Theoretical Models and Processes of Literacy

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Waves of Theory Building in Writing and its Development, and Their Implications for Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum

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3 WAVES OF THEORY BUILDING IN WRITING AND ITS DEVELOPMENT, AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION, ASSESSMENT, AND CURRICULUM

Anna Smith

Introduction

Literacy, argued Kirkland (2013), is an artifact of humanity. Drawing on sociolinguists’ theoretical work such as Smitherman’s (1977) scholarship identifying linguistic social hierarchies, Hymes’s (1994) calls to understand language in its everyday use, and Bakhtin’s (1986) notions of individuals’ articulations as processes of identification, Kirkland illustrated the ways writing, as literacy practice, results from human drives for pleasure, play, creativity, and curiosity. Along with the work of these theorists, his proposition was informed by long-term, ethnographic work tracing the development of literacy practices with six young, Black men in Lansing, Michigan. Though often depicted in dehumanizing ways—as apathetic, lazy, and even illiterate—by some adults around them, these young men were writers. They carried notebooks, which they filled with diary entries, poems, raps, and essays, and they engaged in cypher and storytelling circles with friends and family. By working alongside the young men to examine their writing across the rich literate landscape they traversed, Kirkland concluded that their writing development was, among other attributes, idiosyncratic, multimodal, cultural, political, and historical.

This is a complex rendering of writing and its development that is frequently evoked (Boscolo, 2008). Even when scholars have focused in on just one dimension of writing, such as the orchestration of cognitive processes (Berninger & Richards, 2002), writing is characterized as a complex, recursive, and rhetorical activity. Bereiter (1980), for instance, explained that at its most basic form, writing entails several activities that call for writers to engage in constant comparison between their intended message and the messages forming on the page, including:

1. creating a personal intention for the piece that aligns to the writer’s understanding of the task;
2. coming up with a game plan to accomplish the task and personal goals; . . . and
3. tuning the written output to the writer’s intention and understanding of the discourse for which it is being written. (p. 78)
This complexity exists whether a writer is regurgitating text, in what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) called a knowledge-telling model, or composing a new text, that is, working within a knowledge-transforming model. Flower and Hayes (1981) similarly argued that cognitive processes of constructing a rhetorical situation and goal setting were acts of creativity. Much like Kirkland's (2013) theorization of writing with a sociolinguistic grounding, writing and its development through a cognitive processes lens are depicted as idiosyncratic, rhetorical, and creative activities.

Though seemingly distant in their foci, when writing is discussed on a theoretical level in several fields, not only is its complexity consistently referenced, but so too are its ties to human desire, creativity, and identity. These complex, humanizing depictions of writing are in direct contradiction to the writing-as-basic-skill approach that has frequented assessment and curricular frameworks since writing became a school subject (Dixon, 1967; Hillocks, 2008; Yancey, 2009). Not surprisingly, studies that have characterized writing instruction practices in K-12 schools (Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2006, 2009, 2011; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Cutler & Graham, 2008) have repeatedly demonstrated that the writing and writing instruction happening in schools aligns to mandates and assessment regimes rather than research-informed theory (McCarthey, 2008).

These large-scale research studies have found that over decades much of the writing instruction in schools has remained quite limited to short, paragraph-length original answers or fill-in-the-blank type templates for which teachers are the primary or sole audience (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Although decades of research have shown the futility of isolated grammar instruction (e.g., Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoerer, 1963), grammar exercises still masquerade as writing instruction. When youth are asked to develop an extended piece of writing, it is typically in service of preparing for on-demand, timed year-end assessments. Increased emphasis on high-stakes writing assessments has also left teachers feeling pressure to devote the time they have for writing in school to prepare students for the five-paragraph themes or other formulaic, template-type responses that are prompted on large-scale assessments (Anson, 2008; Hillocks, 2002, 2008). In Applebee and Langer's (2013) most recent survey of writing instruction in U.S. secondary schools, in which they compared their findings across 30 years of inquiry, they found that though teachers' conceptions of writing have become more aligned to theorists' depictions of the complexity of writing, instructional practices have not much changed.

This is a bleak image of the state of writing instruction in schools. Hence, in this chapter, I review theoretical perspectives on writing and writing development as they relate to instructional practice, and focus in on the mismatch between theoretical depictions of writing development and current assessment and curriculum regimes. I advocate for theoretically reframing writing and writing development in assessment and curriculum—aligning guidance for writing instruction to the transdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that depict writing as emergent, multidimensional, relational, dynamic, and driven by human desire. The theory reviewed in this chapter is neither exhaustive nor meant to be definitive; rather, it is one telling of some of the modern waves of writing’s transdisciplinary theory building across time in response to recent theoretically starved educational standards and policies regarding writing, its development, and instruction.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Writing and Implications for Instruction**

Thus far, I have used a variety of terms in relation to writing. Some of the words—such as recursive, idiosyncratic, relational, and multidimensional—are descriptive of writing, whereas others identify its multiple dimensions, such as writing’s textual and linguistic written products dimension, its cognitive and stage processes dimension, its social and contextual practices dimension, and its material, modal, and mobilities or pathways dimension. Although writing has always entailed these
dimensions, and thus, is described as multidimensional, each dimension has received focal attention in multiple waves of scholarship over time, and hence, can be told as a history of transdisciplinary theory building. By “theory,” I do not merely refer to abstracted models, but as Prior and Lunsford (2008) advocate, I refer to a broad arc of theoretical work in writing from reflective practice to theoretical implications drawn from research to grand theory. In writing studies, reflective practice has played a distinct role in its history of theory building. Prior and Lunsford describe reflective practice as “sustained, collaborative attention to a phenomenon” (p. 83) during which a metadiscourse about a phenomenon develops allowing the phenomenon to be critically described, taught, practiced, and further scrutinized.

Following Lewis and del Valle (2008) and Yancey (1999), I describe this theoretical history as building in waves to draw on what the metaphor implies. These theoretical foci are not bound to particular time periods or specific dimensions, nor are they clearly distinct from each other. Rather, they ebb and flow across eras and dimensions, as well as when and how they have been taken up—if at all—in pedagogical practice. When attention to a particular ontological or epistemological approach within a dimension recedes, like tide pools, some attention remains and is carried on through research and practice, and like a beach, the landscape of writing theory has been left changed—sometimes just ever so slightly—before the next wave of theory building washes ashore.

**A Products Dimension**

Many scholars point to the late 1800s—and specifically to the introduction of a written entrance exam at Harvard University in the 1870s—as the time when writing’s product dimension received its first wave of attention in modern schooling in the United States (Elliott, 2005). Deeming many of the passages written by incoming freshmen as inadequate, Harvard University began to offer remedial writing courses. During this era, writing in K-12 schools focused primarily on copying text and penmanship. Yancey (2009) argued that this initial framing of writing as a basic, entry-level skill—one that could be assessed adequately by a single written product—can be traced to today when writing in schools is still associated primarily with assessment, either of the written product itself or on behalf of demonstrating other content knowledge. This, she argued, is an atheoretical, techno-functional uptake of writing that has sustained a sense of crisis around students’ perceived inability to produce quality written products.

Although the ways written products are assigned and assessed in schools have been often critiqued as atheoretical, the written product has received waves of theory building since that time, with a peak of theory building across dimensions cresting in the 1960s and 1970s (Nystrand, Greene, Wiemelt, 1993). For instance, researchers (e.g. Hunt, 1970; Loban, 1976) analyzed the syntactic strategies employed by writers to make developmental claims about the sophistication of sentences in written products. Their findings pushed back on popular assumptions that more mature writers wrote longer, more complex sentences. They articulated a perspective on mature writing that involved syntactic complexity, but more precisely that more “mature” syntactic complexity involved elaboration within sentence parts and succinct embedded concepts. It is important to emphasize that they did not find that syntactic complexity related to the effectiveness of the sentences or the evaluated quality of the written product. They also found that across time, and depending on the rhetorical situation and familiarity of the content, the syntactic complexity did not increase in a linear fashion or steady pace. Though a student’s syntactic complexity was not associated with quality of written products or theoretically linked to development as a writer, working at the sentence level of written products with sentence-combining activities has been a popular instructional uptake in this dimension of writing.

At the same time, but taking a entirely different approach to the written product, Moffett (1968) applied Piagetian psychological theories of maturity to theorize a cognitive-distance developmental
sequence in which the content of a written product that involved the self or personal experiences was at the lower end of the scale, and products that involved distant, abstracted content that was not experienced personally was at the developed end of the scale. Applying Moffett’s cognitive-distance scale to the linguistic and structural patterns in a large sample of secondary students’ written products, Britton et al. (1975) created a hierarchal taxonomy of the types of audiences and functions students were prompted to write. The base or least mature function was described as expressive or emotive, and the cognitively abstract functions, such as persuading, informing, and entertaining, were considered the most mature. Britton et al. found that students were most often asked to regurgitate information for which the teacher was the primary and sole audience. They termed these assignments “dummy runs” (p. 106), and advocated that a developing writer should have more opportunities to write for “real” audiences and purposes. Theirs was not the first call for authenticity in opportunities to write in schools, and not the last. Sheeran and Barnes (1991) have argued that schools have continued to foster genres of writing that are not in play outside of school, and therefore have a limited relevance to developing as a writer.

Perhaps due to the scope and scale of the Britton et al. (1975) study, their developmental taxonomy—rooted in applied Piagetian theories of cognitive development—had a major impact on writing in schools. The first UK National Curriculum in English, for instance, was based on a cognitive abstraction developmental sequence (Andrews & Smith, 2011). However, prescribing a sequence for writing curriculum was not the intention of the scholars who developed this taxonomy. Although the assigned writing tasks aligned with a cognitive-distance scale, the recommendation from Britton’s team was that a developing writer needed a range of opportunities to produce written products for various audiences and with a growing range of function and form. Rather than a maturational sequence of cognition, Britton et al. (1975) argued:

[T]he work we have classified cannot be taken as a sample of what young writers can do. It is a sample of what they have done under the constraints of a school situation, a curriculum, a teacher’s expectations, and a system of public examinations which itself may constrain both teacher and writer.

(p. 108)

The theoretical work of these studies was descriptive of what was made possible by the prompts and structures at place in the classrooms, and should not be taken as prescriptive.

**A Processes Dimension**

Another theoretical focus has been on writers’ processes or the series of varied types of activities, both cognitive and rhetorical, that writers engage in as they produce a written product. Writers’ processes have had at least three distinct waves of theory building that emerged within the same era, each rising from direct observation and reflective practice of student writers at work. Rohman (1965) is often cited as one of the first researchers to focus on what the writer is doing while composing school-based tasks. He suggested a simple, linear stage model: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting. A wave of researcher-practitioners, including Emig (1971), Perl (1979), and Sommers (1980), challenged the linearity and simplicity of this model. Perl, for instance, demonstrated that writers’ processes were recursive and within each phase was a series of various activities during which writers “shuttled” back and forth between activities.

Writing instruction has been intertwined with the development of theories about writers’ processes (Boscolo, 2008; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006), not only because the theory emerged from reflective practice, but also because these theories suggested writing instruction should be embedded throughout the process. Murray (2003) claimed, “When we teach composition, we are not
teaching a product, we are teaching process” (p. 3–4). Instructional practices such as freewriting, peer response groups, and teacher conferences are all associated with this recursive stage model of writing processes. The writing workshop approach also grew out of this focus on writers’ processes (Calkins, 1983).

During this same time, a resonant wave of theorizing this dimension as a process of personal discovery was washing ashore. Arguing that formalist approaches, which emphasized form and correctness in the written product, were fundamentally flawed, Elbow (1973) suggested that writing is a learning transaction in which the writer discovers and learns as they write. Referred to as “expressionists” or “progressives,” scholars in this wave advocated that students write about personal experiences in order to discover understandings of the world. This expressionist wave was marked by an emergence of the idea of personal “voice” in writing, and foregrounded imagination, experimentation, and creativity as fundamental to writing. It was argued that these attributes should be advocated for in the writing done in schools (Coles, 1967). This wave focused on the constructivist and transactional notions of learning through the processes of writing (Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983). For instance, Macrorie’s (1988) I-Search Paper approach suggested that writing extended well beyond the immediate processes of inscribing text, and that writing in school should engage students in inquiring into the contexts of phenomena through questioning.

Another wave in this dimension focused on the cognitive processes of text production. Both Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Flower and Hayes (1981) constructed models of the cognitive processes a writer engages in as they are writing, which have had great uptake in the field since they were introduced (McCutch, Teske, & Bankston, 2008). Since Bereiter and Scardamalia’s models have been briefly reviewed in the introduction, here I will provide an overview of Flower and Hayes’s (1981) more fine-grained model that depicted composition as a goal-driven distinct series of cognitive processes. Their model presented four overarching, highly embedded cognitive processes involving Task Environment, Writing Processes, Long-term Memory, and Monitoring. Each of these processes involved embedded sub-processes. For instance, within Writing Processes, they identified three sub-processes—planning, translating, and reviewing—and each of these processes had sub-processes of their own. Planning involved processes of generating, organizing, and goal setting, and reviewing involved processes of evaluating and revising. Comparing the results of several think-aloud studies of adults and young children, they theorized that a sign of development in writing was having more conscious control of these processes, and they argued that metacognitive handling of writing processes was a key and learnable aspect of this dimension.

Across these three waves, writers’ processes can be characterized generally as a problem-solving “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process[es] whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). Historically speaking, the turn to foregrounding writers’ processes marked a radical shift from decontextualized, formalist depictions of writing to more dynamic and relational theorization, including focus on writers’ voices, interests, strategies, and approaches. However, the writing instruction that stemmed from these waves of theory building has not come without critique. Delpit (1988) argued that the heavy emphasis on personal discovery processes to the exclusion of discursive study and practice in conventional academic forms creates an instructional imbalance that leaves youth already marginalized in society and schooling at a further disadvantage in gaining access to the “culture of power” (p. 282). She explained, “In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit” (p. 287). The instructional approaches for supporting writers through the recursive processes of writing have continued to be questioned for not yet proving to be effective in consistently delivering quality written products (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Others have argued that merely
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facilitating writers’ otherwise “naturally” occurring processes is insufficient writing instruction (Applebee, 1986; Hillocks, 1986). Instead, Hillocks (2008) argued for an environmental (or structured; see Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn & McCann, 2010) instructional approach in which teachers balance attentiveness to the students, materials, activities, and task through a mix of small and large group inquiry.

A Practices Dimension

The waves of theory building focused on the processes dimension in the 1960s to 1970s—specifically on the work that began to ask about aspects beyond the immediate end product or process of text production—were influential in drawing focus to a writing dimension in which writers’ sociocultural practices, and historical and contextual positioning and power relations in writing, were theorized (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993). However, attention to the social nature of writing had been brewing for some time before these swells. In the 1930s, the National Council of Teachers of English developed a Dewey-inspired Experience Curriculum in English, which suggested that writing experiences “are never limited solely to language; they are always social contacts” (Hatfield, 1935, p. 136). This curriculum encouraged teachers to position their teaching and themselves alongside students as they were engaged in their writing process, and to look at students’ lives outside of school to inspire connections and relevance in teaching. These imperatives for writing instruction were repeated at the Dartmouth Conference of the 1960s that brought together expert representatives from English-speaking countries to map out theoretically attuned guidance for English curricula. Dixon (1967) summarized some of these findings, which were rooted in a developmental perspective on learning as socially constructed and included a call for more exploratory talk and writing in classrooms, equal emphasis on writing process as to written products, and opportunities to write about personal experiences outside the classroom.

Since this time, waves of theory in this dimension have described writing practices as dialogic, using a metaphor of writing as a conversation (McCarthy, 2007). This metaphor refers to the immediate “conversations” of literacy practice as a mediator of thinking (Vygotsky, 1986), as well as the broader exchanges of a person and their social environments (LeFevre, 1987), and broader still, the histories of practices that have come before (Bakhtin, 1986; Voloshinov, 1973) and which are reanimated or remediated (Prior & Hengst, 2010; Wertsch, 1991) at each composed utterance. Prior (1998, 2006) uses the terms dispersed and distributed to point to these longer socio-historical chains of influence that writing entails. He further suggests that given writing’s “confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling as well as transcribing words” (p. xi) that an appropriate unit of focus in writing is literacy activity, or embodied, mediated, dialogic, semiotic practice (Prior, 2017; see also Agha, 2007; Witte, 1992).

Understanding writing as literacy practice means situating it in and across contexts as an inherently “social act” (Shaughnessy, 1977), and not just a rhetorical or grammatical exercise. As social practice, writers’ activities, including their products and processes, position them in relation to others and in varying forms of participation in and across contexts (Kwok, Ganding, Hull, & Moje, 2016). Dyson’s (e.g. 1993) work in the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on young children’s writing development—highlighting their linguistically diverse repertoires and use of pop culture in everyday literacy activity—exemplifies this wave of theory building around the practices of writing as socially and contextually situated, historically rendered, and playing out through relationships and power hierarchies. This work is also historically significant to the field of writing studies as it marked scholarly attentiveness to the writing practices of young children, and the research and theory that could extend from a sociocultural approach. Boscolo (2008) explains that though “emergent literacy” was a phrase used in the 1960s (i.e., Clay, 1967), interest in instructional activities to guide children’s writing development did not spark until the 1970s. However, since that
time, pedagogies that focus on particular students and their development in the form of child study have remained popular (Carini, 1986; Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Rowe, 1994), and are a promising form of instruction that humanizes the developing writer in relation to multiple sociocultural aspects (Schultz, 2003).

Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon (2006, p. 10) explain that the practice dimension is held by three theoretical presuppositions (paraphrased here with key references for each): (1) Writing is essentially social in a historical sense, in that “vocabulary, style, and voice are all an outcome of prior language use,” either the writers’ or others’ verbal and written discourse (e.g. Voloshinov, 1973); (2) Writing is ideological, meaning it is “unavoidably bound up in” perpetuating or denouncing particular values and beliefs (e.g. Street, 1984); (3) Writing is constitutive, meaning it is sociogenetic material involved in the “creation, organization, and continuing development” of societies (e.g. Cole, 1996) and individuals’ identities (e.g. Compton-Lilly, 2014; Ivančić, 1998). Further, Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon (2006) add that writing practices position people in relation to others relative to “physically apparent or culturally constructed” differences that “critically affect the way we frame our experiences and encounters with others, and the way we are framed by others as we enter new contexts” (p. 14). For such reasons, Winn and Johnson (2011) argue for a culturally relevant and sustaining (Ladson-Billings, 2014) writing pedagogy in which students interrogate and act on social and political issues and ideologies at play in their lives.

Waves of theory building have keyed into writing practice as a form of identity work. Lewis and del Valle (2008) identified three of these waves—one in the 1970s and 1980s when identity was predominantly framed as a stable set of personal characteristics, followed by a wave in the 1990s through 2000s when identities were often discussed as negotiated and performed through practices. A current wave emphasizes the creative labor of writers in mediating hybrid, dynamic identities in response to their lives (Muhammad, 2015). In this wave, Yagelski (2011) argues for seeing writing ontologically as a way of being, of sensing the self and others through and during the writing experience. Centering American Indian philosophy, Arola (2017) argues for conceptualizations of composing as culturing, a term she draws from Ojibwemowin language in which “there is no static noun for being Ojibwe, but there is a sense of culture-ing as Ojibwe” (p. 279, italics in original). In this sense, composing, identities, and cultures are mutually constituted within active production during which “There is no authentic self who produces original works, instead there are writers who exist in relation to one another, draw from one another, and produce within ecologies of meaning” (p. 280). Indigenous rhetorics, she argues, imply ethics of care, empathy, and reflexivity attuned to others as one writes, remixes, and composes. In an era marked by rapid acceleration in the means to digitally compose and distribute writing, Hull and Stornaiuolo (2010) similarly theorize that writers’ self- and other-work are aesthetic engagements that involve ethical and moral responsibilities to others in a globally networked world. Scholars drawing from queer theory (Alexander & Gibson, 2004) also position writing as self and other praxis, in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) writers counter dominant narratives and normative discourses, connect with others, and compose to cope (Wargo, 2017) through what Pritchard (2017) theorizes (drawing also from Black and feminist theory) are restorative literacy practices of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, the prefix socio- began to append many of the terms used in each of writing’s dimensions, e.g. sociolinguistics (Halliday, 1973; Smitherman, 1977), sociocognitive (Scribner & Cole, 1981). The centrality of social practice was a key conclusion from multiple investigations into writing, its development, and its instruction by the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy (1985–1995; Freedman, Flower, Hull, & Hayes, 1995). Beck (2009) posited that social practice integrates product and cognitive process dimensions, arguing it could be seen more of a descriptive term about, rather than a dimension of writing. Scholarship focused on genre, for instance, took a social turn (Bazerman, Bonini, & Figueiredo, 2009; Miller, 1984), making discussions of a product’s genre indistinguishable from its mutually constitutive sociocultural practices.
Rather than a separate dimension then, many theorize that each dimension of writing is inherently and thoroughly social (Gee, 2013; Prior, 2006).

**A Pathways Dimension**

Waves of theory building within a fourth *pathways* dimension have been co-currently emerging with and from the scholarship articulating writing as social practice. This dimension entails writing’s dynamic ecologies or systems and mobilities, including its writer and their practices, as well as modalities, materials, and meanings (Nordquist, 2017; Stornaiuolo, Smith & Phillips, 2017). Whereas work in articulating the dimension of writing practices focused on the contexts in which writing takes place (Dryer, 2017), theory building in the pathways dimension troubles the concept of *contexts* as singular, bounded social spaces. Likewise, drawing from longitudinal studies of youths’ writing development, Compton-Lilly (2014) theorizes that like spaces, the times and temporalities of writing are elastic as “the word, the self, and the world are created as remembered pasts and anticipated futures are enacted in literacy activity” (p. 41; see also Freire, 1970). Dyson (2007) challenges researchers and practitioners alike to consider writing contexts as nexuses of human interaction in which the “configurations of shared practices—their selves develop” (p. 116). Pennycook (2010) further argues that the concept of “shared practice” is itself an illusion of repetition rather than sedimented systemization and, drawing from Massey (1991), suggests that mobilities are essential for human life biologically and socially.

In these ways, this wave directs attention to writing as an aspect of dynamic, sociomaterial systems. From literacy studies (Barton, 2007) to writing studies (Dobrin, 2012), an ecological perspective on writing has been building. Though it has not yet been widely embraced in policy and instructional practice, Alvermann and Robinson (2017) argue that there has been a recurrent theme in writing ecologies theory over three decades on the interdependencies of the dimensions of writing, other activity, and the lives of the individuals who are writing. A humanizing writing ecologies approach, they further argue, calls for an intersectional approach (Núñez, 2014) to understanding the inequitable systemic forces at play in these interdependencies.

Similar to a practices dimension, when attending to literacies’ movements and mobilities, social power dynamics and the unequal and potentially inequitable movement of some messages, materials, practices, people, and modes over others are highlighted. Just as some writing practices, processes, and products are valued and supported in their capacity to transform from one space and time to another, others are held immobile—a phenomenon Lorimer Leonard (2013) calls the “paradox of mobility.” Articulating a critical pedagogy of transliteracies that addresses these paradoxes, Smith, Stornaiuolo, and Phillips (2018) suggest three “pedagogical moves” for teachers taking up a critical orientation in writing instruction to make literacies’ pathways dimension explicit: designing for emergence, practicing relational reflexivity, and surfacing critical lenses.

Attention to writing’s pathways has been influenced, in part, by the distinctly interconnected nature of the modern era, marked by social and cultural global flows of information, people, resources, and media (Appadurai, 1996), and by rapid acceleration of socio-technological change, which has, in turn, heightened awareness of the media, modes, and materialities of writing. Though multimodality is not new to writing or writing instruction (Palmeri, 2012), the proliferation of digital technologies used with and for multimodal and multimedia composition has accentuated the urgency for writing instruction to extend beyond alphabetic text. Banks (2011) admonished, however, that uncritical acceptance of traditional print-based writing instruction practices applied to digital multimedia could perpetuate and exacerbate long-standing inequalities. This wave of theory building also draws renewed attention to the tools and objects of writing. From the motor activities of the body (eyes, hands, body position) in composing that have changed as writing utensils have evolved from primarily pen and paper to keyboard, touch screens, and currently, mobile technologies (Haas,
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1995), theory building in writing’s pathways dimension point to the more-than-human interactions of writing (Ehret, this volume; Micciche, 2014).

A current wave of theory building across disciplines has thus focused on transmodality or semiotic mobility. Newfield (2015) explains, “The point of tracing the transmodal sequences of meaning-makers—of tracing the routes along which their representations migrate and mutate—is to show how their ideas are formed, developed and change, in other words, how their literacy practices are semiotically mobile” (p. 267). Drawing from scholars who advocated for a repertoire approach in translanguaging writing instruction, Shipka (2016) called for instructional attention to compositional fluency, or as Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur (2011) suggested “deftness in deploying a broad and diverse repertoire of language resources, and responsiveness to the diverse range of readers’ social positions and ideological perspectives” (p. 308; see also Horner, Lockridge, & Selfe, 2015).

In a wave from the field of digital rhetoric, the theoretical apparatus electracy has surfaced as post-process pedagogy focused on the everyday collaborative social action of digital composing (Arroyo, 2005; Ulmer, 2003). Morey (2016) explains, “Metaphorically, electracy breaks from ‘digital literacy,’ as the latter term retrofits a prior logic (literacy) onto a new technology, a logic that was designed for an older technology (alphabetic writing)” (p. 2). Smith and Wargo (2017) argue that electracy critically attunes writing pedagogy to the embodied, multimodal, sociomaterial writing experience as mobile praxis. Across these waves of theory building in writing’s pathways dimension, writing development is located with the individual as entangled with sociomaterial encounters—they themselves developing—moving across dynamic contexts.

Caveats for Describing Writing as Multidimensional

I have described theory building in writing as waves of focus on particular dimensions of writing; however, there are two caveats to describing them as such. First, it may be that describing writing as multidimensional, and telling this history of theory building as waves of focus in these dimensions, may in fact perpetuate the false notion that writing’s dimensions could or should be approached either in instruction or in research as separate. Instead, as theorized across waves, many scholars are calling for the synthesis of these dimensions (Bazerman et al., 2017), explaining that they coexist no matter the dimension of focus or emphasis (Prior & Thorne, 2014). The implication for writing instruction of this “everything and the kitchen sink” call from theorists is that rather than focusing on isolated or discrete activities, instructional approaches must take on writing as complex activity.

Second, this history of theory building is representative yet only partial—not comprehensive. It depicts writing and its history only as gleaned selectively from statements published in journals, reports, and books within academia that have been distributed and taken up broadly in the field. With publication pressures, support structures, and monetary incentives for knowledge generation in the form of publication, much of this history has taken place in university settings by researchers who may or may not have worked with younger populations in educational spaces. Theories of writing and its instruction that stem from K–12 educators and are disseminated in practitioner journals simply do not entertain the same reception and uptake in academia, and generations of writing and instruction in community practice and outside of schools go without representation in academia (except when in partnership with scholars at universities, such as Kinloch, 2009; Larson & Moses, 2018). Further, it is consequential that too often the work of scholars of color or work that centers on youth of color has been and is underrepresented in these histories, including this one. This is due to many reasons, including the historical and perpetuated underrepresentation of scholars and teachers of color in education (Haddix, 2017; Turner, Haddix, Gort & Bauer, 2017). There is also a tendency when work centering youth of color is included that it is framed as a boutique perspective reserved for sections on identity or linguistic “diversity.”
Transdisciplinary waves of writing theory are tightly intertwined with conceptions of writing development. It is worth reviewing these conceptions in order to reiterate a few theoretical disjunctures between theories of writing development and the assessment and curriculum regimes that guide writing instruction in schools. Recently, a collective of scholars whose scholarship in writing punctuates the history above, Bazerman, Applebee, Berninger, Brandt, Graham, Matsuda, Murphy, Rowe, and Schleppegrell (2017), engaged in years of discussions to map out a multidimensional approach to writing development. Working across fields of study, they articulated eight principles for understanding writing development across a person’s lifespan. These principles are useful as succinct theoretical guideposts:

1. Writing develops across the lifespan as part of changing contexts.
2. Writing development is complex because writing is complex.
3. Writing development is variable; there is no single path and no single end point.
4. Writers develop in relation to the changing social needs, opportunities, resources, and technologies of their time and place.
5. The development of writing depends on the development, redirection, and specialized reconfiguring of general functions, processes, and tools.
6. Writing and other forms of development have reciprocal and mutually supporting relationships.
7. To understand how writing develops across the lifespan, educators need to recognize the different ways language resources can be used to present meaning in written text.
8. Curriculum plays a significant and formative role in writing development.

A dynamic, emergent, relational, multidimensional understanding of writing development, as these scholars depict, differs widely from common approaches to measuring growth and mandating instructional practice. As theories of writing and its development are translated to teaching, “development” is often reduced to an idealized, prescriptive, linear trajectory on a teleological scale of written product quality indexed by age or grade level, and set at a steady pace that can be communicated and regulated with policy and assessment oversight. However, modeling writing development as a simple, mechanistic trajectory of product quality across time is not reflective of the waves of theory building across dimensions and fields of study. For instance, in describing their third principle, “Writing development is variable; there is no single path and no single end point,” Bazerman et al. (2017) note, “Individuals’ developmental trajectories are marked by normal variation in the pacing and sequence of learning, and by both forward movement and ‘backward transitions,’ where writers use less sophisticated strategies in more difficult tasks or unfamiliar social situations” p. 355. Rather than a “closed system” in which linear trends in writers’ products are idealized and predetermined (Anson, 2008), what is needed in assessment and curriculum is a theorization of writing development that accounts for multiple dimensions—inclusive of writing’s processes, practices, and pathways and their complex, dynamic, emergent relations.

To make this shift, Andrews and Smith (2011) argue that new conceptual metaphors for development are needed. Ecological metaphors seem to be well suited (or harmonious; Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, & Papper, 2008) to conceiving of the emergent, relational, multidimensional, complex nature of writing development. Wardle and Roozen (2012) suggest that an ecological perspective on writing development can integrate the “vertical” or linear models of development within a single context or genre with the “horizontal” or breadth of literate lives. This would include interactions, activity, and materials not traditionally assumed to be involved in writing (Kell, 2009), but which theory in the writing pathways dimension surface. Smidt (2009) situates an ecological metaphor for writing development in Bakhtinian (1986) dialogics, which draws attention to the
multiple historical relations at play when a writer is writing. An ecological metaphor is promising particularly due to its coherence to the waves of theoretical work in the practices and pathways dimensions of writing that depict writing and its development as a complex, emergent, multidimensional, relational, and dynamic phenomenon.

**The Undertow: Persistent Problems in Assessment and Curriculum**

Depictions of writing development as ecological run counter to the typical ways writing has been assigned and assessed in K–12 schooling. The evaluation of written products, and more specifically, single written products with tightly constricted parameters, frequently stands in proxy for other dimensions of writing (i.e., 46 out of 50 U.S. states assess writing using single, on-demand essays; Behizadeh & Pang, 2016). The development of a writer is charted in retrospect as a comparison of previously written products—either the students’ own or against other students’ or adults’ prepared “exemplar” written products. When a written product or set of characteristics of a written product are positioned at the end of a teleological scale, it sets youths’ written products in perpetual deficit to an idealized, and frankly imaginary, form. This perpetuates problematic assumptions about writing development, and the aims and approaches of writing instruction. As Andrews and Smith (2011) articulate:

> It assumes that successful communication can be predetermined by those outside of the intended audience. Even more basic, it is assumed that these single pieces—or in the case of portfolios, a set of written products—can determine writing ability. Performance on one task is assumed to be representative of typical current performance, as well as predictive of future performances. . . . It is also assumed that individuals can and should be assessed in isolation from others, and that writing is always a solitary activity. Finally, when these isolated performances or measurements of discrete skills are compared against each other by age group, they are described as if they measure development of writing—not just performance. Comparisons are simply not development.

(p. 170)

Many other disconnects between theory and assessment practice can be added to this list, including the dominance of print text in these assessments as a sole indicator of composition, as well as the complete occlusion of the product to any other dimension of writing, including processes, practices, and pathways. The influential ways young people develop as writers through play (Medina & Wohlwend, 2016); digital composing with family (Lewis, 2014); counternarration and “bending” racist, xenophobic, sexist, and gender binaries (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016); and participatory politics (Soep, 2014) remain outside the scope of these limited assessment schemes.

By attending to a single dimension in such a limited fashion, current assessment regimes are not guided by the rich theoretical histories charted in this chapter. Dixon (2010) argued that theoretical work on writing development was essentially “shut down” in the 1990s after the imposition of staged “progression” models in high-stakes testing regimes: “Fatally, the teacher’s goal of finding optimal conditions . . . for developing writers was pushed aside, in the interests of setting national tests” (p. 4). Using a historical analysis of written assessment from the 1900s forward, Behizadeh and Engelhard (2011) found that psychometrics and measurement theory, more so than writing theory, have guided the conception and deployment of writing assessments. Likewise, Huot and Neal (2006) argue that advancing technologies have also driven writing assessment with increasing attention on measurements’ reliability through automating decontextualized norming protocols. This overemphasis on reliability in the pursuit of “objectivity,” they explain, usurps validity as writing assessments have become more increasingly at odds with writing theory. Further, particularly in terms of how writing assessments are used as gatekeepers for enrollment, placement, and
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promotion, and historically have been used to disenfranchise people politically and socially along racial, language, and gender lines (Inoue, 2015), the issue of assessment validity moves beyond a concern of measurement quality and fairness to one of social justice (Poe & Inoue, 2016). Looking beyond products to the multidimensional ecologies of writing development, argued Yancey (2009), would finally pivot writing instruction “beyond an obsessive attention to form and beyond writing as testing; it points us toward creating the fully articulated research base, the theories of composing, and the planned curriculum that have been missing from composition and instruction for over a hundred years” (p. 7–8).

Alternatives to single written product evaluations, normed rubrics, and teleological scales exist. Employing ecological theories of writing development, these alternatives are inclusive of writing’s multiple dimensions and their interrelations. Since the 1980s, many scholars point to portfolios as one theoretically resonant assessment method (Yancey, 1999), but not as repositories for written products—rather, as reflective curated sets of artifacts across which assessors (teachers, students, family, and community together) think ethnographically and longitudinally (Wardle & Roozen, 2012) to descriptively and/or visually articulate the developing multidimensional repertoire (Andrews & Smith, 2011) of their growing rhetorical dexterity (Carter, 2008). In addition to attending to the characteristics of written products, students’ writing processes, practices, and pathways are represented and traced (Wynhoff Olsen, VanDerHeide, Goff, & Dunn, 2017), including the (im)mobilities and fluencies of the writer in relation to the many sites they find themselves traveling across (Anson, 2008). Inoue (2015) theorizes that more just and anti-racist ecological assessment frameworks engage students in interrogating their writing ecologies to gain fuller understanding of their conditions of assessment. Suggesting that students need to be granted the power to participate in their assessment, Inoue suggests grading contracts as another assessment method resonant with writing ecologies theory.

In much the same way, many curricular mandates that guide writing instruction are incoherent with theories of writing development. In order to mandate curriculum, standards must be limited to teaching practices that can be implemented with fidelity across an entire school system. In an era obsessed with standardizing curriculum in this way, scaling ecological writing theory to a statewide or national sphere is problematic. Aspects from across writing’s dimensions—such as self-discovery through writers’ processes, and uptake (or not) of writing practices across settings—cannot be reliably regulated across classrooms, schools, districts, and so on. Thus, these components of writing dimensions are simply absent from curricular standards.

In the place of complex, ecological theorizations of writing development, many writing curricula borrow constructs from cognitive psychology. This has continued to be a popular and problematic approach to creating developmental schemes for writing. The developmental sequence of the U.S. Common Core Curriculum in Writing, for instance, rather than rooted in writing or rhetorical theory (Andrews & Smith, 2011; Rives & Wynhoff Olsen, 2015), can be seen as an application of a gradual release of responsibility type model, but stretched across the grades. In kindergarten, for example, students are asked to write “with guidance and support from adults.” In second grade, “peers” are added to this phrase. By sixth grade, however, students’ writing is supposed to involve only “some” guidance and support from others. By ninth grade “guidance and support” are taken completely from the standard. Such developmental schemes imply that a mature writer is one who composes in isolation; however, as the waves of theory building in the social practices dimension emphasize, writing inherently evokes engagement with others regardless of the age or development of the writer.

Murray (1968) argued that it was an all too common myth that a student’s grade level should be associated with differing expectations in the parameters of a written product, engagement in a process, or type of social practice, explaining, “[It is a] fallacy that there is a group of writing problems peculiar to the tenth grade, the seventh grade or the twelfth grade” (p. 107). Echoing this sentiment, Bazerman et al. (2017) raised the challenge that in regard to the contemporary accountability and
standards movement, “[S]pecifying benchmarks to be achieved and assessed at particular points in primary and secondary education has *de facto* formulated developmental objectives, even though these may not be grounded in research or an informed model of writing development. It has not even been determined whether broad-scale assessments based on the standards can be warranted by developmental research” (p. 325).

**Impacts on Writing Instruction**

The relationship between articulated theories of writing, its development, and instruction, and the tacit, everyday working theories of classroom teachers is a tenuous one (Andrews & Smith, 2011). When given time and space to reflect on their writing instruction in relation to their students’ writing products, processes, practices, and pathways, teachers often trace multiple, and even conflicting, theoretical influences to their pedagogical practice (Handsfield, 2016; McCutcheon, Woodard, & Kang, 2014). Policy and assessment regimes play a role in this, and act as a double-edged sword. They authoritatively communicate depictions of writing, development, and instruction modeled after linear, teleological developmental schemes with limited coherence to the theories discussed in this chapter. And at the same time, when teachers are required to enact these prescribed curricula—under pressure to have students produce decontextualized written products that cohere to a limited definition of quality—they tacitly build rationales for the action they are compelled to take. This phenomenon contributes to perpetuating instructional approaches misaligned to writing theory. New instructional practices or approaches can end up being put into practice within atheoretical frameworks—stripping the approach of its theoretical coherence (Whitney et al., 2008).

Take, for example, writing's processes dimension. Following the initial waves of theoretical work in the 1970s articulating writers’ processes, Graves (1984) bemoaned that he was seeing “a sudden epidemic of orthodoxies” about writing’s processes being perpetuated in pedagogical uptakes. He reflected later: “Artful response, listening, flexibility in decision-making, were replaced by attempts to regularize the process. I once overheard one teacher comment to another, ‘Do you use the five-step or the seven-step Graves?’ Writing theory was bypassed for brainstorming on Monday, writing leads on Tuesday, churning out a first draft on Wednesday, revising on Thursday, and publishing the final copy on Friday” (2004, p. 90). Jacobson (2015) has traced how a similarly regimented writing process is being perpetuated further in the implementation of the U.S. Common Core State Standards. Although linear, prescriptive curricular guides standardize instruction and lend a sense of control in a large, complicated educational infrastructure, they are simply not sufficient models of the development of a writer’s products, processes, practices, and pathways (Dyson, 2013). Further, in use, they can contribute to perpetuating education’s well-oiled deficit framework (Stevens, 2008).

If we hope to see coherent uptake of writing and development theory into practice, teachers need time and support (Locke, 2015) to engage in reflective practice, particularly regarding the interaction of mandated or “vertical” aspects of writing along with “horizontal” pathways of their students’ and their own writing ecologies (Gutiérrez, 2008; Wardle & Roozen, 2012). Given the historical trend of emphasis on reading over writing in K-12 settings, and a lack of professional development and curricular and pedagogical resources for writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008), it cannot be assumed that efforts directed at “literacy” are supporting teachers in these forms of reflective practice in writing instruction. Drawing on a meta-analysis of studies looking at the relationship between a teacher’s personal writing life and instructional impact, Cremin and Oliver (2017) have found teachers citing this intersection as a particular area of struggle and tension, with teachers repeatedly reporting low self-confidence in writing, negative writing histories, and limited ideas of what counts as writing. However, professional development dedicated to writing instruction that engages teachers in immersive writing workshops (Gardner, 2014), creative writing groups (Woodard, 2015), and/or
reflective writing instruction groups, such as the National Writing Project (Whitney et al., 2008), has been shown to support teachers in reframing their epistemological stances toward writing, particularly in recognizing writing’s dynamic processes, social practices, and negotiated pathways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed several modern waves of theory building in relation with their instructional implications, focusing on four mutually constitutive and dynamic dimensions of writing: products, processes, practices, and pathways. Although written products have been dominant in discussions of writing instruction, research, and assessment, the history of writing theory has bent toward more holistic, ecological understandings of writing and its development as complex, multidimensional, relational, dynamic, and driven by human desire. As theory has developed across dimensions, humanizing instructional approaches (Bartolomé, 1994) have been washing ashore. Humanizing approaches focus on the developing writer and their practices and pathways across writing ecologies, and are contrasted with instruction directed solely on the developing writing (whether that be the written product or process). These approaches have been long called for and requested anew in each dimension and wave of theory building—and most recently reiterated in the NCTE’s report Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing (2016).

I have also reviewed theoretically starved educational assessment and curricular mandates regarding writing and writing instruction that have had a long history of being ill fit to ecological and humanizing understandings of writing and its development. Like an ocean’s undertow, regimes of assessment and curriculum have historically pulled against the waves of theory that have been building across dimensions of writing. If more just, ecological approaches were taken up in assessment frameworks and curricular mandates, however, the written product might finally be decentered from its domineering position. In its place, as Hatfield (1935) so long ago argued for, writing instruction would be situated as an activity that happens alongside writers as they navigate their writing processes and pathways and grow their repertoire of practices and rhetorical dexterity. Taking up writing in its complexity does not mean product characteristics would be ignored, but rather, instead of primarily directing instruction at the developing written product, developing writers would become central. In this humanizing endeavor, the dignity of a developing writer, and the culturing work of their writing are foregrounded over mechanics and “mistakes.” In looking both at and beyond products and processes, the larger writing ecology can come into view and instructors can participate in critical engagement with youth in regard to their practices as they navigate their multiple and divergent writing pathways.

Note


References

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