

Traditions of Writing Research

Edited by
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Traditions of Writing Research

Traditions of Writing Research reflects the different styles of work offered at the Writing Research Across Borders conference. Organized by Charles Bazerman, one of the pre-eminent scholars in writing studies, the conference brought together an unprecedented gathering of writing researchers. Representing the best of the works presented, this collection focuses solely on writing research, in its lifespan scope bringing together writing researchers interested in early childhood through adult writing practices. It brings together differing research traditions, and offers a broad international scope, with contributor-presenters including top international researchers in the field.

The volume's opening section presents writing research agendas from different regions and research groups. The next section addresses the national, political, and historical contexts that shape educational institutions and the writing initiatives developed there. The following sections represent a wide range of research approaches for investigating writing processes and practices in primary, secondary, and higher education. The volume ends with theoretical and methodological reflections.

This exemplary collection, like the conference that it grew out of, will bring new perspectives to the rich dialogue of contemporary research on writing and advance understanding of this complex and important human activity.

Preface

The work of writing researchers today crosses many geographic and disciplinary borders. Researchers who view writing as a complex human activity in Asia, Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and North America are increasingly working together and drawing upon each other's work in carrying out their own research programs. Writing researchers in anthropology, psychology, linguistics, rhetoric and composition, sociology, science studies, cultural studies, and education are extending the breadth and depth of their research. While, appropriately, a great deal of this research has focused on the learning and teaching of writing in both L1 and L2 school settings, research on writing continues to expand into many new and emerging areas of practice, including the acquisition of print literacy prior to schooling; writing across the curriculum, in the disciplines, and in the professions; and writing development across the lifespan. Additionally, new political exigencies, educational pressures, research methods, and technological tools have stimulated writing research and deepened our scientific understanding of how writers write and what writing does. For example, in the study of writing and cognition, the use of eye-tracking software in combination with the monitoring of keyboard strokes and handwriting has yielded new insights into composing processes, which have complemented, refined, and built upon the early work on cognition and writing, which began in the 1970s. It would appear that writing research is growing out of its adolescent phase, and is gaining an equal footing with research on reading. Rather than a smattering of isolated studies we now see the emergence of global traditions of writing research.

While the interest and activity in writing is global, the responses are local. The educational institutions around the world that potentially provide writing instruction are themselves varied in policies, structures, ideologies, and practices. Approaches also vary according to the level and type of educational setting. Even more, the traditions of research developed to comprehend these settings and practices are necessarily varied, as they reflect responses to specific educational challenges and the histories of different academic communities.

The current great interest and energy directed toward developing writing pedagogy, practices, and programs as well as research include a

mutual recognition of the value of exchanging knowledge and experience among those of different regions, educational traditions, and research communities. Networks of writing research, programs, and practice that have been gradually building in North America have also been developing in Europe, Latin America, and Asia Pacific. Moreover, across the globe, particularly vibrant writing research communities have been emerging in the last two decades. These communities have been generating an increasing number of opportunities and vehicles for sharing knowledge. Two international handbooks on writing research have appeared recently, and international conferences (such as the International Writing Across the Curriculum (IWAC), the International Symposium on Studies on Genre (SIGET), the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), the European Association of Learning and Instruction's Writing Special Interest Group (EARLI SigWriting), the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), Red de Lectura y Escritura en Educación Superior (REDLEES), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCC), and the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing (CASDW)) have gained increasing global participation.

The Writing Research conference series sponsored by the University of California, Santa Barbara has followed a similar trajectory. What began as a small regional conference in 2002 expanded to a national research conference with a smattering of international participation in 2005. In 2008, it expanded again to a global conference that aimed at being inclusive of all regions, all educational and writing developmental levels, and all research and theory traditions. Surpassing the organizers' initial expectations, the 2008 meeting hosted over 650 participants from 33 countries from all continents. Attendees included writing researchers representing the full spectrum of writing development, from the communication of small children to the lifelong learning strategies of retirees.

The 2008 Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) conference brought together and provided opportunities for interchange among people from widely varying perspectives that reflected the multifaceted practices that comprise writing, as well as the multifaceted political realities that shape educational institutions. Participants defined their own research trajectories in diverse ways, with some focusing on national and regional histories of writing pedagogy and disciplinarity (as in Brazil, France, and China), and others focusing on methodological and theoretical approaches (such as cultural-historical activity theory, computer parsing of linguistic databases, cognitive theories of writing, and ethnographic observations and interviews). In addition to characterizing different research traditions, the over 450 presentations often included concrete examples of classroom materials that represented different writing curricula and activities based on those traditions, as well as ways of reflecting on and evaluating the classroom. Thus, participants encountered three days' worth of sharp contrasts, often learning about research and pedagogies they had no prior inkling of, and becoming aware of intellectual frameworks that challenged

previously held assumptions. Out of this intellectual ferment came deeper appreciations of the intertwined complexities of writing, writing research, and literacy pedagogy.

Although no conference attendee could imbibe all the richness the three days offered, nor could any conference represent all writing research under way, we are all becoming aware that there is far more to the world of writing research and educational practice than any individual had been previously aware. Comprehensive montages of global research on writing are just being sketched out now, and their completion lies in the future. Likewise, we have just begun the archeological uncovering of what lies behind each of the traditions we are witnessing. Still, even though we have little certainty of how to synthesize the global range of knowledge and experience into a more comprehensive account of writing, it is time for us to look about with open minds and methodological flexibility to consider what each tradition is producing so that we can carry our common interests forward. This volume attempts to be a wide-ranging sampler of the best writing research currently under way in the world, at least as it was represented at the 2008 WRAB conference. The editors hope that the volume has the same engaging and challenging effect on readers as the conference did on attendees.

The volume's contents reflect the different styles of work offered at the conference. The opening section presents six writing research agendas from different regions and research groups. In the next section, four chapters address the national, political, and historical contexts that shape educational institutions and the writing initiatives developed there. The two sections that follow represent a wide range of research approaches for investigating writing processes and practices in primary, secondary, and higher education. The volume ends with several theoretical and methodological reflections. The editors hope this volume, like the conference that it grew out of, will bring new perspectives to the rich dialogue of contemporary research on writing and advance our understanding of this complex and important human activity.

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Part I

Approaches in various regions

1 Modern “writingology” in China¹

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Introduction

There are four popular English translations for the term “Xie3 Zuo4 Xue2”² in China: “writingology,” “theories on writing,” “writing studies,” and “writing research.” “Writingology” is chosen here as it best matches the concept of its Chinese equivalent, which refers to a branch of social sciences that studies the laws lying behind the act, the art, the process, and the product of writing. According to the Xinhua Chinese Dictionary, writing is a human-specific activity, the narrow sense of which refers to writing texts specifically—i.e., penning or forming letters or words to record, transmit ideas or to express emotions or feelings, including writing school compositions—and the broad sense also covers translating and compiling activities and creating artistic products, such as music, drawings, and movies. However, “writingology” only studies writing in its narrow sense, and the disciplinary architecture covers both (specific) studies and (abstract) theories on literary works, rhetoric, and school compositions.

Two opinions exist concerning the division of the history of Chinese “writingology.” Some researchers support a two-stage development, namely, “ancient writingology” and “modern writingology”; the “5.4 Movement” (1919) being the dividing line. Others support a three-stage division, with the 5.4 Movement separating “ancient writingology” from “traditional writingology” and the founding of the China Writing Society in 1980 separating “traditional writingology” from “modern writingology.” This chapter follows the latter opinion.

Chinese “ancient writingology” originated from literary writing. Despite the constant turbulence from shifts of political power and frequent wars in ancient China, literature flourished. There were many great literary and philosophical masters, including Confucians who produced the earliest theories on writing. Confucius’ (Confucius: 551–479 BC) remarks on writing poetry played an important role in guiding the development of Chinese “writingology.” However, later feudal governments chose officials or offered scholarships based on applicants’ performance at exams at which examinees were required to improvise “eight-legged” (*Baku*) texts of a fixed format and a limited number of words in ancient Chinese rather

than contemporary daily Chinese. As time went by, such texts became so archaic and difficult for later generations to understand that education was (and even now is still) necessary for interpretation, which greatly affected the spread of knowledge and information.

To change this situation, some great writers (e.g., Hu Shi and Lu Xun) initiated the “Vernacular Movement” a few years prior to the 5.4 Movement in 1919, proposing to replace ancient Chinese with contemporary daily Chinese in writing. It was not only a reform in linguistic expression, but also a reform in the content and conventions of writing. The reformation received great resistance from those who argued that writing in ancient Chinese was real scholarly writing. Despite this, the reformers struggled and pushed forward the reformation during the 5.4 Movement. The 5.4 Movement was started by students in Peking on May 4, 1919 and later extended to other parts of the country. In the Movement, out of patriotism, students fought against the government, opposing the offering of land and territories to other countries. Many famous writers, including those reformers in the Vernacular Movement, were also actively involved in the 5.4 Movement and supported the Movement via writing articles to criticize the government. For propaganda purposes, they wrote in vernacular contemporary Chinese so as to be understood by common people, and thus they became very popular and influential. In this way, archaic ancient Chinese was mostly replaced by vernacular (contemporary daily) Chinese. As a result, theories on archaic ancient Chinese writing could no longer provide satisfactory explanations for phenomena in contemporary writing, and accordingly new theories were needed to guide the practice and teaching of writing. Having no ready theories, leaders of the Vernacular Movement introduced theories on grammar, stylistics, and rhetoric from Western countries (the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, and Italy) and literary theories from the Soviet Union. Combining these theories with Chinese writing practice, Chinese writing scholars gradually built a new system of knowledge on writing. Therefore, the 5.4 Movement in 1919 is generally considered the dividing line of Chinese “ancient writingology” and Chinese “traditional writingology” (or the dividing line of “ancient writingology” and “modern writingology” to some researchers). In “traditional writingology,” literary studies still remained in the spotlight, and rhetoric studies began to draw increasing attention.

Although both ancient writing scholars and traditional writing researchers have produced numerous theories on writing, few of them are aware of the disciplinary construction of “writingology.” In the late 1970s, modern Chinese writing scholars created the concept of “writingology” and proposed constructing “writingology” as an independent discipline. Thereafter, they founded the first professional organization of writing in China—the China Society of Writing—in 1980 and issued the first professional journal, *Writing*, in 1981. Ever since, Chinese “writingology” has entered a new, organized era. Although traditional literary studies remain

powerful, rhetoric studies have made great progress. Therefore, the founding of the China Society of Writing is widely considered an epoch-making event that marked the beginning of “modern writingology.”

A careful search among publications in English shows that no studies have touched upon the introduction of Chinese “modern writingology.” This chapter focuses on Chinese “modern writingology,” aiming to make known recent progress in Chinese theoretical writing studies and to show what contributions Chinese scholars have made to writing studies in the world.

Changes in comparison with “traditional writingology”

Since the 1980s, great changes have taken place in Chinese “writingology” thanks to the practice of the open-door policy and the freedom policy issued in late 1978, two years after the Cultural Revolution. Like everything else in China, writing studies drew to a halt during the disastrous ten-year Cultural Revolution, which was started by Chairman Mao. The executives of his policy went to extremes and exercised severe control over the mass media in all cultural fields (broadcasts, movies, plays, books, articles, etc.). They did not allow people to express different opinions and sent opponents to jail or farms to receive “re-education” (political brainwashing). The Cultural Revolution turned out to be a disaster for the whole nation. In the years that followed, the influence was still pervasive. The top governor of the nation Hua Guofeng, the immediate successor of Chairman Mao, insisted that all Chinese people should absolutely abide by whatever policies Chairman Mao had issued and should follow whatever Chairman Mao had said. This situation ended in December 1978, when the third plenary meeting of the eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party (CCCP) demolished the extreme restrictions, issued the open-door policy, and put forward the proposal for freedom of academic debate. This has made researchers and scholars active and has brought profound changes in China in all fields, including Chinese writing studies.

The founding of the first professional organization and the issue of the first professional journal

Before 1980s, no organizations and journals were committed to professional communication or to research on writing in China; no conferences or forums were dedicated to writing or composition studies. The open-door policy and proposal for freedom of debate put forward at the eleventh CCCP were inspiring to writing scholars; they became active in research and grew comfortable challenging different opinions.

In 1978–1980, the debate over the promise of writing arose because of the widespread negative views in some colleges and universities: “There is little science in writing,” “Writing research is not promising,” and “Writing instructors do not have a bright future.” These views had a great

impact on people's attitude toward writing studies and the teaching of writing in universities. Many researchers and instructors lost confidence in the future of their careers, and became less motivated in their work. To make matters worse, this attitude influenced many students, who had already become fed up with the difficulty of writing and were bored with those tedious practices irrelevant to their daily life.

To prevent the further spread and influence of these negative thoughts, writing scholars who still had faith in writing organized seminars and forums for discussions. They argued for the existence of scientific laws in writing and also for the necessity of exploring the laws. They believed that the importance of writing in life made it certain that writing studies and the teaching of writing would have a great future. One of the rewarding results of the arguments was that some scholars eventually realized that the lack of confidence in writing might be due to insufficient communication and education about writing. Hence, they felt it necessary to set up a professional organization for disciplinary construction and communication about writing. After two years' effort, they finally founded the China Writing Society in 1980 and officially released the journal *Writing* in 1981. Ever since then, writing studies in China have entered an organized era and have been developing fast.

The shift in research and teaching about writing

In the late 1970s, still under the influence of Soviet theories, textbooks in universities continued stressing theoretical knowledge, which did not help to improve students' abilities to write compositions. Therefore, many people lost faith in writing classes in colleges and universities. Even Ye Shengtao, the most respected and prestigious educator and writer of the time, complained that writing courses in universities were similar to those in secondary schools; those courses on writing were just make-up lessons that students missed during the Cultural Revolution; courses on writing should eventually be canceled. His fame and position made the view spread widely and quickly, and immediately it aroused a heated debate in 1984–1986.³

Many scholars criticized this view from different perspectives, arguing that the teaching of writing in universities ought to be completely different from the composition classes in high schools in regard to the theoretical level, the goal, the tasks, and the requirements, and therefore courses on writing should not be canceled in colleges and universities. Encouragingly, *Writing* (5/1984) published a preface with an inspiring note from the President of the National Political Consultative Conference Deng Yingchao, which said, "Recover the prosperity of the writing discipline to serve the Construction of Four Modernizations." This settled the debate and saved writing classes in universities. Eventually, the writing world found that the over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge was the direct cause of the confusion as it did little help in improving students' writing skills. Therefore,