

INTRODUCTION.

GENERATING MURMURATIONS FOR AN ACTIONABLE COHERENCE

Ryan J. Dippre

University of Maine

Talinn Phillips

Ohio University

Increasing numbers of researchers in writing studies, literacy, and education are recognizing that studying literacy development over wider segments of time yields new and exciting insights that we cannot achieve through more traditional methods. Recent special issues (e.g., *Writing and Pedagogy*, 2018 and *Literacy and Composition Studies*, 2018) and edited collections (Bazerman et al., 2018; Fishman & Kimme-Hea, in press) that draw on longitudinal approaches are coinciding with the production of impressive longitudinal work (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2014). Combined, this recent research suggests a growing interest in longitudinal and lifespan writing research. This volume calls for more lifespan writing research while also working to operationalize that research agenda. We examine methodological challenges and opportunities in lifespan research and suggest that a range of new insights and understandings about writing and literacy await us when we shift our perspective to how writing changes throughout the entire lifespan.

When Bazerman (2018) subtitled his recent chapter “A Heuristic for an Impossible Dream,” he did not exaggerate the difficulties of developing radically longitudinal studies of writing development—studies that might even follow writers throughout the course of their lives. Building the kind of multi-site, multi-generational study Bazerman proposes is indeed a daunting task. He asks, “how can we understand people’s varied pathways into writing and their varied pathways to achievement” (2018, p. 327)? He suggests that in order to trace these widely varying pathways of writing development—what Dippre (2019) has referred to as “rambling pathways” of development (p. 14)—that writing studies researchers could build “a rich body of longitudinal studies of writing development across the entire span of many people of many backgrounds and experiences” (p. 327).

Bazerman notes that a project such as this “may seem quixotic and perhaps impossible in its magnitude, expense, and logistical complexity” (2018, p. 327), but he works through this complexity to trace the broad outlines of such a project.

Approaches to Lifespan Writing Research works to flesh out that outline as a next step toward aligned, integrated, multi-site longitudinal studies of writing. In each of these chapters our authors attempt to explicate their epistemological stances, methodological choices, and theoretical reasoning so that resonance across research sites, methods, and findings can begin to be articulated, followed up, and built upon. If Bazerman’s initial challenge to the field requires a disregard for what is easy—even, perhaps, for what is possible—the very complexity embraced by the project has also generated an embrace of collaboration and of joint attention to a difficult problem.

The complexity of researching writing through the lifespan emerges, in large part, from the fact that writing is itself complex (Bazerman et al., 2017, 2018). Writing is caught up in all facets of our lives, whether explicitly attended to or not. Whether we are writing to our senators or our child’s school, making a list of groceries, completing taxes, or writing a report for our employers, we are engaged in various spheres of social and material engagement, working with various audiences, and attending to various demands on our own and others’ time. But through it all, we are writing. Attending to writing through the lifespan needs to attend to all of this complexity *somehow*. The task of this volume is to present potential “hows” and begin to render the impossible slightly more possible for future research on writing through the lifespan.

Yet our aims for this volume are not just that it coheres in these ways, but that it actively *generates murmurations*, or a path forward for those engaged in lifespan writing research. *Murmurations* describes the coordinated movements of flocks of birds (especially starlings—footage is readily available online) and may involve up to thousands of birds moving together while also easily able to change directions and goals. Murmurations are simultaneously chaotic and deeply ordered—chaotic in that a murmuration changes continuously in shape and direction through time, yet deeply ordered in that the movement is seamless and unified and displays a common goal. Fluidity and unified purpose through chaos seem to us a plausible strategy for tackling such a complex research problem, a claim we unpack more fully in our conclusion.

WRITING THROUGH THE LIFESPAN COLLABORATION: A BRIEF AND PARTIAL HISTORY

The Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration had its start at the 2016 Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research and Conference. Charles

Bazerman, a Summer Seminar leader and a plenary speaker at the accompanying conference, gave both a workshop and a closing address in which he shared about the lifespan work he'd initiated among senior writing studies scholars from multiple disciplines—the Lifespan Writing Development Group. Bazerman's Dartmouth presentations encouraged researchers to turn their attention to the lifespan by “think[ing] longitudinally” about the work of studying writing. In response to Bazerman's call, we, as participants in the Seminar and Conference, wrote a call for interested researchers to take up this challenge of longitudinal writing research that would truly capture lifespans. Our call yielded over forty researchers in over half a dozen different countries.

These initial participants met online in early 2017, followed by a face-to-face meeting at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Portland, Oregon. In these meetings, the Collaboration decided to focus our attention on shared language and understandings that we might bring to bear on research across a range of theoretical and empirical approaches, as well as participant age groups. The group turned to the earlier work of Bazerman's Lifespan Writing Development Group and their principles for lifespan writing development, as articulated in abbreviated form in *Research in the Teaching of English* and in greater detail in *The Lifespan Development of Writing* edited collection (Bazerman et al., 2017, 2018). Participants explored their understandings of these principles in blog posts at www.lifespanwriting.org. These online discussions triggered further waves of online meetings about the themes emerging across the blog posts.

Through these online discussions, the Collaboration identified three themes to shape our inaugural conference on lifespan writing research in May 2018: theory, identity, and society. These themes led to over two dozen presentations and plenary talks during the conference from May 31–June 2, 2018, which in turn have led to this book.

In this volume, we build upon that conference, drawing in other voices from the diverse fields that research writing, to chart a course for future lifespan writing research. Part of this work involves developing a sense of what it means to take a lifespan perspective on writing research. Is there a meaningful distinction between *lifespan* writing research and longitudinal research? Is lifespan writing research a method? A methodology? A theoretical framework? A philosophical orientation?

Drawing on the work and insight of the Collaboration as a whole over several months, we arrived at a working definition of *lifespan writing research*, beginning with an independent definition of each term:

Lifespan: Refers to the entirety of a lifetime—both chronologically (i.e., cradle to grave) and across the many social spheres

that writers participate in (the term “life-wide” has also been used to reference this). To orient something to the lifespan is to locate change within a life-long and life-wide perspective, up to and including multiple lifespans (i.e., across generations).

Writing: Refers to acts of inscribed meaning-making. Any act of this sort necessarily involves multiple modes of semiotic engagement and multiple dimensions of human activity.

Research: Refers to the accountable collection and study of records, or evidence of writing broadly construed (i.e., retrospective examination of lived experience, textual artifacts, video capture of inscription, and so on). Different research traditions determine what counts as “accountable,” and different research questions will direct what records to collect and analyze.

From these individual definitions, we developed this working definition of the lifespan writing research concept:

Lifespan Writing Research 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. (Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration, 2019)

This definition, as we will see in this collection, allows for studies with a wide range of methodological approaches, theoretical orientations, and sub-populations to inform our study of writing through the lifespan, while also orienting all research toward a common goal (that is, a holistic understanding of writing from cradle to grave).

Thus, while lifespan writing research is often longitudinal and qualitative, it is not exclusively so. We will likely also find that focused studies on particular age groups and populations that are under-studied in writing research generally (e.g., Lee; Rosenberg; Bowen; Arya et al., this volume) may offer useful insights for a lifespan perspective on writing, as will some quantitative methods (e.g., Zajic & Poch or Costa et al., this volume). As the chapters in this collection show, our approach to lifespan writing research is methodologically expansive, embracing any method that promises to contribute to our understanding of writing development. We also suggest that when lifespan research *is* longitudinal and qualitative, it is still distinct in that it recursively, intentionally, and me-

thodically looks forward, backward, and across in time as it works to understand the causes, triggers, and impacts on writing development in an individual's life. Thus, the work of the Collaboration, from its inception to the chapters in this volume, suggest that the term lifespan refers to research oriented to both a life-long and life-wide understanding of how writers write and of how they change as writers in their lifeworlds. Lifespan writing research as an area of inquiry must then endeavor to run across lifeworlds, across ages, across technologies, across social strata, and across populations, but always with the intention of attending to writing in all of its complexity from cradle to grave.

Readers may have also noticed the conspicuous absence of the term “development” from the definition above. This was a deliberate choice on the part of the Collaboration to further our broader aims of disrupting the writing normativities that proliferate, especially during formal schooling. And while, by definition, members of the Collaboration are highly invested in the value of writing, we don't wish to suggest that a life without writing is somehow a failure. Thus, it is not that we are uninterested in *development* but that we are equally interested in *change*, in *stasis*, even in *decline* in one's abilities. In short, we want to understand what happens in people's writing lives and why, regardless of whether what happens could be understood as “development” or not. Moreover, we argue that investigating writing lives—period—can enable those of us in writing studies to support more people becoming more versatile and capable writers.

GENERATING MURMURATIONS FOR AN ACTIONABLE COHERENCE

Since the beginning of the Collaboration, and perhaps because of the complexity that the Collaboration has tried to embrace, there has been a keenly felt need for a unified path forward in lifespan writing research. That is, the members of the Collaboration were not interested in merely developing studies that looked across wide swaths of time at different sites. These swaths of time, these sites, had to speak to one another in some way. It quickly became clear that we were unlikely to get these sites to synergize through a shared methodology, though methodology was certainly one avenue through which coherence could be built. Instead, we've focused on aligning sets of methods so that epistemological foundations, methodological choices, and the conceptualizing of results could resonate across studies.

Within this volume, our approach to coherence can be explained by a family of terms. First, the following chapters cohere through a shared *phenomenon of interest*. Each chapter draws on a range of methods, populations, and theoretical orientations to understand, in some way, lifespan writing in all of its complexity. But a phenomenon of interest, even one as capacious as lifespan writing, still has

limits since, at this point, lifespan writing is still largely an unknown. As Bazerman et al. (2018) note, many questions remain about the ways in which writers (and their writing) change throughout the course of a lifetime. The uncertainties of our phenomenon of interest call for openness in our embrace of theories and methods. Will phenomenological hermeneutics provide insight to lifespan writing? Will structural equation modeling? Would it be productive to align sociohistoric theory with large-scale data collection? These questions, and many others, are worth considering as the field's understanding of what it means to write through the lifespan continues to grow. Even while we attend to a phenomenon of interest, then, we are careful to remain open to new approaches for examining that phenomenon.

Openness, as a concept, keeps lifespan writing a “big tent” research activity—it encourages new approaches and new understandings that can contribute to a growing understanding of this phenomenon of interest. But openness alone does not wholly capture the inherent interdisciplinarity of lifespan writing research or the value of a big tent. The pursuit of coherence not only embraces openness but also actively *resists regimentation*. If, as Haswell (2012) suggests, “the true enemy is people’s love of regimentation,” then the nebulous nature of lifespan writing will regularly run the risk of being simplified, flattened, and rendered easy to measure via regimentation. Any attempt at coherence across methods, methodologies, theories, and orientations needs to actively deny regimentation in order to ensure that we’re researching the whole massive research object—the entire elephant, not just its parts. By attending to the phenomenon of interest of lifespan writing with openness while actively resisting regimentation, the Collaboration—and, by extension, this collection—seeks to develop a coherence across theoretical frameworks, methods, and findings.

The chapters in this collection explore new framings, methods, and approaches for lifespan writing research, propose new sites of study, identify provocative findings, and do so while both looking inward, toward a coherent series of connections across studies, and looking outward, toward future research questions, sites, and methods. Like all effective research, the work of the next fourteen chapters both presents answers to pressing questions and uses those answers to develop new questions that future research—more informed, more responsive to other methods, more tied into a growing and coherent understanding of lifespan writing—can follow.

OVERVIEW OF APPROACHES TO LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

This volume is organized into two parts that provide a detailed but coherent vision of the ongoing development of lifespan writing research, its limits, and

its possibilities. It is our hope that subsequent lifespan writing researchers will keep this robust multidimensionality in mind as they continue to expand our knowledge of what it looks like to write through the lifespan. One of the ongoing risks of working with such a massive research object is the too-human tendency for simplicity. While simplicity certainly has its value, we argue that the multidimensionality of lifespan writing needs to be valued and carefully attended to so that our understandings of it do not flatten over time. To that end, we've drawn together authors from diverse fields invested in writing research and asked those authors to give special attention to methodology throughout so that we can both learn from each other and develop a deeper appreciation for bringing diverse methods to bear on lifespan writing. Our authors employ the diverse disciplinary discourses of fields including rhetoric & composition, education, sociology, psychology, medicine, and more. Their diversity begins to uncover the range of expertise needed for lifespan writing research and it is our sincere hope that the interconnected work of this volume encourages similar tendencies in future work.

We begin as we mean to go on: boldly. "Part 1: Embracing the Radical" collects innovative and even radical frameworks and methodologies from different disciplines that have been developed in order to give writing studies the tools to tackle lifespan writing. With this section we demonstrate that, to capture the complexity of the lifespan, we must engage in ongoing methodological reflection and, in many cases, substantial innovation. In Chapter 1, Anna Smith proposes three orientations to lifespan writing research that would enable researchers to reflexively engage with their selection of methods and theory in conducting this kind of radical longitudinal research. Next, Ryan J. Dippre and Anna Smith (Chapter 2) suggest that treating context as protean and responsive to the ongoing use of practices in context is a vital consideration for future lifespan writing research. Then Matthew C. Zajic and Apryl L. Poch (Chapter 3) draw our attention to the importance of quantitative research for lifespan research, introducing us to the possibilities that structural equation modeling offers lifespan writing researchers when set along a broad enough time frame. In Chapter 4, Magdalena Knappik provides a rigorous assessment of the affordances of the literacy autobiography as lifespan research data while Jeff Naftzinger (Chapter 5) urges lifespan writing researchers to include *everyday writing* in their work. Drawing on time-use diaries and interviews, Naftzinger uncovers the power of everyday writing as a concept for both researchers and participants at all stages of the lifespan. Lauren Rosenberg (Chapter 6) concludes "Embracing the Radical" by diving more deeply into the realities of interacting with qualitative research participants longitudinally. She also considers the ways in which revisiting participants might provide new insights for researcher and participant alike.

But just as lifespan writing research needs radical departures from disciplinary confines (as exemplified in Part 1), “Part 2: Leveraging Our Traditions” capitalizes on what writing studies already offers by exemplifying targeted innovations to well established theories, methods, and frameworks. In Chapter 7, Lauren Bowen adapts sociohistoric methods to study the literate action of one older writer but does so with an innovative *literacy tour* approach. Yvonne Lee’s (Chapter 8) qualitative project suggests the possibilities of radically longitudinal work by attending to intergenerational connections in one family and James T. Zebroski (Chapter 9) offers autoethnographic examinations of the intersecting spaces of the social and the personal. In Chapter 10, Lara-Jeane C. Costa, Jeffrey A. Greene, and Stephen R. Hooper draw on structural equation modeling to trace the relationship of executive function and written language from first through fourth grade.

The remaining chapters give particular attention to semiosis. Diana Arya, Anthony Clairmont, and Sarah Hirsch (Chapter 11) draw on students of varying ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses to examine critical meaning-making and data representation, thereby bringing new modalities to our attention as we think about how writers grow and change over time.

Apryl L. Poch, Matthew C. Zajic, and Steve Graham (Chapter 12) take a lifespan perspective on understanding the writing skills of individuals with learning disabilities or with autism spectrum disorder, highlighting what is currently known about these two groups of writers and where research needs to go. Erin Workman (Chapter 13) then transforms the research tradition of concept maps for unpacking the psychological complexity of the literate lives that our research participants engage in. Finally, Kevin Roozen (Chapter 14) explores the continual becoming of people, practices, and social worlds through a longitudinal case study of one undergraduate throughout his college experience. By attending to the range of everyday inscription that his subject engages in, Roozen identifies the ways in which lifeworlds are integrated, laminated, and developed throughout the lifespan.

We conclude by demonstrating how these seemingly disconnected individual studies together suggest patterns of inquiry. We outline how the points of convergence in some of these chapters can be developed into *lines of inquiry*—a rigorous investigation of a concept or set of concepts that can be traced through the lifespan and scaled from a case study to a large data set—and posit that those lines of inquiry can generate the kinds of murmurations needed to keep such a diverse set of researchers, projects, and sites moving forward, together.

With these chapters we argue for the richness and diversity inherent to lifespan writing research and for the serendipities it creates. We hope that this wide-ranging volume encourages lifespan writing researchers to maintain an

openness and generosity to the unique contributions that diverse methods, research traditions, and disciplinary perspectives offer up as we jointly pursue lifespan writing.

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.
- Bazerman, C. (Ed.). (2018). Writing across the lifespan [Special issue]. *Writing and Pedagogy*, 10(3).
- Bazerman, C., Applebee, A. N., Berninger, V. W., Brandt, D., Graham, S., Jeffrey, J. V., Matsuda, P. K., Murphy, S., Rowe, D. W., Schleppegrell, M., & Wilcox, K. C. (2017). Taking the long view on writing development. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(3), 351-360.
- Bazerman, C., Applebee, A. N., Berninger, V. W., Brandt, D., Graham, S., Jeffery, J. V., Matsuda, P. K., Murphy, S., Rowe, D. W., Schleppegrell, M., & Wilcox, K. C. (Eds.). (2018). *The lifespan development of writing*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Bowen, L. M., & Rumsey, S. K. (Eds.). (2018). Composing a further life [Special issue]. *Literacy in Composition Studies*, 6(2).
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2014). The development of writing habitus: A ten-year case study of a young writer. *Written Communication*, 31(4), 371-403.
- Dippre, R. J. (2019). *Talk, Tools, and Texts: A Logic-in-Use for Studying Lifespan Literate Action Development*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2019.0384> <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/talk/>
- Fishman J., & Hea, A. K. (Eds.). (in press). *Telling Stories: Perspectives on Longitudinal Writing Research*. Utah State University Press.
- Haswell, R. (2012, Aug 26). Re: Re: Trusting Teachers. Was: Digital Faculty: Professors and Technology, 2012 | *Inside Higher Ed* [Electronic mailing list message]. <https://lists.asu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=WPA-L;811419ef.1208&S=>