

EPILOGUE

Deborah Brandt

University of Wisconsin-Madison

When Ryan Dippre and Talinn Phillips announced at the end of the 2016 Dartmouth Conference on Writing that they wanted to form an interdisciplinary, multilocational collaborative research group on writing development across the lifespan, the idea struck me as highly admirable and wildly improbable. Surely after the euphoria of the Dartmouth conference wore off, attendees would drift back to their separate locales and to the daily grind of campus life. Communications would sputter, and attrition would set in. Isn't coordinated research difficult enough with close colleagues? But across countries? Across fields? Across methodologies? Without a mega-grant? Really?

But in the months following the conference a working group did come together and stayed together. With the help of global technologies, the group talked, shared, reflected, and united in an inaugural conference that produced this volume. Within a scant three years, *Approaches to Lifespan Writing Research* took shape, solidifying a vibrant area for research. This volume challenges researchers to accept, indeed embrace, the conceptual and methodological demands of a difficult yet critical area of knowledge-making. By calling their effort a “murmuration,” a wave of coordinated and buoyant energy produced by a flock of birds moving in the same direction, the authors clearly want lifespan writing research to take flight. But they also see that flight as necessarily collective, networked, and sensitive to changing conditions.

This volume focuses on some of the key perspectives and methods for generating understandings about writing across the lifespan. As the volume progresses, methods and perspectives proliferate. Some might find that frustrating, but it is the point. Look through multiple lenses. Start in different times and places and among different populations. Work forward. Work backward. Work across. Experiment. Be ready for confounding factors. Be inclusive before generalizing anything. Run qualitative hypotheses and findings through quantitative hypotheses and findings and vice versa. Look for convergence. But not too soon. Remember that writing development is embodied but not atomized. Individually driven but socially and historically contingent. Remember that learners' perspectives are indispensable to this endeavor because they put the life thread in lifespan development. Find partners—better yet, multidisciplinary partners—to design and undertake studies. *Persevere.*

In their useful conclusion, Dippre and Phillips (this volume) anticipate next steps, drawing out what they call “lines of inquiry” that can begin to match up convergent or complementary research methods with patterns or processes that are central to writing and its development. These are useful and necessary moves. In a similar spirit I would like to raise some questions for the lifespan writing movement and raise possibilities for potential next steps and additional directions.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

What motivates lifespan writing research? Why should the larger community (of literacy educators, writing researchers, policy makers, assessment experts, parents, others) care about lifespan writing development? Who would be better off and what would be better off as a result of progress in this area? In what areas of teaching, learning, and society can this body of knowledge make a difference? What are the major problems facing writers and writing instructors today that a developmental perspective is best able to address? To engage wider audiences, these matters cannot be taken as self-evident.

WHAT ARE THE CORE QUESTIONS DRIVING RESEARCH IN LIFESPAN WRITING DEVELOPMENT (BEYOND HOW TO STUDY IT?)

This volume sensibly focuses on ontological, disciplinary and methodological matters. Before anyone goes to work in a serious way, perspectives need inter-rogation and the investigative toolkit must be assembled. This volume demonstrates how varied that toolkit can and must be. But what are the questions that lead researchers to their methods? Which questions tell us which tools to pick up? What kinds of questions does lifespan research best address? For what questions may it be less relevant? Identifying a common set of questions can focus collaborations and reveal similarities among the differences—both for researchers and for other constituencies in and out of academia. Now, if it is such that questions are not in common, that realization would be useful too.

WHAT DOES WRITING ITSELF DEVELOP?

For researchers in education and writing studies, the main interest is, of course, the development of writers. We see that focus in this volume. Among other things, chapters explore the contextual sources and stimulants for writing. Or they examine how a person grows as a writer or helps others to grow. Chapters explore how writers drive their own development, or how bodies and brains or

prior experience contribute to or interfere with this pursuit. This focus will need to remain dominant given the needs for writing instruction around the globe. But there is an opposite end to this telescope. What do writers and writing contribute to the development of our worlds? The powerful force of writing as a technology is implicated in the production of wealth, knowledge, organization, art, religion, peace, and strife. People write not only toward their own development as writers but for other reasons. The working group that gave rise to this volume could serve as an example. Acts of writing sustained cohesion among members across time and space, served as a medium for developing and sharing understandings, and provided democratic access for consensus and disagreement. Out of these powers of writing, a fledgling field of inquiry is developing. Obviously, individual development of writing and societal development by way of writing are reciprocal processes with mutual impacts. But that is all the more reason to reverse the telescope and make the highly generative, globally relevant concept of *development* a key interest.

HOW MIGHT THE LIFESPAN WRITING DEVELOPMENT MOVEMENT FORM PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHERS?

One of the most attractive features of the movement represented in these pages is the urge to think audaciously and follow what Charles Bazerman has called the impossible dream. Bazerman asks us not to dismiss the possibility of truly longitudinal studies, even as we recognize the logistical and conceptual difficulties. The gold standard in longitudinal studies would follow the same individuals from childhood across adulthood in a comprehensive way. This vision seems more possible after engaging with this volume. Seeing that a diverse set of researchers can work together across sites and methods makes the challenge less daunting and the burden seem lighter.

Another way to think about collaboration is to consider how developmental perspectives might be infused into traditional writing research and how the writing-development movement could form partnerships with more traditional writing researchers for mutual benefit.

One such potential partner is the National Assessment of Educational Progress which (rather lurchingly) is tracking writing achievement across childhood into adolescence. NAEP collects writing samples from fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders and sorts them by proficiency level. These studies do not follow the same students but rather give rise to a “report card” on the state of writing instruction by state in the United States. Interestingly the 2017 assessment is currently undergoing reanalysis because of what might be called a developmental oversight. In an effort to stay relevant to changing writing practices, NAEP

had asked students to take the 2017 assessment on tablets, only to find out too late that many students lacked experience with tablets. That inexperience suppressed achievement scores. After such an expensive mistake, it would seem NAEP might be keenly interested in consulting with development-minded researchers going forward.

At the same time, NAEP findings provide big and tantalizing questions for those interested in writing development and especially those interested in finer grain approaches so admirably demonstrated in this volume. Here, in my view, are two big and tantalizing questions.

WHY IS PROFICIENCY IN WRITING (AS MEASURED BY NAEP) SO ELUSIVE?

According to the NAEP 2011 Writing Report Card, 24 percent of eighth and twelfth graders demonstrated proficiency when asked to plan, write, and compose essays in response to prompts. Only three per cent of the students achieved advanced proficiency. In a society where writing is increasingly connected to democratic and economic life, these results are discouraging. But what do they really mean?

What if NAEP could be convinced to add a developmental dimension to its studies? It could administer its assessment to a subset of the same individuals at grades 4, 8, and 12 and allow a development-minded team of researchers to do finer grained study of these individuals. For instance, from where does advanced proficiency arise at the fourth grade level? What changes and what does not change by the eighth grade? And the twelfth grade? Any and all of the methods and study designs introduced in this volume could be applied in such an undertaking. Such an inquiry could more fully address the questions to which NAEP seeks answers. What impact does instruction have on writing achievement? What factors in and out of school condition writing achievement? What do highly skilled writers share in common and how do they diverge? The same questions could be asked of writers achieving at the proficient, basic or below basic level, providing deep dives into similarities and differences within groups and across groups. For its part, the lifespan development movement would also stand to gain in such a partnership. It would have access to a national, representative population and, over the course of ten years, would have at least a partial longitudinal result among an age group of critical interest to educators. Fine-grained studies could get below apparent, broad correlations identified generally by NAEP (i.e., race, gender, socioeconomics, etc.) and explore the finer factors that drive writing development. Results would no doubt be surprising and useful. Many methodological and philosophical issues would need to be addressed

to form such a collaboration but . . . nothing is impossible.

WHY DO GIRLS WRITE BETTER THAN BOYS (AS MEASURED BY NAEP)?

According to the 2011 Writing Report Card, girls as a group across race and socioeconomic background outperformed boys as a group in the NAEP writing assessment. Girls are overrepresented at the advanced proficiency level. To investigate such an interesting gap would be to investigate many of the factors that are of interest both to NAEP and to lifespan researchers. What gives rise to gender differences in NAEP results? Do those differences hold up in different contexts? How do gender identities and experiences condition achievement? How do these conditions matter over time? What are the implications? To do an exhaustive dive into just this one finding could begin to develop a template for investigating other findings and developmental factors. It could fill in the blanks for NAEP and developmentalists, not to mention teachers, parents, and policy makers.

So what I am suggesting is the potential of working with traditional writing research to find areas that can be enhanced by a developmental perspective. Convincing the larger research community to build developmental perspectives into any study of writing (not just longitudinal ones) could be a welcome outcome. In addition, such partnerships could build stronger political will for writing research, as writing continues to be neglected in comparison to reading in most national and international assessments of literacy.

As you can see, this is an afterword that only proliferates questions and possibilities. But I do hope that this response testifies to the provocative impact of this volume and to the contagious energy of murmuration.

REFERENCES

- Bazerman, C. (2018). Lifespan longitudinal studies of writing development: A heuristic for an impossible dream. In Bazerman et al. (Eds.), *The lifespan development of writing* (pp. 326-365). National Council of Teachers of English.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). Writing 2011: National assessment of educational progress at grades 8 and 12. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012470.pdf>