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*Handbook of Research on Writing: History, Society, School,
Individual, Text.*

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Imagine creating an interdisciplinary collection of scholarship inquiring into “how people write, how we learn to write, under what conditions and for what purposes we write, what resources and technologies we use to write, how our current forms and practices of writing emerged within social history, and what impacts writing has had on society and the individual” (Preface xi). That is precisely what editor Charles Bazerman and fifty-two other international scholars have done. A massive undertaking of a text, this 650-page work involves thirty-seven newly authored chapters in five sections: History of Writing, Writing in Society, Writing in Schooling, Writing and the Individual, and Writing as Text.

There are two significant things about this text for which we should thank the substantive and inclusive vision of Charles Bazerman: 1) the multidisciplinary drawing on research about writing from archaeology, anthropology, technology studies, information sciences, typography, cultural history, intellectual history, religious studies, sociology, political science, law, gender studies, economics, psychology, neurology, medicine, linguistics, education, and composition studies; and 2) the inclusion of international activity and research on writing in school and in life. Indeed, almost one-fourth of the contributors are international researchers.

First to elaborate on the multidisciplinary of this collection: The foundational premises of the text are that literacy is “a key competence for contemporary life” and one of the “key intellectual infrastructural elements differentiating our life” (Bazerman 1). Writing is not just taught in or done in school. It is multidimensional and is a “core element in human history” (3). As such, there is almost no arena in our lives to which writing does not contribute.

Second, there is robust scholarship and support for university student writing in both a student’s native language and in the languages of global interaction around the world. Bazerman taps that by noting that within “different national scholarly traditions, the precise dynamics of writing research as well as traditional forms of writing education have played out somewhat differently, but there is clearly a global renaissance in writing studies at all levels on every continent” (2). I am starting to think that this expansive vision of Bazerman’s along with his tireless efforts (for example, he organized and chaired the Conference on Writing Research Across Borders in 2008, which brought 500 scholars together from thirty countries at UC – Santa Barbara) in forging global connections on writing research will be his greatest legacy.

The first section, History of Writing, provides the framework to “understand the impact of writing technology as it spread and ramified throughout society” (5). The five chapters cover the origins and forms of writing, histories of writing technologies and typography, and the history of the book. Thus the intertwined technologies are located within an historical context, and this documentation of the “residue of texts ... [leads] to a history of thought about writing” (3). With the groundwork laid, we are prepared for the final chapter in this section, “History of Reflection, Theory, and Research on Writing” by Paul A. Prior and Karen J. Lunsford. These authors recognize that most histories of our field follow one of two trajectories: they either begin with classical Greek rhetoric and move to Roman and maybe medieval and then on to current-traditional rhetoric and modern composition studies, or they start with modern rhetoric and composition studies and work within the past 100 years. Prior and Lunsford propose a broader “more inclusive history” that looks globally (meaning not only to Europe) as well as across disciplines. While they don’t write the history itself (clearly not possible in fifteen pages), they do argue that we stand to gain much from a global perspective in examining all aspects of composition studies—from how we define terms and what motivates reflection on writing to what authorship might mean and even how we frame a history of writing studies.

Section II, “Writing in Society”, includes twelve chapters on how writing has “enabled and become a central element of social systems and practices over” five millennia (3). It is this section that might be of most relevance to community literacy. As the introduction to this section points out, “belief, knowledge, law, economy, and government all took on new force when mediated through writing” (97). Social systems became linked through writing, economic enterprises thrived on writing, law was transformed from an oral to a written code, religion relied on scripture and was a force in the spread of literacy. In addition, this section discusses how knowledge was formed and disseminated prior to the advent of the Western university as well as how secular knowledge developed and spread. Furthermore, libraries and archives arose to organize and preserve knowledge, and one full chapter is devoted to this. Canonical and vernacular literacy texts, the rise of journalism, and professional writing each receive ample attention in separate chapters. There are even chapters on writing and gender and writing as an agent of social change.

Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will appreciate the chapter “History of Writing in the Community” by Ursula Howard from the University of London. While she does focus on “unbidden learning and practice of writing by ordinary people in disempowered communities, mostly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ... mainly ... in Britain,” she also includes research and theorists from the US (237). The overall taxonomy of the chapters includes the roots of writing in the community and nineteenth-century literacy practices in communities. Such practices as letter writing, the role of scribes, working-life and social-protest writing, and writing in community organizations are examined. Howard carefully documents the struggles of writing in communities,

paying particular attention to “women’s accounts of conflict about their writing activity.” The themes that emerged in the nineteenth century recur in the twentieth century: 1) the “significance of writers’ connection with intermediaries or sponsors ... who influenced their learning and practice of writing,” and 2) “the role of writing in addressing separation, dispersal and loss” (238). While there was continuity, there was also change in community literacy as we moved into the twentieth century: Compulsory state education had the biggest impact in changing attitudes about literacy, and Howard argues this also resulted in the “steady erosion of associational cultures of writing in communities” (248). The concept of adult literacy emerges in the 1970s, and research also suggests that clear gender differences emerged in American communities between men’s and women’s literacy (251). Finally, the proliferation of email and the advent of multimedia initiatives and resources of new technologies have continued to change the nature of writing. The web is important in terms of community literacy because, as Kathleen Yancey writes, it creates “extracurricular social co-apprenticeship” because knowledge is communicated freely in a networked way (6).

Section III, “Writing in Schooling”, has seven chapters on what we know about “the history of schools and writing, the history of writing teaching and teachers, and current practices of teaching writing at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, along with current understanding of diversity and assessment at all levels” (3). As an English Education specialist, a comparative pedagogy researcher, and a former director of a site of the National Writing Project, I felt curious about the chapters on “History of Schools and Writing” by David R. Olson from the University of Toronto and the chapter “Writing in Primary School” by Pietro Boscolo from the University of Padova, Italy. I wondered how these international perspectives would align with what I know. The answer? Surprisingly well! It was refreshing to have UNESCO cited on literacy, to see overlap in the development of literate societies and schools, and to recognize theories about reading and writing in primary school compared among the United States, New Zealand, Spain, England, Israel, France, and Italy. Boscolo argues that while there are some differences in emergent writing across these countries, “the developmental sequence of the writings appears to be similar across the different languages” (295). I did hope to see more attention to whole language approaches in the chapter on writing in primary schools. Chapters on writing in secondary school (by George Hillocks), writing in higher education (by Richard Haswell), teaching writing and teaching writing teachers (by Duane Roen, Maureen Daly Goggin, Jennifer Clary-Lemon), validity and assessment in writing (Sandra Murphy and Kathleen Yancey), and issues of access and diversity (John Albertinti) are all comprehensive in coverage. I think readers will value the useful taxonomies created by each author to somehow circumscribe such large topics and broad historical reach.

In Section IV, “Writing and the Individual”, the eight chapters pick up where the previous section ended by focusing on issues of the individual and writing, including “development, cognition, affect, identity, multilinguality,

health, disabilities, and disorders” (4). Writing development changes in different life stages. Thus two chapters are devoted just to writing in childhood and then to writing in adolescence and adulthood. Everything from genre awareness to sociocultural influences on children to adult literacy programs and adult education trends are discussed. Though it might seem that these chapters just repeat what the previous section covered on primary, secondary, and higher education, indeed there is a significant difference: The previous sections focused on institutional practices and pedagogy whereas here we see a more personal look at the children and adults as they develop as writers. As the editors suggest, there is an “echo” but also a different lens here. Another interesting part of this section is the recognition of psychological and even biological effects of writing on individuals. Whether we focus on cognition, communication disorders, or biomedical well-being, writing is inextricably bound up in our personal identities. It is in this section that an entire chapter is devoted to “Identity and the Writing of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students” (Arnetha F. Ball and Pamela Ellis). As the face of America changes, we are all more concerned about teaching writing in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. This chapter summarizes issues, corrals the research, and makes specific recommendations for teachers, including providing more opportunities for students to talk, learn, and develop skills, to access adult role models, to have structure mixed with interactive discourses, and to model appropriate language use (508).

Finally, Section V, “Writing as Text”, “explores more deeply what we know about the specific linguistic resources people deploy to carry out their purposes within their situations, social activities, and education.” These five chapters cover the relation of written language to “spoken language, grammar, syntax, larger forms of organization, and the transformations in writing facilitated by electronic tools” (4). But it is the final chapter, “Seeing the Screen: Research into Visual and Digital Writing Practices” by Ann Frances Wysocki, that calls into question print literacy and its uneasy relationship in twenty-first century literacies to aural, visual, verbal, and vocal literacies. Computers change our lives and technology changes how we teach writing. This is not to say that print or alphabetic literacy will disappear. But our challenge today is to understand how to bridge the tension between traditional writing and this new media and, more importantly, how to teach the use of visual and spatial texts rhetorically. Wysocki argues that “rhetoric is attentive to context as well as text and audience.” Approaching visual texts rhetorically means we can “attend to the experiences of specific audiences within cultural milieus” (605). We don’t view production as “isolated tasks” but rather as embedded in a particular place and time. I think her last words are worth quoting: “...the speed of online change challenges academic publishing’s pace ... , suggesting how all aspects of production of words have been shaped by a book culture whose grounds and objects now shift” (608). Indeed.

Anyone who is a graduate student or scholar studying writing will find this collection invaluable. It is comprehensive and particularly useful as broadly circumscribing five millennia of writing through the lenses of history, society,

school, individuals, and texts. This ambitious text on the role of writing (pen and ink on paper) lays a foundation for documenting where we have been so we can move confidently into a future that Kathleen Yancey calls a new era of literacy—a time when print literacy and digital literacy will become inextricably bound up together, when writing will not just involve alphabetic literacy but visual, electronic, and auditory literacy as well (“Writing in the 21st Century: A Report from the National Council of Teachers of English.” Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2009). This book will both mark that border and enable us to bridge it.