Foreword

Anne Beaufort, PhD
University of Washington, Tacoma

When I was asked by my former graduate student, Dana Lynn Driscoll, to write the foreword to this book, I wondered what had changed in the field of writing studies research in the 10 years since I retired. If Driscoll's work and the works she cites are indicative, the answer is, "A lot." When I began publishing my ethnographic work examining college level and workplace writing in the late 1990s, the concept of "writing expertise" would have yielded very few citations in database searches. Some of my mentors even tried to discourage me from taking on such a complicated topic. And when I discovered the literature in cognitive psychology on transfer of learning and finally had a name for the problem I was seeing in my data, my dissertation advisor said, "Don't go there Anne. It's too complicated." Fortunately, that was one piece of advice I didn't listen to. I had burning questions I wanted to find answers to.

Driscoll's work is a testament then to a line of research that now has almost a 20-year history. The question of "expertise" at first may seem a form of meritocracy. Who gets to be labelled "expert," and by whom, and for what reasons? But the opposite is the case in writing studies. To define expertise means curriculum developers, textbook publishers, teachers have a more clearly defined path for skills development, from novice to expert. And once that knowledge has become explicit through the efforts of researchers such as Driscoll, we are living out a more democratic, egalitarian, inclusive agenda for instruction, for mentoring, for research, and ultimately, for creating new knowledge.

Driscoll pulls apart and dissects multiple layers of the writing process of expert writers here, from first idea to published article. When I asked her why she had chosen to focus on this one aspect of writing expertise, she said, "I felt writing process knowledge wasn't well developed in the field, particularly at the post-undergraduate level of writing. I was looking for best practices for supporting and teaching graduate students how to write for publication and the body of work I needed didn't exist. So, I decided to do the research and see what I could find out."

The use of software (Google Docs Draftback), which Driscoll employs to track writers' revision strategies in real-time, is a research method Linda Flower and John Hays probably barely dreamed of in 1981 when they were doing their ground-breaking work on writing process. The only tool they had at their disposal was think-aloud protocols—at best, a multi-tasking process with all the limitations that entails. Driscoll's refinement of an understanding of just the revision aspect of writing through computer tracking as a writer composes is noteworthy both for writers and their mentors.

But then add on the beginning explorations here of post-college level writers' identity as that affects their motivation and their output. Driscoll looks into that too because of her willingness to cross-pollinate from psychology to writing studies. Identity is a complex construct: it is formed both by our genes and our environments, by life circumstances, mentors, teachers, parents. How many of us haven't heard a student or co-worker lament, "I can't write. I'm not a writer." This self-limiting belief can often be traced back to an early teacher or a parent who was frustrated with what we had produced. Or we've not developed a sense of self as a writer because of a lack of good training in the kind of depth Driscoll documents here.

Nor is a writer's identity static. New genres (the dissertation, for example!), new discourse communities, new content—all of these can affect one's sense of self as writer, and hence, one's ability to produce good writing. Driscoll's report of the ways in which several expert writing studies scholars view themselves in relation to their writing projects can inspire and inform the development of yet another layer in the complex construct of "expertise." Although her informants were graduate students or PhD professors, there are generalizable aspects of the data for writers less advanced than these writers were.

Also of note, for researchers in writing studies Driscoll's use of multiple data sources, from interviews to self-reports, to textual analysis, to survey data, to computer-captured writing process data and writing journals. Her research methods are diverse, as are her methods for integrating multiple data sources. These are hallmarks of good qualitative research.

Despite artificial intelligence breakthroughs in machine-generated language in recent years, the need for effective written communications that only humans can do will not go away. And what do I mean by "effective?" Writing that is clear, precise, rhetorically appropriate, and ethical in intent. Driscoll is setting a good standard here, both in what she says and how she says it. Enjoy this window into her journey of discovery of the many-layered, complex, and beautiful process of creating new knowledge through the very act of writing itself.

PS: David Whyte said, "Writers need a lot of self-forgiveness." Writing is, after all, a very complex cognitive and social process. And I would add, emerging writers need wise instruction such as Driscoll presents in her text, which is both a report on research and a "starter kit" for a writer beginning an academic career in his/her journey towards writing expertise. And perhaps, if this knowledge gets widely disseminated to new scholars, we will have fewer ABDs and more PhDs to help tackle the continual stream of problems to be solved in this complex, twenty-first century world.