch (Chapter 3) described in a study of the executive functioning of students in Grades 1 and 4, considering ways to orient such work through the lifespan.

The remaining chapters in Part 2 also work to expand our understanding of how we make meaning. Arya et al. engage not just the production of texts but also their reception as they examine acts of data representation and the emergent understandings that school-aged children have about them. Data representations, in this chapter, serve as a strategic site for uncovering the complex work that readers engage in to construct data in their reading of it. Next, Poch et al. highlight the complex cognitive landscapes that semiosis occurs with and through, bringing to light the work of producing texts and the challenges with textual production that individuals with learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder may face. They also provide some paths forward for thinking

about semiosis across the internal-external divide and using psychometric techniques to locate semiosis within contemporary psychological thought. Erin Workman, like Knappik earlier, asks us to think about how we make sense of our own literate development, but Workman achieves this by adapting cognitive researchers' mind maps for lifespan writing research. Kevin Roozen concludes Part 2 by tracing inscriptions via the interpretive work of Latour (1990) and Gries (2015), rendering more robust the complexity of semiotic acts that Poch et al. and Arya et al. build up in their work.

Just as Part 1 provided some starting points for writing researchers to re-conceptualize their thinking about theoretical orientations and methods toward the lifespan, Part 2 allows writing researchers to imagine new approaches that are more tightly tied to existing disciplinary structures—new, creative methods of repurposing that take advantage of the insights and innovations of existing fields and traditions. If we are to conceive of lifespan writing research as a long-term endeavor requiring both immediate and extended pay-offs, then Part 2 provides the short-term return on innovation that the ideas in Part 1 do not easily support. *Leveraging Our Traditions* also paints a picture of the incredible variety of disciplines, methods, and theories interested in the phenomenon of writing through the lifespan.