

PREFACE

Charles Bazerman

University of California, Santa Barbara

Lifespan development of writing has an intuitive obviousness. Of course it takes a long time to develop as a writer! Of course even famous writers keep working at it and learning new things! Of course the five year old struggling with a pencil to form letters may thirty years later be the same person struggling with a plot outline or a corporate report! Of course students had writing experiences before getting to our classes and will have others after!

Yet in that obviousness we are tempted to a naiveté—that we know what skilled writing is and what an idealized developmental pathway to it might look like. Our idealized model might come from the writing life we have known or the writing life we wish we had known. Our idealized model might come from whatever school curriculum we were familiar with or might reflect individualistic rebellion against school values and practices. Wherever our ideas about development came from, they likely would be allied with our beliefs about knowing what writing is and what counts as skilled writers.

Even though I had spent many years researching the variety of writing, the history and distinctiveness of genres within evolving social conditions, the contingences and situatedness of writing choices, and the creative ingenuity of writers forging new paths, I was still tempted to think we could draw something of a coherent picture of development. Somehow I had projected the fortunate writing experiences I had as a middle-class, suburban child passing through elite universities into a normalized picture—as though my complex development would somehow define endpoints of writing development, if not the exact way stations. How egocentric! How arrogant! How persistently naive!

But we all tend to be egocentric in our understanding of writing because we know largely what we have learned, or the imagined trajectories and idealized accounts of icons we cannot measure up to. There is no large, realistic picture available to us at this time, only the neighborhoods we have passed through. From that journey into a world that has become normal to us we make generalizations and idealizations about writing and writing development. Even if curiosity or scholarship or happenstance have introduced us to different writing worlds, we still carry with us our deeply naturalized understandings of writing. These understandings become reinforced every time we sit down to write because we activate the resources and visions we know as we strive to follow our

best lights in creating our best next text. This creative and determined growth in successive problem-solving increases the intensity and scope of our best lights, as we incorporate new tricks, strategies, and deeper understandings. Yet our vision remains limited to the space illuminated by those best lights.

Under such illusions I initially brought together a panel of wonderful scholars that engaged in four years of illuminating discussion—Arthur N. Applebee, Virginia W. Berninger, Deborah Brandt, Steve Graham, Paul Kei Matsuda, Sandra Murphy, Deborah Wells Rowe, and Mary Schleppegrell. The group, in their collective wisdom, moved the discussion to a broader and more comprehensive vision of principles of investigation that would make visible the great diversity of writing development trajectories (see Bazerman et al., 2017, 2018). We got far, but it remained only the invitation to a beginning.

The Writing Through the Lifespan Collaboration and this, their first volume, take up that invitation, cutting us loose from our moorings of normalization into the great varieties of experience, the great varieties of trajectories that look so different. Even more challenging, writing itself is constantly evolving, growing through the creative inventions of writers who constantly remake writing and themselves in addressing the challenges in front of them. The Writing Through the Lifespan Collaboration also started from hopes of coherence of a great study that would contain multitudes, yet could be comprehended in a single large frame, like a Breughel painting. But bringing the inquiries together rather than adding up pulls us in many directions. We have yet to find the practices, themes, processes, principles that can draw it all together with some clarifying structure. Some methods proposed here try to aggregate quantitatively or at least follow similar paths by proposing repeated methods for following the writers, but they are only bets to lead us into the obscure. If we are now finding uncontainable multitudes, we must first get lost within the multitudes to know its vastness and variety. At some point exploratory knowledge may, we trust, emerge in orders—not predetermined orders or orders forced by our lassoing various wild pieces and trying to tie them down. We trust that order will reveal itself within the material we find.

The leaders of the collaboration and editors of this volume, Ryan Dippre and Talinn Phillips, draw on the metaphor of bird murmurations to express a trust in emergent order. The order that emerges and coordinates motion in a flock forms not because any of the birds have a spatial sense of the whole or a plan for coordinated movement. The order emerges because each is attuned to the movement of a few of its close neighbors. To take this metaphor seriously is to hope that somehow the inquiry will be self-organizing as studies will position themselves in relation to neighboring studies and soon observable patterns will emerge. This is a plausible hope, a plausible strategy, rather than imposing a

dominant theory or frame to organize a normal science, or an incremental adding of facts that will somehow add up to a great structure. In this particular case it is a strategy befitting the complex variety of writing development—responsive to so many variables and constantly inspired by human invention and creativity in protean and evolving situations. But as of the moment we are still seeing the birds flying in different directions, not sure whether self-organization will occur or whether some groups will start to identify some pattern at some level that will attract them to align with each other and form coherent clusters moving in coordinated harmony.

The metaphor of murmurations has a further implication that defines our current naiveté. The patterned fluid beauty of the murmurations of birds is perceivable only by those that stand apart and view it from a distance. The ones that participate in the flock sense only what is immediately around them. Now we do not yet have that distance to see even if any patterns are emerging. We can see only those studies around us that attract us to align ourselves with. So now the first task is to watch in wonder at the rich variety they display, to see what we can point out to each other, to appreciate the vastness of how people find their separate paths to grow into writing creatures. In so doing we can expand our sights and see more that we can align ourselves with and move in response to each other.

While it is uncomfortable to venture forth on journeys where we don't know where we are headed, yet it is a journey filled with inspirations. Writing evolves, textual worlds evolve, the social worlds that writing is part of evolve, people evolve as writers, and our research to understand this emergent world itself evolves perhaps in turn to change practice. What a broad and deep sky to explore together! How many best lights to follow and enjoy! What unknown orders for us to bring into awareness!

REFERENCES

- 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., Jeffrey, 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.