CHAPTER 2.

ALWAYS ALREADY RELOCALIZED: THE PROTEAN NATURE OF CONTEXT IN LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

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Writing is never without a context. Despite its prevalence, however, context is often backgrounded in the study of writing, rendered inert and uncomplicated by methodological choices. In this chapter, we wish to turn the spotlight on context, consider its role in the production of writing, and writing's reciprocal role in producing context. In our interests in writing across the lifespan, we argue, the relationship between context and writing becomes paramount: A defining feature of the "span" of life is the differing contexts across which and with which a writer moves. The Lifespan Writing Development Group (LWDG) center "context" in their attempt to "address the need for a vision of writing development that incorporates its complexities and many dimensions, and that accounts for the individuality of trajectories that can lead to distinctive voices and expressions" (Bazerman et al., 2018, p. 21). As its first of eight principles to inform such a vision, they foreground: "Writing can develop across the lifespan as part of changing contexts" (2018, p. 22). The LWDG note that "the growing body of texts that becomes part of each social grouping's resources and understandings forms the context of each new piece of writing, whether these are sacred texts and commentaries within religious communities, the research literature in an academic discipline, the regulations of a government agency, or the records of a school (Bazerman, 1999; 2013)" (2018, p. 24). In both the declaration of the principle and the elaboration that follows, the LWDG frames *context* as a site of ongoing change as people move across their lives, and the role that writing plays in establishing and moving forward those contexts, even as those contexts establish and move forward writers along particular developmental trajectories.

This framing of *context* by the LWDG resonates with many of its uses in studies of rhetoric (Bitzer, 1968; Burke, 1945), semiotics (Volosinov, 1978), materiality (Pigg, 2014; Prior & Shipka, 2003), and literacy (Dyson, 2008). Context, in much of contemporary writing research, is treated as a setting of and respondent to unfolding social activity. In this chapter, we put argue that context is a more active agent than even many context-attentive writing researchers have articulated, and that a full appreciation of the agentive power of context can reveal productive insights for the ongoing study of writing through the lifespan. Drawing on New Literacy Studies and ethnomethodology, we develop an understanding of the protean nature of context in order to inform future lifespan-oriented writing researchers.

We take up the word *protean* to describe our vision of context because it highlights the highly variable character of context—the responsive flexibility that the so-called "background" of our social actions has to those actions. The term *protean* is derived from the Greek god Proteus, who was the warden of sea animals. He had the ability to shapeshift seamlessly, taking up forms as he moved. We see protean as a useful word located in interesting corners of literacy and writing research to articulate the complex social worlds within which writers and readers of texts live, work, and build. Bazerman (1989) draws on *protean* to expand upon the "ramshackle and ad hoc" process of reading student writing (p. 140). "In reading student papers," he argues, "we watch people coming and going, hiding and faking, being and becoming, and sometimes those people are ourselves" (1989, p. 139). The concept of reading as protean is a useful one for Bazerman, as it allows him to ask how the many "forms of life" that "leak through" (1989, p. 140) into the process of reading student texts should be shaping the reading of those texts, and the responsibilities that the teacher has to them. Delgado-Gaitan (1996) also draws on the word *protean* to articulate the transformative opportunities available to a complex, historically-layered, and dynamically-changing community. Likewise, Heath (2001) draws on the term to argue for seeing "literacy events" as never solely written or oral, but a dynamic confluence of literate forms that are always changing in relation to social situation and purpose. In each of these instances, *protean* serves to highlight the fluid, interactive nature of social action as well as the potential for transformation. Likewise, we hope that thinking of context as protean can launch the transformative possibilities of context to the fore of our thoughts when working to imagine writing through the lifespan.

A RADICAL RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONTEXT IN WRITING

Our reconceptualization of context begins with a conceptualization of social action that locates social structure in the moment-to-moment work of individ-

uated actors. This framing draws on the ethnomethodological research program of Garfinkel (1967, 2002, 2006), Lynch (1993), and Cicourel (1964), among others. The ethnomethodological tradition argues that social facts—that is, the shared understandings of the world that make up society—are located in a place entirely different than the research sites of the then-reigning sociological program, structural-functionalism. Structural-functional theorists, they argued, saw individuals as "cultural dopes," producing "the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 68). Ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, came to see social order as emerging from ongoing, local, joint work of people interacting with one another and the world around them—it is, in other words, always an accomplishment, rather than a free-standing structure. Society, for Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists who followed him, is not something "out there" to be taken for granted, but rather the product of regular, ongoing work of participants from one moment to the next. When an ethnomethodologist looks for a social fact, then, they look to the moment of its shared construction amongst members of a group.

By treating the social world as an ongoing accomplishment, the ethnomethodologists open the door to seeing contexts as also an accomplishment, something that is recognized, taken up, and understood by actors as they work together to produce social order. Central to the work of these creating and accomplishing contexts is through the work of *practices*—socially-recognized activity through which we make ourselves understandable to others and ourselves (and, by extension, through which we come to understand what others are doing). It is important, however, that we see practices as multiple (Scollon, 2001) and constantly in-flux, as always unfolding and responding to the actions of others as we co-construct situations of social (and, by extension, literate) action. In other words, as I (Ryan, in this case) work to *keep writing going* (Brandt, 1990) in the production of this section, I am undertaking my usual practices of literate action, but unsure of how they will unfold in a number of ways. Will I effectively realize this sentence that I start to write, or will I have to delete and start again? Will I be interrupted from my task by a phone call, a need to eat, my child's demands that I play with him? A practice's end is inherently unstable, in other words, until it is reached. And, by extension, so is the context that is created by and co-constructs that practice.

Pennycook (2010) offers useful language about practices and their role in perpetuating social action. Pennycook's work attends centrally to the locality of practices and, particularly, to language practices. A central concept for Pennycook is relocalization, which he uses to move toward "a notion of locality that includes theories of space and movement as part of a new way of thinking about

how we relate to place" (2010, p. 35). The phenomenon of relocalization draws attention to the work of similarity, difference, and repetition: by seeing difference and not similarity or repetition as the constant in the flow of social action, Pennycook suggests difference is the given and that similarity and repetition must make themselves understood against a background of dynamic difference. The sameness that emerges in a sea of difference locates a given speech act within time and place, within a history that members of a given group can use to continue the work of producing sameness out of difference "for another first time" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). In the work of making the different similar again, in other words, a locality is (re)constructed—a context is built.

RELOCALIZATION AS PROTEAN: LITERATE ACTION FOR ANOTHER FIRST TIME

Pennycook's framing of the local as being co-constructed anew in each instance of a given practice highlights the complex work of the production of social order that Garfinkel (1967, 2002) attempts to uncover with his "tutorials" and "experiments." Bringing students to see the actor-oriented perspective of clapping in time with a metronome, or encouraging students to experiment by acting as a boarder in one's own home, bring into sharp relief the complex, interconnected work of organizing and maintaining social order and, through it, the context that such social order emerges from. Seeing context as part and product of the ongoing work of social order is not entirely new to writing research, whether it be in the rhetoric and composition tradition or the tradition of New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003), but past research has not yet highlighted the truly protean object that context is for all social actors, particularly for those engaged in the work of writing. Writing coordinates social action at a distance (Bazerman, 2004), and so gives those involved in literate societies a sense of a broader structure through which they operate. When we complete a tax form, for instance, we can imagine a typified picture of the social actions of others that make that tax form do the things we intend it to do. For researchers following the work of Schutz (i.e., Miller, 1984), the underlying assumption of our understanding of this social action is that it emerges from our "stock of knowledge at hand" (Schutz, 1954, p. 8)—that is, the understandings of the world that we carry with us from one moment to the next. Other researchers drawing on more of a structural-functionalist paradigm (i.e., Devitt, 1991) may see our completion of a tax form as the result of our ongoing work to coordinate the many roles that we serve in as part of our broader participation in the structuration of society. In both of these models, we have something seemingly stable (a stock of knowledge; an enduring social organization) that we turn to when producing writing.

The sense of stability enables us to understand the task at hand, to freeze the context into place as a rock upon which a text may be constructed.

Ethnomethodology challenges such stability, encouraging researchers to reject such notions in order to turn to a closer look at the moment-to-moment work of *lived* practices in particular groupings. For ethnomethodologists like Livingston (1987), these practices could best be observed in *perspicuous settings* (Garfinkel, 2002), or sites that afforded easy access to viewing practices in use, such as bookstore lines at the start of the semester. Other ethnomethodologists have turned to the world of music (Sudnow, 2003) or the scientific laboratory (Lynch, 1993) in order to highlight the complex work of any given moment of practice, and its irreducibility to a pattern of social order or an indexed stock of knowledge in the mind. These researchers and others demonstrate that the stability of either social structure or stocks of knowledge prove insufficient to explain the complexity of keeping social action going on a moment-to-moment basis, and, worse still, that those explanations occlude the actor's vision of what is seen as possible from one moment to the next.

Setting aside the stability of social structure and stocks of knowledge leaves context hanging in the wind—caught up in an unending sea of difference reminiscent of Pennycook's (2010) argument. Yet somehow, despite this ongoing difference, we encounter situations that are familiar to us. We sit down to eat dinner with family, we exchange polite greetings in passing on the street, we run the red light because the cop is never on this stretch of road at this hour, etc. Disconnecting from the stabilities indicated above highlights the ongoing different-ness of each moment, but fails to account for recurrence. In other words, it takes care of the "first time" aspect of "each next first time" without accounting for the "next" (Garfinkel, 2002).

It is precisely this missing accounting that makes such a position so useful to understanding the complex co-construction of context from one moment to another. Because the "next-ness" of a given moment is not accountable in a sea of difference, researchers need to turn their attention to the mechanisms through which that next-ness is produced. Turning attention to the moment-to-moment work of literate action treats social order as inherently local, historical, and proleptic, and cognition as a set of structures (Coulter, 1991) through which patterns of interaction are signaled and interpreted, opening the door for researchers to attend to *how* literate actors move in their work of producing writing from one moment to the next, and how they keep the work of context going in the process of that work. Smith and Prior (2020) call for such research arguing that the profound heterogeneity and thorough lamination of practices, people, artifacts, and environments in each moment of writing requires close tracing attuned to sociohistorical threads and potential futures. They charge writing researchers to remember that

as research contexts are protean and co-constructed, their common labels such as a classroom, home, or workplace "need to be seen as cultural ways of classifying many unfolding emergent assemblages" (Smith & Prior, 2019, p. 1).

If actors co-construct context as they construct social order, we can begin to think about the ways in which context participates in that co-construction. How, for instance, do the resources that actors talk and act into meaning in a given moment emerge from the talking and acting that went on in the moment before? In the moment that follows? Furthermore, how do these resources shape the talking and acting that goes on within that moment? If context is tied to history through the work of relocalization, how might the protean nature of that context enable actors to untie and retie various historic threads in the production of the moment? The protean nature of context enables a multiplicity of alternatives in any given moment of social action that might be recognized by members of the scene in question as legitimate and meaningful. In the next section, we articulate the benefits and limitations of such a perspective, and offer some potential paths forward for taking up this work in lifespan writing research.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONTEXT-AS-PROTEAN FOR LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

BENEFITS

Thinking through context as a protean phenomenon brings with it several benefits for lifespan writing researchers. Perhaps most consequential is the way in which a protean nature of context draws attention to the moment-to-moment work of literate action. If context emerges from difference, if the basis of recurrence is social interaction, then researcher attention is directed to the ways in which actors create context together, from one moment to the next, over time. By thinking through the nuanced work of ongoing context-construction, researchers can attend more carefully to the subtle developmental work that occurs for writers across spaces and times. Smith (this volume) refers to this as being oriented as a lifespan researcher to details *through* which writing development occurs.

Such attention to moment-to-moment context construction can also provide researchers with significant insight into development from an *actor-oriented perspective*. Dippre (2016, 2017) has suggested elsewhere that the lived reality of writing across the lifespan—the felt experience of keeping writing going from one moment to the next—is the one constant that researchers can rely on when looking across the lifespan. Whatever the age, the social situation, or the kind of writing, there remains at the heart of things an active agent engaged in literate action for another first time. Treating context as protean, as responsive to the

needs of the moment, as transforming social action while simultaneously being transformed by that social action, helps researchers think through the eyes of the actor—what they are seeing, how they are seeing it, how the work to make order out of the next passing moment synergizes cognitive structures and social expectations. Treating context as protean, in other words, highlights the actor-oriented perspective on acts of reading and writing and, by extension, shows the ways in which seeming islands of stability come to be seen that way. At the same time, this treatment provides a way out of these stability-driven understandings, by turning the researcher to the production of the moment.

The protean nature of context also signals the agency that individuals have in any given moment. In this sense, treating context as protean calls attention to post-humanist (Accardi, 2015; Dippre, 2018) understandings of agency: that agency is circulated through situations as they are constructed and can land not only in individuals but in any of what Latour (2003) would refer to as an *actant*. As individuated actants co-construct a context and a social situation, they circulate agency in a range of ways, through a variety of objects. A protean context, responsive to the ways in which agency can circulate, can address the complexity of the agentive work of writers across a range of writing tasks over time.

Finally, a protean treatment of context renders each passing moment, each social situation, as deeply laminated (Prior, 1998), and with individuated actors orchestrating—that is, foregrounding and backgrounding—multiple lifeworlds in any given moment. Treating context as protean enables researchers to follow the actor-oriented perspective of the writer across these lifeworlds, to trace the ways in which literate practices move beyond social boundaries in order to make possible the production of texts for somewhat-recurrent and somewhat-new circumstances. Work by Prior (1998, 2018), Roozen and Erickson (2017), Smith and Prior (2020), and others has begun the tracing of practices over time, and continued attention to the laminated lifeworlds present in a given moment may prove particularly useful to researchers interested in tracing the development of practices over time.

Problems

Attending to the protean nature of context brings with it some issues as well. The biggest challenge, by far, is that of data containment. Attending to the complexity of social action in a given moment requires an enormous amount of information, and isolating events without disturbing the phenomenon of interest can be particularly problematic. This would be an issue in any given research involving a protean conception of context, but attending in such detail to writing *through the lifespan* exacerbates the problem: issues of data collection and data storage alone become nearly insurmountable in such instances.

Lemke's (2000) argument calls attention the necessary and highly consequential work of data reduction in any study. In a lifespan study that recognizes the mutable and emergent boundaries of context as protean, drawing time and space boundaries around data or the representation of data is highlighted as an interpretive move on the part of researcher. In his work on longitudinal designs, Saldaña (2003) argues that three concepts are effectual in understanding phenomena in a longitudinal study: duration, time, and change. Each of these, he explains, are contextual, produced moment-to-moment through practices. Boundary-making decisions about data collection—that is, the act of reducing data for analysis—will have to be made on-the-move, as researchers follow one unfolding activity after another (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017). But if such decisions need to be made on-the-move, if there are no clear *a priori* guidelines for those decisions, how might researchers effectively both *make* decisions and *account* for those decisions to other researchers? Principles for making such research decisions in a context-as-protean framework have yet to be articulated.

A further issue with treating context as a protean phenomenon is scalability. The problems of data reduction indicated above hold true for a single-case study, let alone the work of multiple writers over extended periods of time. How might researchers attend to context as protean on a wide scale? In what ways might the complexity of context construction become analyzable to wider studies? Due to the massive undertaking of just perceiving let alone analyzing data drawn from a moment-to-moment approach, Lemke (2000) argues that "distributed communities of researchers" are needed, suggesting, "'It takes a village' to study a village" (p. 288). No doubt the treatment of context as protean in future research will unveil some mechanisms through which this work may be scaled, but at the moment more questions remain than answers on how to appropriately scale this work.

Data reduction and scalability are perhaps the most pressing concerns of treating context as protean, but they are far from the only ones. In the next section, we identify some ways in which we might begin to conduct research that assumes context to be a protean phenomenon and shapes its frameworks, methods, and sites accordingly. From these proposed early steps, we hope that future research can take on the work of identifying and resolving further problems in order to allow lifespan writing researchers to fully access the benefits of seeing context as inherently and unavoidably protean.

PRACTICE ↔ CONTEXT: ONE WAY FORWARD

The beginning of our work to see context as protean lies in a rather blunt instrument for supporting data reduction: focusing on one practice at a time. This work of focusing on particular literate practices (see Roozen, 2008 for instance) has had

wide analytical purchase for writing researchers in the past, and we suggest that a continued focus on single practices will be a useful mechanism to provide researchers with a focal point while following literate action over a long span of time. Work by Dippre (2018), Roozen (2010), Woodard (2015), Rounsaville (2017), and others highlights the massive amounts of data that come from a careful look at a single practice or set of practices. Working through that data may provide a useful way for researchers to study writing over time while focusing on context and simultaneously honing approaches to reduce data in future, broader studies.

Such a focus on a single practice at a time may also suggest ways to scale up projects beyond the study of single writers. Focusing on particular practices (and how those practices get taken up and transformed across a range of subjects over time) can serve as a scalable mechanism through which development can be traced and, through it, the production of context over time. Studies of slightly wider scale than a case study—for instance, several stratified groups of writers assigned to particular researchers on a team trained to follow a particular literate practice—may offer insights for future, more complex studies on an even wider scale that accounts for the ongoing, protean nature of context over time.

Tracing one practice at a time would not require new methods, although a subtle tweaking of existing work might be required in order to make certain that context is treated as protean rather than as a stable given or a backdrop to the focal practice. Consider, for instance, the sociohistoric methodology enacted by Roozen (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2019; Roozen & Erickson, 2017). This work highlights particular practices as they are repurposed (productively or not) in order to meet new demands across a range of lifeworlds. Roozen (2020), for instance, traces the emergent laminated trajectories (Roozen et al., 2015) of an engineering student, Alexandra Griffith, across three years and through retrospective interviews and document analysis through to childhood, turning attention in particular to the practice of composing data tables. Composing data tables—from puzzles to schedules to science labs—is the mechanism through which Alexandra's development as an engineer is seen. As Roozen traced the development of the practice of data tables in engineering, he noted the boundaries of writing in an engineering context were mutable to a range of data table composing practices Alexandra brought to each new data table. In this work, Roozen focuses on the "histories of reuse across heterogeneous times, places, and representational media" to trace the ontogenesis of practices and persons. In other words, he conducts a sociohistoric tracing of *similarity* across the wide array of *difference* operating in Alexandra's life. Roozen argues that analysis of practice should primarily focus on people's mediated action in relation to particular sites and groupings, but not end there. Rather, the writing researcher must be attentive to the "extensive historical trajectories that flow into and emanate from such sites" (p. 4). Tuning this sociohistoric approach

to one that embraces fully the protean nature of context might further involve indexing Alexandra's dynamic writing activity with other socially demarcated yet evolving time-space-mattering boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Beyond approaching context as a setting of and respondent to unfolding social activity, in this chapter we argue that context is a far more ephemeral and active agent in the co-construction of social action than we've seen typically taken up in writing research. Each site of writing, we argue, must be approached as dynamic, complex, mediated, and historically-layered, and a writer's developing writing should not be considered outside of its concurrently developing context. This approach, we suggest, is one that treats context as protean.

Thinking about context as protean, as always variable and as the result of the ongoing construction of social order, does no favors to anyone hoping to simplify lifespan writing research. However, a protean sense of context opens up interesting and productive problems for understanding writing, its production, and the development of writers over time—problems that can be answered with new methods, theoretical viewpoints, and conceptual frameworks. Later chapters of this collection indicate some movement toward envisioning context-as-protean. Bowen (this volume), for instance, turns to specific decisions that writers make when materially constructing contexts for writing, which calls attention to the complex assemblages through which literate action emerges. Lee (this volume) turns attention to the broader historical and social contexts of writing across generations, showing how material affordances, changing social configurations, and changes to broader social structures create literate opportunities that resonate across generations of literate lives. Such steps toward articulating the protean nature of context in a range of sites and methods offers initial but productive steps toward embracing the study of writing in its deeply social, material, and historical complexity.

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