

# **What We Teach When We Teach Writing: A Big Picture in a Small Frame<sup>1</sup>**

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Teaching writing is an immensely rewarding profession, even if the work is exhausting and institutional recognition, conditions, and recompense are regularly inadequate. We provide environments, tasks, and resources for students to become more articulate and thoughtful while they share their experiences, joys, traumas, and realizations in their writing. We watch them grow as people and intellects. We see students work hard to bring their thoughts and experiences into the world and escape the confines of unshared ruminations. At the same time, we prepare them for future successes no matter what subjects they study, fields they enter, or careers they launch.

The immediate personal connections of teaching writing pull us beyond ourselves and beyond the limits of our energies, often leaving us too depleted to contemplate the reach and importance of the enterprise we are engaged in, how complex and varied writing is, how it forms the

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ligaments and lifeblood of the modern world, and how it makes literate humans who we are today. With the luxury of a position that allows me to explore the immensity of writing, I have tried to make available to our overworked profession what I and others have found, in research publications, in edited volumes, in reference books, and series, but I often feel the big picture is missing, as these publications are focused and particular, or abstract, or long. Readers may be attracted to one idea without connecting it to the big picture. James Joyce is reputed to have said that it took him seventeen years to write *Finnegan's wake* (1957) so readers should take that long to read it. Although I appreciate the cheekiness of the remark, I do not want to consign my poor readers to a fifty-year internment just so they can share the picture my journey has led me to. After all, Nabokov in his introduction to *Lolita* (1955) said that novel was inspired by a newspaper story about a captive chimpanzee who was taught to draw, and all he drew was the bars of his cage. That portfolio of pictures might be of interest for a minute or two, but hardly longer. Let's see whether the vision of my cage can hold your attention for a few minutes more.

I will tell the story as a series of discoveries, as I experienced them, given the contingencies of my life and the time I grew up in, surrounded by fellow teachers and scholars in writing and other fields, and gaining insight from their research and ideas. I have told the story of those contingencies and their impact on my development as a writer in a book-length autoethnography *How I became the kind of writer I became* (2023). I have also discussed the work of my fellow scholars in many other publications, particularly my 2013 *Theory of literate action*. I will not cite them here, however, though you may be able to spot their thinking in what I say, because here my task is to sketch out the broad picture, rather than synthesizing relevant literatures. I want to keep the frame small so the big picture comes together. I am connecting dots without dwelling on the dots, just sketching in the connecting lines.

I first came to the power of writing through my struggle to make meanings relevant to my life while delighting in the play of language, starting with childhood puns and the syntactic fun of making complex sentences in primary school, to writing poetry and witty literary papers in college. Writing became a way of making sense of my world, values, and commitments. Many of us I think come to writing in similar ways, through

our personal engagement with what we can do with writing and what meanings writing can help us discover. When I first started teaching, I simply wanted to share the power of the written word and the power of what we can make with it. Accordingly, I focused on the language itself, how it can be manipulated, what it could express, and how I could share that linguistic invention with our students. But it didn't take me long to realize that my students didn't come through the same set of experiences and did not always find writing the means of expression, discovery, and power that I did. Many had faced obstacles and failure in their early writing education, and found writing aversive and not at all motivating. So I needed to learn what was meaningful in their lives and how writing could help them in their struggles, as well as how to help them overcome aversive, anxiety-laden writing experiences.

As I started to focus on my students' attitudes, feelings, motivations, and needs, colleagues were beginning to discuss writing processes, and how each text emerged over time requiring multiple kinds of psychological work and personal engagement. We aided student writers to become more aware of their processes and to develop the practices and commitment needed to produce good texts. I started to see the benefit of time on task and focused attention on different tasks at different moments, which needed to be coordinated over the entire process. I saw my role increasingly as stage managing sequences of activities that would both challenge and motivate students, while providing explicit instruction and guidance at the point of need – which meant instruction became a dialog over writing in progress. I began thinking more concretely about the zone of proximal development and how it existed within social environments as students were addressing motivating tasks. The teacher had a role in setting engaging tasks and providing clues or footholds as students were sorting out whatever they were trying to accomplish and make sense of within those tasks. This orientation toward engaging and supporting students' developmental tasks stayed with me as I started to understand more about the complex symbolic worlds students were learning to participate in through their writing.

Entering further into the students' writing lives, I started to learn what they wanted to become through their engagement with the university they voluntarily enrolled in. This meant seeing how writing was a

means of academic success, but even more of academic discovery as they started to find meaning in their studies. Writing in my classroom became part of the entry into writing across the curriculum and then writing in their workplaces – but it was also writing as a means of knowing, learning, thinking, and critical reflection on learning. Discovering how much their writing at the university was explicitly about their readings, I was led down a path of seeing how intertextual writing was, not just in the academic world, but more generally. These growing conceptions about writing were shared by a number of teachers in my generation and after.

As I started to look into writing within the curriculum, I wondered about the disciplines that lay behind the curriculum – first it was the complex relationship of classroom genres students practiced to those of published disciplinary scholars who were their teachers. As I looked more fully into social studies of science, however, I came to appreciate the many other ways writing was part of how professionals engaged with their field, whether grants, reports, organizational documents, or everything else that was part of their activity systems and the roles they enacted. I started to see the many genres academics encountered and worked in as orderly and organized to form the social ligaments and the communicative lifeblood of their worlds. This orderliness led me to look into how these genres and activity systems came to be the way they were. Even the out-sized role that money and economics take in our lives can be tied to a history of literate inventions of financial instruments, commerce, marketplaces, government financing, legal regulations, banking systems, accounting practices, communication, information technologies, and the like. I also became more self-conscious about the development and organization of the field of writing studies and how I could support continuing its growth and place within the academy, through publications that advanced areas of study and aggregated the accumulated knowledge of the field, through advancing organizations that created opportunities for communication, and for building mechanisms that raised the visibility and status of the field.

The orderly organization of genres and communications led me back to think of the classrooms as also organized activity systems, with particular histories tied to the development of educational institutions. These histories and the consequent reading and writing practices within

schooling turned out to be differentiated and situated within countries, regions, cultures, and the interests of sponsoring bodies in society, whether church, state, wealthy benefactors, commercial interests, or communities. All this helped me understand better what was occurring in the classrooms of the universities I worked in; the range of attitude, skills, social manner, and knowledge students brought with them from the many different private, religious, home, and public school systems they experienced; and the tasks students were challenged to accomplish. Later, as I started to engage more with colleagues and universities in different countries, I became ever more aware how differently organized educational systems were, how they were differently regulated, how they were guided by different ideologies, and how these educational systems arose from different histories. Practices and attitudes arising from a millennia old system of Chinese bureaucratic examinations are still consequential for contemporary Chinese schooling. Talmudic yeshivas have distinctly different cultures and organizations than their near cousins of Islamic madrassas, even though both give supreme authority to their sacred texts. Within each system and each educational variation within any one national or religious system, writing and its teaching are differently positioned. Seeing this great variety made me realize how unusual was the tradition of college composition that developed in the US over 150 years within the equally unusual expectations of US general education. There is nothing inevitable about what we do, which is historically particular as the practices anywhere else, though we may have our reasons to prefer it and the larger way of life it supports.

As I came to see more clearly how the academy ran on documents, I came to see something similar in all spheres of society. We participate through reading and writing within large and often distant forms of social organization whether of economy, law, governance, finances, corporations, religions and belief communities, culture, and the arts. Even our most local private life is increasingly imagined and guided through ideas circulated through literacy, as our expectations and practices of personal relationships are saturated with self-help books, psychology, sociology, spiritual guidance, and literary representations. Each domain has its repertoires of symbolic meanings, knowledge, genres, communicative practices, organized roles, and communicative relations. Scholarship

in history, anthropology, archeology, cultural evolution, governance, the arts, journalism, as well as of literacy and rhetorical practice, helped me see the last five thousand years since the invention of literacy as the invention of increasingly complex intertwined elements that comprise modern life – ways of thinking, communicating, relating, enacting values, creating meanings, affiliating and participating within spheres of activity. All have been mediated and held together by writing and more recent modes of recording and sharing – turning local social groups into part of larger collectives spread over space and time, increasingly global and intertwined, but also providing different locales for individuals engaged within different spheres, each located within historical and geographical moments. Although humans may be the same biological creatures we were 5000 years ago, we live very different lives; do different work; are aware of, attend to, and know different things; have different identities and affiliations; and think different thoughts. Even today, people living just a few blocks away from each other in the same city, may live in very different worlds depending on their sources of information, identity, and work that draw them into worlds that extend far beyond their neighborhoods.

All along, even as I was starting to see the role of inscription in this history of the last five thousand years of human society, I remained aware that the different spheres and locations of activity and relations created different spaces for individual development. While this awareness was initially a fuzzy intuition, the more I learned about the evolving differentiated text-mediated networks of activity, the more I could see how this complex landscape created different opportunity spaces for the literacy development of individuals as they engaged with the specific reading and writing tasks they encountered. These tasks met their individual perceptions, needs, motivations, resources, and states of mind in order to create ladders for individual development, as well as to present obstacles. The opportunities and tasks became habitats for learning and formed potential zones of proximal development, while obstacles restricted the possibilities for writing development. It was a small step to move from this vision of the particularity of development within socio-historic literate locations to gain a more concrete understanding of the individuality of each person's lifespan writing trajectory and then to see the collective

development of writing practices as the consequence of all the individual participations of differently developing individuals within the possibilities of their time. This ever-changing literacy environment then set the opportunities for development of future individuals and collectives. The variation and processes of lifespan development of writing along with the communal consequences for human social organization offer possibilities for research with direct consequences for education as well as for the future of our species.

Our educational interventions are only brief episodes within the total writing development of the people who pass under our watch, and through them the literate development of the collectives they participate in. The more we understand about their individual and collective trajectories located within the historical and social space they navigate, the better we can help contribute to their lives and the lives of society. This concept reframes more robustly and crisply a more general orientation that has guided me from my earliest teaching.

The idea of lifespan development also helped integrate another dimension of ideas that had interested me, concerning emotions, anxieties, and psychological needs. People as individuals are not just motivated by rational participation in cognitive social practices; they are also driven by personal needs and desires, while constrained by aversions and anxieties. These emotional themes go very deeply, as I experienced when writing helped me gain bearings in my own life. More generally, the recent research on trauma writing suggests that writing can fundamentally affect our neurological organization even to the level of impacting our immune systems. It is a step further to think about the atypicality of everyone's literacy development as it becomes part of our perceptual and neurological organization in engaging with all aspects of the world. We each develop under a unique set of neurobiological conditions influenced by our unique social and material positions that we respond to. The more visible extreme of differently abled people are those who have to learn to cope with written language without hearing or sight. The autism spectrum offers another recognizable set of alternative conditions under which some learn to use symbols as part of their interaction with others. But this individual difference is true for all of us, whether or not we have an identified atypicality.

What unusual creatures we humans are. While most animals have some form of social relations, some communicate, and even a few develop cultures that pass on through generations, only humans read and write. Reading and writing has supported robust and rapid cultural evolution, making our lives change from generation to generation, as well as changing the conditions and means of our learning, thinking, and actions. Consequently, we have created highly differentiated spaces for our development as we encounter and select among the virtual world of meanings available in our time and place, making ever more complex and differentiated possibilities for individuality. We now extend far beyond the neural communication in our physical body to participate in large social bodies of knowledge, co-orientation, collaboration, and coordination – as well as conflict.

So this brings me back to thinking about our twenty-first century students, passing through the range of educational and cultural experiences available to them in their regions and institutions. Our students are trying to make their ways in the world before them as they see it. Through education they seek to enter more fully into their chosen worlds of literate practices and knowledge, taking place in the social collective. They are trying to make meaning of those worlds and to participate in them, navigating their life trajectories during the years unfolding before them. They are no longer Mesopotamian farmers counting their sheaves of grain nor medieval monks devoting themselves to a maintaining a single set of Holy Scriptures nor even nineteenth century medical doctors, working within and contributing to the theories and knowledge of their time, using the devices and measures then current. Even the professional practices of accountants have changed radically in recent decades as computing has transformed their tools of inscription, record-keeping, and intertextual accountability; as well, the personal and civic lives of these same accountants are being played out in changing literate cultures.

The material world around us may remain pretty much the same (apart from what humans do to our material environment, often aided by literate planning), but the world of meanings, knowledge, interactions, culture, and community that humans make is constantly changing. Yet this symbol-saturated communicative world is held aloft only through the attention and meaning-making of individuals, largely through reading

and writing. Our communicative practices keep pumping energy into the shared world of meanings. Without that active attention and engagement the world of meanings would collapse as fast as a hologram with the plug pulled. But every bit of energy people contribute to those shared meanings changes that symbolic world, creates new meanings, interactions, organizations. As teachers of writing, we enable people to keep this theater of meaning and society alive, to maintain and evolve the built symbolic environment at a distance, to keep the human literate experiment going.

## References

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