

Introduction

The essays in this volume revisit some of the questions that have obsessed me over the years and that continue to haunt me even as I approach my eighth decade; thus, unfinished business. To me they seem puzzles that will remain for writing studies long after I am gone. So, this, too, is unfinished business. While I am still able, however, I want to put the pieces I see on the table, for others to fiddle with. Although the chapters appear as distinct essays, I think they begin to sketch a picture of what it means to write, how writing has emerged in human worlds, how we might understand our writing classrooms and their ethical implications, and where writing may go in the future. Writing itself is unfinished business.

Almost half of these chapters are previously unpublished, either freshly written for this volume (Chapters 1, 2, 6, 9, 19) or transformed from recent conference presentations (Chapters 7, 8, 10). Some have been published in places not usually seen as part of writing studies (Chapters 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18) or only in Spanish translation (Chapter 15). Some, though published and accessible, nonetheless fill in some of the connections among the other essays (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 11). Together, I hope they present how I see writing and its instruction these days. None are the last word, and I rely on some speculative leaps. Yet I hope they intrigue some researchers to pursue questions, seek evidence, or await more definitive knowledge from researchers in other disciplines.

The questions addressed here range from the most fundamental ideas about humans as writers and writing as constituting modern society to the most practical issues of curriculum and teaching. The answers to some may someday become clearer as data are gathered or as the future reveals what will happen. Other questions are less empirical and more about our values and commitments as writing instructors. But they all relate in some way to the purposes, means, skills, situations, and development of writers—and our actions as instructors. In ways more distant or immediate, they all bear on what we do on Mondays.

Although we experience our classes in real time, and we interact with students in the moment, there are long histories that define our academic circumstances as well as the motives for writing in society and how humans came to be the kinds of creatures who could invent writing. All these histories give shape to our teaching and writing challenges in the current moment. These histories also reveal who we become as we develop into our socio-literate environment. Writing, although only a recent invention, reaches deeply into ourselves, becoming part of our cognitive, affective, and social development, along with our engagement with the world around us.

Organization of the Book

The five sections of this book present, I hope, a coherent narrative of writing as central to the great evolutionary experiment of humans and of how we can assist

new generations in carrying that experiment forward. The first section places *Homo sapiens'* capacity to write within the biological and cultural evolutionary arc. The opening chapters consider how the human capacities to use language and then to invent writing emerged from the endowments of our biological ancestors but then changed the conditions and potentials of our lives. The emergence of *Homo scribens* has expanded our social connectedness, socially shared knowledge, and range of social action. These changes, however, have placed ever more significant and challenging demands on the capacity to write. It may seem a long distance from earliest protocells to white-collar professionals communicating from their desktops with colleagues in globally distributed networks, but it is an imaginable distance. Or at least I try to imagine it in the chapters of this first section.

The second section focuses on how writing has extended and transformed our knowledge with major consequences for us as societies and individuals. Writing extends our ability to know what others know and how they have come to know it. Writing allows us to know more about ourselves by enabling us to compare and apply what others have learned. Writing facilitates forming collective concepts and collective canons of methods, evaluation, and criticism. Writing facilitates forming and organizing collective systems of knowledge production, sorting through collective knowledge, and taking actions on the basis of shared knowledge. Writing even transforms what kinds of things are knowable, reportable, and usefully shareable. But tensions among and within different systems of knowing emerge into communal disputes and struggles about which knowledge is accurate and relevant. These tensions also give rise to dilemmas and problems for individuals living in worlds with multiple knowledge systems.

The third section considers how we go about teaching this increasingly important skill that gives people voice in the literate world. Writing has become essential for people to assert their presence and interests within the many complex literate systems that constrain, guide, and provide opportunities in our world. So, teaching writing and fostering writing has become ever more demanding. Our research into writing's challenges and uses has also transformed our teaching practices as we understand more fully and deeply all that is entailed in writing. That research also challenges commonly held educational ideas that have informed teaching, curricula, and assessments.

The fourth section reflects on the values and ethical concerns that pervade the practice and teaching of writing. Foremost, the ability to write with force and meaning is one of the most inequitably distributed resources in modern society, achieved by only a small percentage of even the most highly educated. In mass education, the teaching of writing is often an educational afterthought, taking a second place in literacy to reading. In elite education, however, writing is often granted a central role for those who are likely to wield power in societies. So, the teaching of writing has major ethical implications. As well, writers form and enact ethical relationships with readers and with the prior writers one draws on

and responds to. The social relations enacted through writing have major ethical responsibilities that we do well to understand and live up to if writing is to live up to its promise.

The final section speculates about where writing and writing instruction may go in the rapidly changing future. Predicting the future is a fool's game, but since writing technologies, distribution, forms, and instruction have been changing so rapidly in the last few decades, writing instructors are repeatedly asked to opine about where writing is headed. Based on the experiences and perspectives of a long career in writing studies as sketched out in this book, these are my guesses. They are of course bound to be mostly wrong. An unfinished business can't expect to be right.

Acknowledgments

In a number of chapters I draw on resources not common to contemporary writing studies, and in those cases the citations are drawn from other fields and may be unfamiliar to those working in writing studies. Through discussing the findings and ideas from these other fields, I hope to show their relevance to writing studies and bring such work into our field. Some chapters are more fully grounded in writing studies and will have more familiar references. A number of the writing studies topics I have explored in previous essays, which I cite; for a fuller presentation of the writing studies sources relevant to those topics, I refer you to those previous essays.

Over a career of exchanges with colleagues, I have amassed so many debts I cannot even begin to remember them. Decades of conversations with colleagues and reading their work have merged into my thinking in ways I can no longer sort out or attribute, unless a specific citation reminds me. Many people from other times and places whose work I have read have found a place in my mind. Working with international colleagues has opened my mind to different ways of looking at writing, and communications with colleagues from different disciplines have given me a glimpse into the literatures and knowledges and perspectives of their fields. Writing students I have interacted with and observed have given me much to think about and much sense of what works and is important in writing. My graduate students have shared ideas with me and given me the opportunity to talk through what I have been thinking. Many have now become colleagues, fellow researchers, and thinkers.

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6 Introduction

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