

## Book review

# The lifespan development of writing

**Bazerman, C., Applebee, A.N., Berninger, V., 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*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English | 398 pages - ISBN 978-0-8141-2816-9**

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This volume delves into the nature of writing development from a holistic and multidimensional perspective. Though a considerable amount of research has been conducted in the field of writing development, most studies have focused on specific populations or age cohorts. Additionally, this research has been conducted within a variety of theoretical perspectives. As a result, the field lacks a theory of writing development that may help researchers and teachers to improve students' learning of writing in a comprehensive way. Thus, this book aims to set the basis for such a theory, by linking together different perspectives of writing development. As a starting point, authors assume that, rather than occurring in a specific context or circumstances, writing development is an integrated part of learners' whole life experience.

The book is divided in three sections. The first section is written collectively by all the authors. It presents an overview of the book contents and the rationale for adopting a multidimensional perspective in the understanding of writing development. The authors also propose a set of principles to define the complex nature of writing development across the lifespan. The second section explores changes in writing and writing perceptions over time from different perspectives (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural). It discusses how a fragmented view of writing may adversely affect school curricula and policy making. The third section includes a concluding chapter, in which the authors suggest future research lines to explore the interaction between multiple writing dimensions.



Arrimada, M. (2019). The lifespan development of writing [Book Review of *The lifespan development of writing* by C. Bazerman et al. *Journal of Writing Research*, 10(3), 573-581. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2019.10.03.07>

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## Contents

Throughout the chapters, writing development is understood as a modification in the way we use writing (e.g., in terms of writing skills or purposes), produced by an intentional effort toward change. Since development occurs within the context of the learner's life, writing does not develop alone, but in close interaction with other forms of development. According to this view, the book is structured as follows.

### Section 1: The Project

This section comprises two chapters. *Chapter 1* features a detailed analysis of the multidimensional nature of writing development. From a cognitive perspective, writing develops from the learners' inner resources, while from a linguistic perspective the focus is on how the writer handles linguistic resources. As stated by the social perspective, the use of these resources takes places in the context of human relationships. Finally, from a historical perspective, writing development within societies is mediated by historical and cultural processes. Current educational policy and practice tend to disregard some of these perspectives, which leads to incomplete descriptions of writing development. Thus, the chapter supports the need to challenge policy and practice, by promoting a global understanding of writing that joins different perspectives.

*Chapter 2* relies on the interactive and multidimensional view previously stated to establish a set of principles of writing development, which are valuable across theoretical orientations and contexts. These principles constitute a comprehensive description of writing development, that should more effectively support learners. The first principle addresses writing as a social tool that makes people part of a community and changes in response to changing social demands. The second principle focuses on the complexity of writing development, whose mastery requires the coordination of multiple skills and cognitive processes within the learner's mind. The third principle addresses the variability in writing development. Far from being linear, writing trajectories vary within and between individuals. The fourth principle points out that the writing tools used by writers are defined by social and historical changes. The fifth principle addresses the mechanisms by which cognitive systems are reshaped, so that they can be used to write. The sixth principle focuses on how writing development interacts with other forms of development, such as speech or reading. The seventh principle encourages educators to use a wide range of language resources to better foster the production of meaningful written texts. Finally, the eighth principle suggests a new school curriculum that takes into account the heterogeneity of students' writing development. Ideally, these eight principles should guide and support educational change.

### Section 2: Perspectives on Lifespan Writing Development.

This section comprises eight chapters. In *Chapter 3*, Rowe presents a detailed description of writing development in early childhood, based on two premises: first,

literacy learning starts very early in life; second, writing development can be studied long before children use conventional written forms. The author conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the written products of 139 students aged from 2<sup>1/2</sup> to 5 years. Findings suggested that different dimensions of writing follow different developmental paths. While letter-sound correspondence appears between 4 and 5 years, conventional directional patterns appear earlier, suggesting that understanding conventional writing direction is less complex. From late 3 years, children are able to relate a picture to a verbal message, but only around 4-5 years are children able to assign a meaning to their printed marks. Additionally, the author conducted a 3-year longitudinal analysis of writing development of 10 students. Taken together, findings from both analyses suggest that writing development follows a linear path across age groups, but it follows specific trajectories within the same individual. At the end of the chapter, Rowe points to variability in writing development as an important issue in writing research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the development of students' ability to produce meaning by using language resources. Schleppegrell and Christie present several texts written by K-12 English-speakers to illustrate meaning-production across the school years. The authors rely on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the underlying theory of writing development. According to this perspective, lexical complexity evolves from simple grammar in early childhood to consolidated grammar of abstraction in late adolescence. The authors present four categories of meaning-development along with examples of language resources to promote their evolution: (a) objective expression of writer's own thinking; (b) controlled and sophisticated use of themes, understood as elements to place the clauses within their context; (c) density of students' texts, which becomes greater as the writer includes additional information to guide the reader (e.g., time, space, background, etc.); and (d) abstraction of knowledge presentation through the use of non-congruent grammar. The role of the different subjects taught at school is particularly emphasized in this chapter. As children move from elementary to secondary education, differentiation between subjects becomes greater and each discipline has its own expectations and requires technical language. This specificity helps students to develop a variety of language resources that may allow them to participate in multiple social contexts. At the end of the chapter, the authors discuss implications of SFL. From a research point of view, SFL offers tools to explore which language resources writers use to achieve their communicative goals. From an educational perspective, SFL features a detailed description of writing development that teachers and policy makers might use to create learning and assessment tools.

In *Chapter 5*, Berninger et al. explore how developing writers' perceptions of writing change across time. The authors also address how these perceptions and writing disabilities are related to each other. Authors present two descriptive studies focused on the writer's self and how it is conditioned by his or her background. In the first study, typically developing children in Grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 described what writing was for them. It was found that students did not adapt their descriptions to the

audience, and that (a) references to cognition or executive functions only appeared in the upper elementary grades; (b) references to language or emotions appeared earlier, but became more complex across time; (c) references to the sensorimotor domain decreased throughout schooling, and (d) references to specific writing skills (e.g., spelling, idea generation, etc.) as well as to the relationship between writing skill and schooling only appear from Grade 5 onwards. In the second study, students with long-standing writing difficulties in the 4th to 9th grades, those receiving computerized writing instruction, were asked about their perceptions about writing. These struggling writers reported enjoying writing activities, despite their difficulties with transcription. They also pointed to student-teacher bonding as a key factor in learning to write. In their concluding comments, the authors encourage future research of the influence of writing environment upon students' perceptions, as well as the use of multiple methods to assess these perceptions.

*Chapter 6* provides insight into adolescents' perceptions of academic writing in secondary school. Campbell and Jeffery analyse those perceptions on the basis of agency, understood as the capacity to be an active agent in writing. The authors examine 63 sixth-to-twelfth-grade students interviews and writing samples from the National Study of Writing Instruction (NSWI). Their aim was to compare the perceptions of L1 higher-achievers, L1 lower-achievers, and L2 students. Results can be grouped in three categories concerning students' perceptions about writing at school, confidence in their writing skills, and understanding of the purpose of writing. First, older students tended to express more positive views than younger ones. Besides, L1 writers reported positive feelings more frequently than L2 writers. Second, L1 higher-achievers felt more confident in their writing skills than L2 and L1 lower-achievers. This latter group reported the lowest level of self-confidence. Third, L1 higher-achievers seemed to better understand that each discipline pursues a particular writing purpose. L1 low-achievers and L2 writers, on the contrary, demonstrated limited understanding on the different writing purposes across disciplines. At the end of the chapter, the authors emphasise the importance of using meaningful writing tasks, where students are allowed to express, not only their knowledge, but also their feelings and experiences for a variety of audiences.

*Chapter 7* presents a set of guidelines to make writing more visible in the school curriculum. Murphy and Smith take curricular diversity as the starting point to justify the reason why writing receives a varying level of attention across schools and classes. Curricular diversity seems to be influenced by the different understandings and teaching approaches to writing. As a consequence, the authors propose and illustrate three game-changers to promote effective teaching of writing: (a) collaborative writing to promote knowledge-sharing; (b) new technologies to provide adequate scaffolding; and (c) activities to personalise each student's curriculum. For these strategies to become a reality, there is a need to invest in teachers' professional development. Teachers should be provided with responses to their specific needs. This can be achieved through opportunities to work together, to become researchers

of their own teaching practices and to write about them. The chapter ends by highlighting the importance of hearing what teachers have to say. Specifically, the authors claim that educational problems must be solved from the inside, that is, from what is really happening in the classrooms.

In *Chapter 8*, Brandt explores the writing development of working adults, relying on the idea that literacy and human development are intrinsically linked. The term 'life-course development' is used to emphasise the bidirectional relationship between changes in the environment and in one's self. Individual literacy is therefore presented as a result of the social changes surrounding human beings. The author delves into adult writing development by analysing interviews from 60 working adults. Three main aspects are discussed and illustrated with several examples. First, writing development is closely linked to the workplace and arises as a work product. Thus, the way writing develops depends on each individual's role at work. However, as roles are dynamic and partly defined by the corporate structure and the relationship with other employees, they are a source of heterogeneity in adult workplace writing development. Second, historical events influence writing development. Social, cultural, political or economical situations promote the construction of new text types as well as the adaptation of old ones. Among other examples, the widespread use of new technologies illustrates the reciprocal relationship between adult writing development and periods of history eras. Third, individual dispositions influence one's own development. Dispositions are defined as personal beliefs on how to make progress in life, created by the experiences someone lives through. Thus, adult writing orientations are affected by early life experiences. The chapter ends with a suggestion to explore how writing should be taught in schools on the basis of what is known about adult writing development. If research is conducted exclusively on student writing, we run the risk of missing the dynamic perspective of writing development.

In *chapter 9*, Graham describes a model of writing integrating the cognitive and the sociocultural perspectives, by linking writers with their writing community. The first section addresses the writing community, defined as a group of people who achieve their shared goals through writing. The author describes the elements of a writing community and emphasises their interrelated nature. That is, the final written product is presented as a result of reciprocal influences between each individual, their writing community and other communities. The second section focuses on the cognitive and psychological resources that writers use to deal with limited processing skills, which are known to constrain the written product. These include long-term memory resources gained from experience; control mechanisms to self-regulate one's writing behaviour; processes carried out to produce the final product; and physical and psychological modulators of writing. The third section presents a detailed example of how the writing community and writers work together. The proposed model understands writing as a two-way activity, in which social and individual components collectively shape the steps of the writing process. In the last section, the

author addresses the mechanisms that promote writing development. He proposes two levels of development: social and individual. Several examples are used to illustrate how writing evolves both within a writing community and within an individual. The points made throughout the chapter support a multidimensional perspective of writing.

*Chapter 10* presents a proposal of a lifespan longitudinal study of writing development. Bazerman justifies the need for such a study on the assumption that it depicts how writing competence is achieved and, therefore, it would help educators to support learners. In the first part of the chapter, the author addresses the features of longitudinal studies, in particular, long-term ones. Although studies from different fields are brought together, there is a focus on developmental psychology and how its principles are applied to longitudinal research on writing development. Taken together, these studies suggest that developmental paths vary highly across individuals. In the second part of the chapter, he proposes a design of a long-term longitudinal study of writing. Writing is viewed as a social tool whose development runs in parallel to social advances. From this perspective, the author suggests that data collection should be broad and start as early as possible. This will allow researchers to capture early attempts of communication that may influence future writing development. Additionally, samples should be large enough to allow comparisons within and between cohorts. Finally, the author suggests using a combination of methods to collect data considering factors such as individuals' region, age, type of writing required in their lives and social changes. To conclude, Bazerman describes a set of data categories that would be needed in the suggested study to fulfill the points made throughout the chapter.

### **Section 3: Final thoughts**

The volume ends with a concluding chapter that summarises the authors' shared thoughts. There is a general agreement on the complexity and variability of writing development, which is understood as an individual path not biologically determined. The chapters are summarised around three research fields: dimensions of writing development, concurrent forms of development, and environmental variables that influence writing development. The authors claim for a new conception of writing development: it should be considered as a life resource shaped by one's individual trajectory and not only as an academic product. From this broad understanding of writing, the authors define directions for teaching and learning. Continuous research will, in turn, guide these directions, making it possible for researchers, policy makers and teachers to work together towards a shared goal: the long-term success of the writer according to his or her individuality.

### **Conclusion**

The unstoppable development of societies, with its subsequent rapid changes in theories, knowledge, and methodologies, undoubtedly pose a challenge to study

writing development. Besides, traditional models of writing (Alamargot & Chanquoy, 2001) tend to focus on a particular aspect of what constitutes writing, mostly cognitive or contextual factors. As a result, most current definitions of writing development are biased and knowledge is fragmented across theoretical perspectives, methodologies and populations of study (Bazerman, 2016). In an attempt to overcome this problem, this volume offers a multidisciplinary lifespan perspective of writing development as the starting point to conduct research on it.

The book constitutes a brilliant example of how to join theory and practice together. Some chapters focus on the definition of writing and writing development, as well as on its components and on variables that affect them; others either address the results of empirical studies on writing development or provide specific clues and detailed guidance on how to conduct them. The authors provide an extensive collection of examples to illustrate both the theoretical and practical framework, which allow readers to have a better understanding of the conveyed message. This complementarity of theory and practice is particularly helpful when designing empirical research on writing development. It sets the path between the theoretical understanding of concepts and the practical implementation of methods and procedures. In other words, the double orientation of this book responds first to what needs to be known and then to how this knowledge must be applied. Contributions of this book can be summarized in three major points.

First, the volume questions the idea of writing as the simple act of putting speech in the written mode. The holistic perspective presented in this book suggests that writing development is more than a mere form of communication. Learning to write serves several functions that might go unnoticed when this act is studied from a single perspective. For example, writing contributes to the development of personality and beliefs about one's self and the others; it places each individual into a social group and enhances the relationships within that group and between different communities; and it leads to success and generates a sense of personal satisfaction. In sum, writing development provides individuals with an array of tools to handle different situations.

Second, according to the volume, writing development goes beyond the educational agents. The majority of writing research has been conducted within the school context. Most of it focuses on educators and students, while some addresses curricular changes. The authors of this book, however, adopt a broader perspective. They see writing development as a responsibility of the society as a whole. This view includes teachers and students, but also policy makers, companies concerned about their workers' skills and every community in which individuals develop as writers. Though this point is conveyed throughout the book, Chapter 8 constitutes a particularly good example of writing development outside the school context. In line with the perspective taken by the authors, writing constitutes a cognitive resource that contributes to maintain citizens' socio-economic well-being (Beddington et al., 2008). Not in vain, the European Union set writing as one of the "key competences

necessary for employability, personal fulfilment and health, active and responsible citizenship and social inclusion” (Education Council, 2006, pp.13).

Third, the book encourages readers to re-think the design and implementation of writing interventions. During the last few decades, a considerable body of research has been conducted on effective instructional practices to support writing development (see, for examples, meta-analysis by Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007). These practices tend to focus on how to improve either the writing product and/or process, or the context in which writing is produced (e.g., students’ motivation, environmental features). They fail, however, to address both aspects jointly. Additionally, writing interventions are traditionally assessed within cohorts of students with specific characteristics (e.g., age, learning disabilities, socio-economic status). The multidimensional perspective of writing development endorsed in this book sets two essential principles of writing interventions. First, writing development is the result of reciprocal influences between internal and external factors. Therefore, writing interventions should address the cognitive, psychological and social components of writing. Second, the teaching of writing needs to target the individuality of all students. Thus, interventions should take into account variability between- and within-subjects. The model suggested by Graham in Chapter 9 clearly illustrates these two principles, although they are conveyed throughout all the chapters.

In summary, this volume offers new insights into how to understand writing development and how to apply this understanding. The authors present their arguments from scientific, educational and social perspectives. Consequently, contributions are made not only to writing research and instruction but also to policy making. Overall, this book set the basis for re-designing the writing curricula: Educational policies and instructional practices should get away from standards and focus on individual learning paths.

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