

Chapter 32. Looking Backward and Writing Forward

What Has this Story Told Us?

My development as a writer was influenced by many factors—distant, proximate, and internal. Biological and cultural evolution first of all made possible for me to develop as a writing human. With no major discernible genetic biological anomalies and no major bodily accidents affecting my capacity for learning literacy, the particularities of my trajectory of writing development depended on my interaction with the particular time and place I have lived within cultural, political, social, ethnic, and economic history, with all its distinctions, opportunities, resources, and obstacles.

Each life poses a set of problems to the growing person, influencing how they will address the conditions of their life, how they will understand the relations and communications with others, how they will be motivated, and what opportunities they will pursue. For me, many of my challenges and motives led me to writing as a way to pursue and satisfy my needs. A particularly important set of needs was to understand much of the world and relations in terms I could accept, as I found so much confusing and problematic in the people I grew up among. I felt I had to make my own sense of the world and to learn to evaluate skeptically perspectives offered by others, whether in my immediate family or the writers I was to read later. Writing became a major tool to sort these things out and discover more of the world. In turn, writing itself became one of the puzzling things I felt a need to learn more about, to pursue my own growth and the growth of my students. As I pursued these ends, I came to see that understanding writing was the way I could most contribute to our communal life and the human experiment, thereby finding meaning in my own life.

My reactions to my family, school, community, and institutional life motivated my dispositions, stances, strategies, and meanings expressed through my writing. In the early chapters of this book, I have recounted the formative conditions and my reactions to them, but these social motives and dispositions accompanied me throughout my life. As my life became more focused on schooling and the academy, academic contexts with their histories, practices, and evolving conditions became increasingly defining of the problems and ambitions through which I developed as a writer. As I gained some success in the academic world through my writing, my writing started to reach beyond the classrooms of the educational institutions I enrolled in or was employed by. This then created opportunities to engage more widely, but never that far outside an academic world.

Throughout this process, skills, techniques, and tricks I learned earlier returned, sometimes in expected and other times in surprising ways. Of course,

early technical matters of letter formation, spelling, grammar, and syntax were foundational and recurrently used, but so were recognition of the importance of meaning, awareness of communicative effect and responsiveness to audience, even though the kinds of meanings, the communicative effects, and audiences changed and became more distant, requiring more subtle understanding and analysis. Also continuing throughout my writing life was reporting about the world (material, social, textual, personal) I experienced; facts I was engaging with; and reused words, phrasing, and genres, even though the extent and my awareness of them grew. Learning that writing had consequences and could influence others and my own understanding also started early but kept growing and ramifying.

Less expectedly, devices and techniques learned in one place could turn up in very different places. Abductive leaps, for example, practiced on the high school math team that helped me to solve obscure puzzles set the stage for flashes of insight in writing, whether for poems, understanding the shape and force of literary texts, seeing the connection of different theories and pieces of evidence to give rise to a new concept, or having sudden visions of the organization of major projects. Of course, the abductive intuitions needed to be worked through and validated by mathematical or textual reasoning, but the trust in their potential gave me confidence to work out whether they could be validated. In another example, the use of the icon, which I first remember learning explicitly about in an undergraduate course on Chaucer, but rested on earlier experiences noticing significant details in texts, became transformed in papers for other courses into considering dramatic scenes, particular poems and lines, and descriptions of buildings as iconic for analysis of authors' thinking. This use of the iconic later turned up in examining scientific texts and disciplinary cultures. This story is rife with many other examples of this sort, of devices and processes of writing turning up far from their initial site of use, discovery, or invention.

Another thing I notice in reviewing this manuscript is how at different moments I latched onto certain phrases, poetic and literary lines, quotations attributed to scientists, or even geometric models to sum up my current state of mind, to identify a stance toward my work, and to guide my future thinking and writing. Composed phrases stayed with me as cornerstones of my consciousness. These odd examples of how transfer happens indicate the complex and idiosyncratic ways that lessons are learned and are carried forth to new settings and projects.

These details of remembered lines, moments of intuitive insight, techniques and devices that recur in unexpected places are also indicative of a larger theme emerging in this narrative. Once I had learned the basic tools of literacy, composing text and composing my consciousness were intertwined, whether from the early jokes I told myself and stories I wrote in class to my young adult search for meaning and a habitable place in this world; from my reaching out to students in my professional life to my years of research and my late career musing on theory. These motives were enacted through text production. Texts were composed from impulses and meanings arising in consciousness. What texts to compose, how to

compose them, and what I could say in them possessed my mind. Phrases, text structures, chains of reasoning floated in my head and stayed with me after texts were complete and submitted to instructors or journals. Writing was a way of growing my mind, just as the growth of my mind was realized in the texts I wrote.

As with the authors I discussed in Chapter 21, as well, I found that my changing view of the social worlds I was engaging with and my experiences in communicating in those worlds informed and changed my evolving ways of writing and framing of writing projects. Part of this was broadening contact with more worlds as I took on different roles (moving, for example, from the role of student to role of teacher) and as I moved through different institutions and social groups (up the levels of schooling, engaging with different disciplines, or developing international experiences). But part of it was a deepening of my understanding of whichever context I engaged in; for example, appreciating disciplinary genres and how those genres fit within disciplinary activity systems opened up the kinds of choices I was able to make using those genres. So in a very real sense the communicative world I wrote to at one time would be substantially different than at some previous date, because my perception and understanding of that world changed in addition to any evolution that would have occurred in that world apart from my perception of it. Practicing, teaching, and studying writing changed the writing goals I set for myself and the ways I attempted to realize them.

I said earlier in this book that I started to save my writing to follow the change of my thinking, but in writing this book I used those texts to examine what I was learning about writing. By learning to write those texts, however, I also was also learning to think the kinds of things they expressed and to reflect more comprehensively about the writing I was doing. In the end, I wound up thinking a lot about writing and came to look at much of the world around me through the analytic lens of what I have come to know about writing. As I said in the introduction, this would make a boring movie, of me sitting at a desk, looking around, thinking, and writing, then sending the resulting missives out into the world of teachers, publishers, colleagues, administrators. I have tried to understand that world and how texts move it well enough so that my missives and the missives of others I might influence as a teacher and a colleague might have some positive impact on it.

The Value of Good Luck and Making Good Bets

Luck has played a central role in my writing development. I grew up in a time and place with rapid economic growth from an already substantially middle-class, affluent society, though not equally shared by everyone. There were large numbers of opportunities, enough educational support, and rewards for those who performed well in the ways in which I was successful without the barriers some faced. Consequently, I could live a life of reasonable comfort, even when my family was economically strained or when I was scraping by in grad school and then anxiously looking for first jobs—giving me the opportunity to pursue my

interests, academic success, and writing endeavors. Although my family situation placed some difficulties and challenges in my early life and set up some difficult transitions, yet in the long run these transitions seemed to be productive for my writing development, motivation, and ultimately career success. Whether I would have been set on this pathway without those early challenges, or whether alternatively I might have moved more smoothly on this trajectory had my family situation been otherwise, I do not know. But not everyone who faced similar family difficulties has had such a positive outcome. That match between opportunities of my time and place, the accidents of programs and people I encountered, and my particular dispositions and emerging skills that allowed me to find my way, again has to be accounted to luck. I think the best that can be said for me is that I kept my eye out for opportunities, was realistic in my choices, and pursued them with energy, persistence, and guarded optimism.

My choices of commitments turned out to be remarkably lucky, as I entered the university at a time of growth. My commitment to writing education I initially accepted as being institutionally marginal and having major costs in academic rewards as I started my career, but I saw those costs recompensed by doing what I thought valuable. Over my working lifetime, however, the field has gained a degree of legitimacy and has developed a substantial research component which I could participate in and contribute to. My role in the growth of this emerging field brought me increasing economic comfort and leisure to pursue my research and writing with all the resources I needed. I also had good luck in the mentors I met within sponsoring institutional settings. Writing this account has helped me see more clearly all they did for me far above institutional expectations, and I am overwhelmed with gratitude. Even those whom I experienced negatively taught me the complexity of writing for others, and the consequences of these negative encounters were buffered by the luck of institutional settings. An occasional lowered grade, wounded feeling, or rejection by people whose good opinion I sought did not seriously impede my development. Such costs are miniscule compared to the high costs paid by many who have limited access to school; who suffer punitive, regressive schooling; who end schooling prematurely; who are ostracized from careers; or who are even imprisoned or disappeared for the views they put in writing. Although in my fantasies I may imagine how things might have been even better, I know how terribly things may have turned out if situations had been even slightly different.

Each writer's development is necessarily enacted within the contingencies, accidents, and luck—whether fortunate or unfortunate—in the person's life. As important as teaching any particular skill is, as teachers, our most important role may be creating the conditions within which people can advance their writing. We can form at least a small part of the luck of the developing writers we run into, helping them identify the opportunities before them, provide useful tools, and support them to build the strength and persistence to move forward.

Even more fundamentally, this story has reminded me that people's luck depends on the social and institutional conditions which provide obstacles and

opportunities to their development, writing development included. The existence of schools, cold war educational programs, universities, private foundations, and state funded scholarships all created the spaces in which I was able to learn and develop. Even the existence of private charitable summer camps and the establishment of the Head Start program in 1965 allowed me to have my first experiences working with young children as a counsellor and a teacher's assistant, which eventually were to lead to a career in writing education, inflecting all my writing development as an adult. Even the horrendous Vietnam War in constraining my choices to avoid participating, also directed me to the opportunities I pursued and to reconfirm political consciousness. At every step, choices, actions, and institutions made by others affected where, what, and how I wrote, and thus how I developed—even computer manufacturers in their product designs, timing of releases, availability, and prices. While this story has been told as a single person's journey, the space in which it happens is historical, social, and economic. Context is not just context, not just the wallpaper on the walls of the room; it is the room itself and what happens within it. If we are concerned with whether people develop to be skillful users of such a pervasively important personal, intellectual, social, civil, and economic tool as writing, we need rightfully to be concerned with all the conditions that make possible their luck and give them places to engage their efforts.

So What did I Learn Along the Way and How did These Things Describe a Trajectory of Development?

At different life epochs I had different uses for writing in response to the tasks others posed for me and the opportunities I came across. The writing tasks and opportunities had to do with the institutions and other activity systems I participated in, mostly educational and academic. Since in later years I was increasingly investigating or supporting the writing life of others, wider worlds fell into my view. While I brought with me all I had come to learn and practice in writing, yet each of these epochs posed new problems, inspiring me to reconceive what I had brought and to use it to new purposes. Each epoch as well brought new experiences and challenges that taught me new things about writing.

The following list summarizes leading activities in different periods in my life, as documented in the previous chapters. During each of these periods I worked on other aspects of writing, and I continued to work on and expand on themes foregrounded earlier. Nonetheless, the most challenging and novel problems changed as I moved through my writing development, as this list suggests.

- Learning tools and uses of written language—early schooling (Chapter 2)
- Developing ideas and knowledge—adolescence, college (Chapters 3, 5-13)
- Exploring my understanding of myself and the world to locate my place, values, and priorities—adolescence, college, graduate school (Chapter 4-13)
- Relating to others; sharing my experience, knowledge, and skills; writing

as communication—teaching, therapy, creative exploration (Chapters 10-15)

- Academic writing to advance practice and share mutually useful discoveries—writing about pedagogy, textbooks—early to mid-academic career (Chapters 16-18)
- Advancing knowledge for practice through systematic research: focus on questions, research sites, methods, evidence, argument; telling what I was finding in a compelling way—mid-academic career (Chapters 19-22)
- Explaining, elaborating and creating a coherent a vision of writing; developing theory—late career (Chapters 23-24)
- Addressing and supporting collectivities to advance knowledge, teaching, community—late career (Chapters 25-26, 30-31)
- Elaborating and researching issues to fill out my conceptual vision and open up possible issues for the field—late career (Chapters 27-31)

As the scope of my research and theoretical writing has expanded, I have become more aware of how that work contributes to the advancement of communal knowledge and culture. I have sought to support the development of new generations of writers by providing them additional tools to realize their writing motives and to understand what they can accomplish through writing.

Since I have come to see writing as so infrastructural to modern society, I have come to see writing education as crucial to the success of the human experiment, even as our future as a cooperative species hangs in the balance. How much writing can help create shared knowledge, coordinate cooperative endeavors, and advance mutual understanding is still an open question, perhaps even a quixotic hope, but that is the slim thread upon which I measure the value and accomplishment of my life. If we fail in the endeavor, a lot more will fail than my own self-image.

Where do I Go, We Go from Here?

So much of my life has been associated with the academy, it is hard to know what happens following my retirement in June 2022. I am no longer formally a student or a teacher. Everyone is a school dropout at some point, but some do it earlier, for some it takes completion of a degree to call it quits, and some of us keep hanging around as long as we can function. For me, it looks like it took 77 years to figure out how to drop out.

I don't know how many years are left to me, nor what the diminishing energies and waning capacities of old age will allow. I can accomplish ever fewer hours of productive work daily, and I can no longer work late into the night. During the daily periods when I can work, short term memory weakens and I am less able to hold complex structures in mind. Even reading complex texts requires more energy and I need to take more frequent breaks. All this means

that my projects are less likely to rely on extensive fresh research. I have had the good luck of greater scholarly longevity than most, but I can't go on forever, and aging inevitably takes its toll.

I have completed most of my commitments and promissory notes I made to myself and others. I have been shedding projects that require the energies and resources of younger people, as well as long horizons to complete ambitious things. My recent research and writing described in the last few chapters has been more to open up and advance topics for others to follow than for me to make much substantive progress on. Just as I stopped producing textbooks once I no longer taught first-year composition and I lost touch with the needs and interests of newer generations of entering undergraduates, I imagine losing touch with graduate students and attending fewer conferences will limit my imagination of what might be useful to accomplish. Yet still a few new ideas and projects might occur to me and I want to do what I can to support the continuing work of the field.

In the exploratory projects described in the last few chapters I have already identified the directions I see promising around the environment, technology, internationalism, and the use of data. Writing articles and studies is my way of seeing down paths, so I have no unspoken agendas for the field to share here. What others might see and pursue, I have little idea, because what they see will arise out of their experiences and visions. New ideas, perspectives, and materials to study through new methods are likely to emerge over time. I hope as well that growing knowledge in other fields devoted to understanding human life will intersect more fully and richly with writing studies because I see writing depending on a broad range of human capacities. In turn, writing has many consequences for other dimensions of human life, from our most internal self-regulation and consciousness to our largest networks of societal engagement, knowledge-making, coordination, and communal action. But exploring these intersections will depend on the interests and visions of new generations in writing studies and in other fields.

Then there are all the externalities that will direct the field's attentions and possibilities, whether educational policies, programs, and fundings; shifts in cultures, and national and international economies; or crises that reorient priorities. Technologies likely will continue to change rapidly, though it is easy to be entranced by immediate changes and miss the underlying continuities and deeper changes, likely to occur at the level of social organization. Crises of climate change and consequent pressures on food, immigration, national and international politics, and education, will likely put demands on writing and communication, but what those demands and uses of writing are unclear. All these will happen, inevitably, but it is hard to predict what will be most salient and determinative for writing.

What I am reminded of at this moment is Joseph Priestley's 1769 *A Chart of History*, which is a long fold-out timeline since the beginning of recorded time; it is perhaps the first published timeline. He left the last column blank for the reader to fill in as events would occur. Or as I realized standing outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968, we live in history and we make it by what we do.

