

## Chapter 12.A? Developmental? Path? To? Text? Quality?

A special issue of the *Journal of Literacy Research*, titled “A Developmental Path to Text Quality” (Tolchinsky & Stavans, 2019), has brought together three significant and complex issues: writing development, text quality, and path (which in the school context implies curriculum or educationally structured activities).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in providing contrasts across languages and nations with differing educational systems, the studies in the special issue offer clues about the effect of language and educational culture on development and what may remain constant across these differences. Nonetheless, the issue title presents text quality as the goal of the path, putting focus on the evaluated text rather than on the writer’s pathway, motives, and transformations. The comments that follow are directed to this general goal of text quality rather than the particulars of any of the articles.

The turn in writing studies toward investigating how writers change over time is a significant advance from studies of learning specific language skills, the effect of instruction, or writing processes and strategies (whether individual or collaborative)—although no doubt these will remain important areas for research. Development is variable, multidimensional, and idiosyncratic, situated within the particularities, interests, meanings, and experiences of each person’s life. It takes a long time for writers to develop, writing in many situations over many years. Development at each moment draws on the resources, habits, stances, skills, and problem-solving practices from prior experiences and has consequences for further developmental opportunities (Bazerman, Applebee, Berninger, Brandt, Graham, Jeffery, et al, 2018; Bazerman, Applebee, Berninger, Brandt, Graham, Matsuda, et al., 2017).

The complexity and variability of development and the limited number of truly developmental studies we researchers currently have access to mean that our work at this time is only halting and exploratory, locating pieces that one day may fall into larger patterns. We cannot, consequently, be sure of any of the initial terms we rely on. Therefore, we must look at each of the terms of the title of this special issue with caution, interrogating each of them.

Issues of development, quality, and path might be applied at any moment in a writer’s lifetime trajectory. Any experience in writing (whether within formal instructional settings or not) is just a passage point contributing to development but not the end of the story or the mark of complete mastery. Nonetheless, schooling as a total process provides an extensive set of more or less structured experiences over years aimed at improving student performance and understanding.

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While each student may be following an idiosyncratic path and interests outside of schooling, when they are fulfilling school tasks, students are constrained and focused by school mandates. Their expressive communicative and social needs and interests are for many years filtered through (or consciously defined in contrast to) this institutional location.

Early schooling, in particular, creates a passage point from the prior and ongoing lifeworld into an organized set of activities to prepare students for life beyond schooling. In daily life, children may be exposed to and engage in a variety of family and community practices; student horizons of learning, nonetheless, are likely to focus on the schooling that will occupy them and provide the most consequential sites of writing for the next dozen or sixteen or twenty years. This is the point when the child meets the curriculum and curriculum meets the child. So, at this moment when writing development becomes entangled with writing curriculum, we in writing studies perhaps can start to unpick the entangled threads and see how curriculum begins to exert a centripetal force on the diversity of experiences and individual sense making of growing writers and how the child might fight against the current to carve out fresh uses, solutions, and meanings both in the context of school and beyond (Bazerman et al., 2017; Bazerman et al., 2018).

Investigating writing development in the early school years, further, is useful for examining how the most basic and visible normalized elements of written language interact with the more communicative, relational, and expressive elements of writing development. Throughout their lives, writers work with words, making decisions about which to choose and how to put them together, as Ernest Hemingway notably said when asked why he revised the end of *Farewell to Arms* 39 times: “to get the words right” (Plimpton, 1958). The greater access writers have to wider language resources, the better they can select and combine words in ways that are recognizable, interpretable, and acceptable to others. Further, having those language resources readily at hand frees cognitive and emotional resources to be devoted to other considerations in putting words together, increasing the writer’s expressive potential.

Early education, therefore, needs to attend to basic inscription, graphophonemic correspondences, spelling, grammatical and syntactic conventions, and basic text organization. But the question remains whether other aspects of writing development—such as motivations and intentions, audiences and situations, strategies and planning, text structures and continuity, elaboration of content and reasoning—should be postponed while transcription preliminaries are mastered or whether preliminaries are most effectively and efficiently developed in more encompassing communicative contexts. Nonetheless, early attention to fundamental transcription skills highlights skills that are sometimes lost sight of in more advanced writing education. Few music educators would, in contrast, doubt that technical training and practice in the fundamentals of sound production and music theory must continue and be refined throughout the musician’s career, expanding expressive and creative potentials. Early writing education may provide important information about the relation of technical and communicative development (Rowe, 2018).

Writing development in early schooling can as well reveal much about the bigger picture of writing development, offering clues to untangle the complex relations between curriculum and personal development. But to untangle these puzzles, we need to be careful in not assuming particular solutions implied in our terms. To place the publication of this special issue and its studies in relation to the broader investigation of writing development, it is useful to sort out where these studies are situating themselves with respect to the many complexities of writing development. In that spirit, I will interrogate each term in the thematic title of this special issue, though for expository clarity I will not follow strict syntactic order.

## Path?

Do studies seek to understand the developmental path all humans go through? Or do they seek to guide school curricula to be more developmentally appropriate or to set out a more reasonable sequence to support development? Or do they propose a path by which research may tell us more about the development of writers? The title of this special issue promises a path to accomplishment of some evaluative criteria by students engaged in particular kinds of curricular experiences (see the questions about *quality* that follow). Is this end to be achieved by understanding development, identifying necessary supports, or implementing curricula? Since this special issue looks comparatively at the accomplishments of children in different countries with different languages and presumably different curricular structures, it is already looking at multiple paths, unless a single pattern is anticipated to emerge from the comparison. If so, will the pattern cover the entire dynamic of development or only some elements? In what aspect of writing development, then, ought researchers to be looking for patterned similarity across situations, conditions, personalities, languages, and individuals?

## A?

Why is *path* identified as singular, but not determinate? Is this because certain students following one path are being singled out for attention? Or are the authors proposing some form of educational path that might be one of many to lead to improved quality? Or that an educational regime can set out for children an actual path by which they develop—that is, the curriculum will be experienced in the same way for all the children in it and will have similar effects on all of them? On the other hand, is it suggested that there is not just one path (whether curricular, research, or individual) and that alternatives are reasonably to be expected?

## Developmental?

In what way is a developmental perspective adopted in the research here and elsewhere? Is development a context within which individual episodes of growth

or instruction are examined? Is development a theoretical assumption adopted in the collection and evaluation of data over time? Is development assumed to be the result of short-term changes in performance in response to school activities rather than a qualitative change or reorganization at certain junctures? Or is development conceptualized as the synthetic crystallization of multiple kinds of changes? Is the concept of development itself the object of investigation? If so, what are the relevant forms of data that will identify developmental processes or the overall development of writing in a child's life beyond the ability to meet curricular goals or the expectations embedded in school tasks? That is, how do studies disambiguate individual development from alignment to curricular mandates? Or is development considered to be congruent with the ability to perform the tasks set out in the curriculum and measured in school assessments?

Further, if looking beyond school textual productions to locate development, do studies continue to look primarily at textual productions but outside school contexts? Or do studies examine processes, practices, habits, dispositions, or orientations? Or strategies, reflections, problem framing, choice making, and other meta-talk? Or other indicators of writers' developing skills and understanding? Further, do studies look at the variables that might influence the development and the way in which they would impact, support, advance, impede, or direct development? What data would indicate these variables, the processes these variables would engage, and their effect on the way the writer would approach any task going forward? How might writing development interact with other aspects of development (whether cognitive, emotional, social, linguistic, relational, physical, economic, or other), and how would studies determine that?

## To?

What kinds of perception, attention, conscious awareness, self-monitoring, and self-direction are part of people working on and improving writing? What are the motivations, satisfactions, emotions, perceived rewards, or social relations that might support those forms of engagement, and what emotions, anxieties, or perceived obstacles interfere? Conversely, do habituation and unreflective, undirected practice have a role in development? What kinds of experiences in writing set up writers to address further challenges as part of school and nonschool experiences? How are these psychological, social, and situational elements crystalized in the performance of any text or group of texts? And how do these concomitants of individual performances or sequences of performances influence writing development?

## Text?

What are the salient elements of texts to identify in considering development? Are these the same as those identified by curricular traditions or current recommendations? Or is there something else to be attended to? What dialect and

linguistic diversity features enter into texts produced? How significant are these language differences within the totality of the text and in what way? How do the various elements and features carry out the social work of texts, and how are they the result of writers' processes, resources, positioning, stances, or perceptions? Further, how do the text and its production fit within sequences of events and activities within organized social settings to take on meanings for readers and writers? What role does interpretable meaning play within the text, and how do the various features of the text contribute to or detract from that meaning? Further, to what extent and in what way can the text be understood apart from the social situation, activity, and authorial identification realized through the text?

## Quality?

What is text quality, and how should it be assessed? Is text quality a clearly definable thing, or is it only identifiable through the assessments used in schooling to which curriculum and classroom practices may be aligned? To what extent are content, accuracy of representation, depth of evidence, or quality of reasoning part of text quality, or is text quality to be evaluated in content-neutral terms only? Is text quality a holistic entity, or do texts display multiplicities of qualities? If so, are these multiple qualities coherently aggregable in an overall assessment of quality?

Further, how are the quality or qualities displayed in each text the function of different qualities developed in the writer? That is, are texts in some way an embodiment of the character, personality, social relations, identity, or presence of the individual? Or are texts the result of qualities enacted in writing processes, such as persistence, attentiveness, meticulousness, or imagination? How might quality or qualities be related to the dynamics of situations? Is quality, alternatively, a function of social or interactional success in situations? If so, how can success within situations be identified, and how can textual quality be compared across differing situations? How salient, meaningful, and motivating are evaluations of text quality or success to the writer, the various readers, or the researcher? Might they each have different ways of characterizing quality?

In addition, to what extent does the evaluation of text quality require making texts comparable in meeting standard skills or expectations? How are tasks and texts aligned sufficiently to be comparable for quality to be evaluated? How does comparability allow for the presence of varied interests and resources of the writers? Are there other aspects of the writing development that might be revealed in less comparable parts of the text? To what extent does the evaluation of text quality attend to the communicative value of the text in expressing novel information, argument, affect, or effect—thereby making each text potentially worth the attention of its relevant reader? Does the assessor of text quality share the same interests and motives for attentiveness as the primary readers, or are they one and the same? Is the evaluation of quality in part or in whole an evaluation of the student's ability to align with and accommodate to the school situation and

mandates? What are the criteria of attention and interest in educational settings, and how do they compare to those in other settings?

## Final Comments

The questions offered here reverberate with the many studies of writing that have revealed the complexity of writing activity, engagement, and learning, situated in the particularity of individual lives, writing situations, textual intention, and meaning, even if these studies are not strictly developmental. More locally germane, the perspective embodied in these questions grows out of the positions articulated in the work of the Lifespan Development of Writing Group, which has proposed principles for the study of writing development (Bazerman et al., 2017; Bazerman et al., 2018). However evidence may fall out in the long run, our understanding will advance most effectively if we in writing studies are fully explicit about what we are looking for, doing, and assuming, as well as how each inquiry fits in with and contributes to building the large and complex picture of writing development. The picture at this point seems to be so large and inchoate we cannot assume that the meaning and value of each study for our growing understanding will be self-evident. In the short run, what this means for practice and assessment is that we attend to the individuality of our students' writing development, appreciate the particularity of the meanings they are bringing into being, and provide opportunities for them to continue developing in their own distinctive ways

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