Conclusion. Renovating Our Worlds

In this chapter, I bring together the various insights into literate action development through the lifespan that the eleven cases earlier in this book highlighted. First, I bring together the several threads that have developed about the lived reality of literate action development. From there, I elaborate on the possibilities of using the totality as the basis for building middle-range theories of literate action development. I close the chapter by articulating the next steps in treating the work of this text as a *foundational infrastructure* for studying lifespan literate action development.

The Totality of the Literate Experience: A Summary

As I mention in the introduction, tracing writing development through the lifespan is challenging for two reasons: (1) the complex sets of affairs that individuals write through as they live their lives; and (2) "writing" proves, upon detailed inspection, to be too "contextually thin" of a unit of analysis for careful study (Prior, 1998, p. xi). In order to provide a consistent lens through which I could view literate action at all stages of the lifespan, I turned to the *lived reality* of development—the ongoing, moment-to-moment, lived work of engaging in activity with developmental consequences. In order to shore up the limitations of writing as a unit of analysis, I turn to *literate action* to describe the focus of my analysis. My pursuit of the *lived reality of literate action development*, then, attempts to build both a robust unit of analysis and a lens that will hold constant through the entirety of the lifespan. *Development*, in the sense of this project, refers to sustained transformations of patterns of literate action amid situations recognized by the actor as *recurrent*.

A logic-in-use for making sense of and analyzing literate action development from the perspective of the lived reality involves five interlocking concepts: practices, *What-Comes-Next*, information, object possibilities, and adumbration. This framework is put into action at the level of the local production of social order. That is, in each passing moment, co-configurations of people, talk, tools, and texts are mobilized to create social situations from and through which actors can make sense of both what they are doing in a moment and what they need to do next. In order to do this, members of a situation produce *practices*—socially recognizable actions that inform themselves and others what it is that they are doing. These practices are sometimes part of projects—that is, goal-oriented work—but practices are also ends in and of themselves: they are the tactical work we do to keep social action (in this case, literate action) going.

Practices are also a way of reducing uncertainty. In any given moment of our lives, we are largely uncertain of what the next moment will bring. But the work

of practices reduces that uncertainty: the simplest things such as acts of handing (Scollon, 2001) or a greeting can allow members of a situation to make assumptions about the next moment, what I refer to in Chapter 2 as *What-Comes-Next*. Part of the work of practices is to manage the uncertainty of *What-Comes-Next*. So long as practices continue to maintain a reduced uncertainty of the next moment, social action—and, by extension, literate action—can be (re)produced unproblematically.

But sometimes the *What-Comes-Next* brings forward an anomaly, something that existing practices cannot resolve, cannot work into the ongoing production of social order. Drawing on the language of Garfinkel (2008), I refer to this as *information*. Information, as I am using it, is the anomalous aspects of *What-Comes-Next* that practices must be altered to make sensible, usable for individuated actors. Resolving information requires the adaptation of practices for a next-first-time, and this adaptation, as seen particularly clearly in Chapter 7, can be a productive trigger for literate action development.

Members of situations work through the anomalies that information provides through recognizing new arrays of possibilities in objects. In daily interaction, this work of recognizing an object's possibilities are overlooked. A book I am discussing in class is now a container of words requiring interpretation; now that I am back in my office it becomes a paperweight for student papers; now that I am leaving for home it becomes an irritant that makes it difficult for me to snap my briefcase closed. All objects have multiple social possibilities, and these possibilities are realized through the concerted co-configurations of objects in social situations. That is, a book in a classroom is treated as a container of words requiring interpretation not only because of my understanding of the book but because of the way in which the bodies in the classroom, the desks in the room, the language of the syllabus, and the schedule of the academic year conspired to make the class a site where the book could be treated as a book. When members of a situation have to deal with information, they recognize new arrays of possibilities in objects in order to transform that information through newly reconfigured practices.

All of the descriptions above work to bring us to an understanding of members' methods as they make sense of a given social situation. But these concepts, on their own, only attend to the work of members in a general sense—we do not have the language needed to see, in an individuated manner, the ways in which specific actors in a given social interaction take up practices, work through the anxiety of *What-Comes-Next*, and reduce information via the recognition of new possibilities in objects. Each individuated actor in a group, however, has an *adumbrated* perspective on the work of the group. Individuated understandings that emerge from perspectival co-configurations of actors, talk, tools, and texts in any given moment can lead to significantly different rambling paths of development even in the writing lives of actors who have, in Schutz's (1967) words, *grown older together* in a sustained chain of situations.

These five concepts, working together, can reveal the complex, individuated, moment-to-moment work of participation in social order through literate action. As individuated actors with adumbrated perspectives in a given social situation enact practices to reduce the uncertainty of *What-Comes-Next*, they recognize new arrays of possibilities of objects in order to transform the anomaly of information and, by extension, transform their practices as well. Should these transformed practices be sustained through situations which these actors define as recurrent—that is, as happening to them for a next-first-time—then development can be said to have happened.

At the end of Chapter 5, I mobilized these concepts into a portable logic-in-use that I refer to as the *totality of the literate experience*, which has three framings: (1) ongoing joint action; (2) individuated actors; and (3) the scenic reduction of uncertainty. In Part II, I brought this logic-in-use to bear on the study of six writers at different points in the lifespan. These analyses revealed two concepts for understanding and articulating literate action development through the lifespan: agency and identity.

The Totality as Foundational Infrastructure

At the start of this text, I argued for the need for a foundational infrastructure of literate action development through the lifespan. The totality of the literate experience, as a logic-in-use to get at the lived reality of literate action development, is meant to serve as that infrastructure. From this starting point, it becomes possible to develop new understandings of literate action, new explanations of data that serve as *middle range theories* of lifespan literate action development.

The term "theory of the middle range" was used by Robert Merton in his review and critique of the state of sociological study. Merton was concerned that sociology—a discipline that, at the time of Merton's career, was still in its infancy compared to the hard sciences—was rushing too hard to catch up with other fields. He critiqued "grand theories" as being applicable both everywhere and nowhere because of the lack of specifics and gaps in their explanatory power. Likewise, he critiqued theories of the narrow range for their lack of applicability outside of the specific circumstances of their study. Merton was looking for theories of the middle range, or theories that provide specific information for wider circumstances than the area of study but avoid becoming so generalized as to lack utility in any given specific application of that theory.

This "middle range" concept has been explored in the field of writing studies by Bazerman (2008). In his reflection on historical studies of writing, Bazerman (2008) argues that "middle range theory seems appropriate to pursue in writing studies, given the complexity of writing—linguistically, psychologically, technologically, socially, historically, and even economically and anthropologically" (p. 4). A theory of the middle range—or an approach to studying writing that is tightly anchored to the available data and yet still connected to many more sites

of writing than are shown in this text—is a useful and practical tool for both understanding and studying literate action development. I envision middle-range theory as a necessary tool for building, over time, a theory of lifespan writing development that is both complex enough to account for the complexity of writing and coherent enough to be mobilized into teaching, research, and further theorizing. This can be best exemplified by working with the concepts that emerged from the work of Part II—agency and identity. To be sure, these concepts are not yet middle-range theories. Rather, each is "*merely* an image for thinking about a component" of literate action development through the lifespan (Merton, 1968, p. 42, emphasis in original). Such concepts have the potential to develop into full-fledged middle-range theories because of both their origins and the analytical purchase that they represent.

One of the primary criteria for candidacy as a middle-range theory is the way in which a concept emerges. First, these concepts "have not been logically *derived* from a single all-embracing theory" (Merton, 1968, p. 41). The totality of the literate experience, as a logic-in-use, is not a theory. Rather, it is a set of framings for examining a phenomenon of interest (literate action development through the lifespan) from a particular perspective (the lived reality of the individuated actor doing the developing). The totality does not predict or explain: it only serves as a focusing agent that keeps the lived reality at the center of analysis. The concepts that emerged in Part II are the result of applying this logic-in-use to data. For these concepts, "the proof is in the using" (Merton, 1968, p. 41). When we use these concepts to make an empirical study literate action development, we can see things that we might not otherwise see.

Though the words attached to these concepts are commonplace in writing research, the ways in which they are used in this text—that is, through the totality—are different. "The difference," Merton (1968) argues, "is initially a small one—some might say so small as to be insignificant—but the shift in the angle of vision leads to successively more fundamental theoretical differences" (p. 41). Agency and identity, as concepts, are understood through the totality of the literate experience. Therefore, they are oriented to literate action as it emerges from the ongoing work of social order, and the broader patterns that emerge from it. As these concepts emerged from an analysis of the lived reality of the participants of Part II, they brought with them specific, if small, changes. The circulation of agency, while linked to a posthuman tradition, calls attention to the ways in which *human* agents circulate agency *back to themselves* in their selection of practices for the co-construction of a given context for action. The (re)construction of identity, while resonating with the production of a situated self, is slightly tweaked to attend to the ways in which that (re)construction is scenically pulled together. These changes are, indeed, slight, but they suggest—as indicated in Chapter 8—the start of what will become deeply transformed understandings of both concepts.

Agency and identity, then, are useful concepts for developing middle-range

theories of lifespan literate action development. But, again, they are images, not robust theories, at the moment. As Merton (1968) suggests, this image "is a beginning, not an end, for it leads directly to certain analytical problems" (p. 42). The concepts should suggest problems, and potentially hypotheses, through which future writing researchers may develop more robust realizations of these concepts and, with it, middle-range theory. Though still images rather than theories, these concepts, in the work they did throughout Part II, have begun to suggest interesting problems and potential hypotheses that may be followed to make them more robust theories for use.

The work of agency through three different segments of the lifespan offered a handful of interesting problems. For instance, in the cases of Lilly and May, there is no clear explanation of their selection of practices in a given moment: the decisions for bracketing and stacking remain largely opaque, excepting perhaps those obvious reasons. But these reasons are retrospective. There is no evidence of the production of order in the classroom, in the field hockey film room, that suggests what pulled Lilly toward note-taking in one instance and away in the other. How does Lilly's realization get realized in the moment? *Does* it get realized in the moment, or are there aspects of the production of social order that do such work only to be later effaced as a straightforward rationale?

This issue suggests a problem (the mechanisms through which things are bracketed and stacked are unclear), some specifics for what might make for a strategic research site (a place that provides evidence of the moment-to-moment work of practices in use, as well as access to the histories behind and around them), and a level of perspicuity needed for the production of social order (turns at talk may need to be directly visible). It is not the only such interesting problem that is offered by the concept of agency, which suggests that agency may be at the basis of a rich middle-range theory. I continue to refer to agency as a concept, however, because not enough of these interesting problems have been answered to allow the concept to predict or explain with sufficient power the work of literate action development.

Identity, like agency, offers interesting problems for take-up by those interested in literate action development through the lifespan. In the process of balancing a working life of manual labor and a personal life that involves writing in a range of ways—short stories, stand-up comedy, screenplays, and reflective writing—John used a range of notebooks to coordinate his action, stacking and bracketing practices where necessary to (re)produce an identity that allowed him to, in various moments and activities, manage groups of workers, compose screenplays, develop "bits" for his stand-up comedy acts, and develop new understandings of words when encountering difficult readings in graduate courses. Through recurring iterations of such work, John worked out a complex, ever-revised sense of himself as a worker, a student, a writer, etc.

Various aspects of John's life lead these identities to overlap, integrate, and intertwine as he (re)produces his identity scenically over time, but little is known

about what brings about these particular moments. How might we locate particular characteristics of points of development not just for John, but for writers like John, who are consistently investigating, tying and retying their connections across a range of lifeworlds? Like Lilly, John's case offers a problem (how might points of significant identity (re)construction be located throughout the lifespan?), indications of what research sites may have strategic value (sites of literate action that lie at the intersection of multiple identity (re)constructions), and perspicuity needs (perhaps a significant moment bookended by recent retrospective interviews). These next steps might be followed by future research to work identity up into a middle-range theory from a lifespan perspective.

Agency and identity, as shown above, offer useful central concepts for eventual middle-range theories that emerge from a study of lifespan literate action development through the logic-in-use of the totality. I mention above that I envision the totality acting as a foundational infrastructure, and these concepts show the potential of this infrastructure in action. Below, I elaborate on the totality as an infrastructure by connecting it to existing issues in the emerging work of lifespan writing research.

Using the Infrastructure: Furthering the Missions of Lifespan Writing Research

Although much has been done recently to understand and frame lifespan writing research, there is much work that remains. First, the incredible complexity of writing through the lifespan, as a research object, must be brought to heel. This will require studies that follow participants throughout the entirety of the lifespan, which in itself will necessitate coordination of researchers as they study writing across multiple nations, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, etc. It is this work that the *Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration* has set itself toward (see Dippre & Phillips, in press).

Second, lifespan writing research must engage with the here-and-now demands of the field, of the careers of emerging researchers (as emerging researchers will be in high demand in order to trace such a long-range research trajectory), the pressing questions of writing in a changing world, and the immediate problems of multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional, and multi-site collaboration. In short, lifespan writing researchers must address the immediate needs of the field and the problems of writing while *simultaneously* engaging in a long-term pursuit of studying writing through the lifespan. I have aimed, throughout this text, to develop a foundation that would allow lifespan writing researchers to aim toward both of these goals.

The totality of the literate experience, as a portable logic-in-use, is a way to re-envision literate action development, to locate evidence of it through a variety of records and trace instances of it across wide swaths of time while keeping a

steady frame of the lived reality of that development. Such a logic-in-use can keep up with the challenges of studying writing in a range of different times and places: it is flexible enough to be adaptable to limits and possibilities offered by various research sites, and it is durable enough to allow findings to maintain coherence across such local adaptations. This combination of flexibility and durability provides a productive starting point for a life-long and life-wide tracing of literate action development.

But the totality can also act as a foundational infrastructure for more pressing, immediate needs. Early-career researchers interested in understanding lifespan literate action development can use such a foundation to launch shorter-term, more focused studies of particular populations and set their results in conversation with other researchers interested in other segments of the lifespan who also have lifespan orientations. This would solve two problems at once: early-career researchers can address the demands for publication that they are under, and problems, questions, and concerns about writing for specific populations or segments of populations can be targeted and addressed with a lifespan orientation in mind.

One particular need that is both long-term and short-term is uncovering useful approaches for interdisciplinary work. A forthcoming volume (Dippre & Phillips, in press) provides some groundwork for interdisciplinary approaches, but the totality also provides a potential way forward. The totality can serve as a broader structure, a point at which various disciplines can pull their insights together. Having a connecting point for emergent concepts and middle-range theories also means having a way of identifying what is not yet known, and what *needs* to be known. The totality, in other words, can serve as a spark for discussing and agreeing upon shared priorities for future research. Importantly—at least in my vision of research—the totality does not dictate future research, leaving open possibilities for serendipitous findings, research sites, and breakthroughs. Rather, the totality, in its role as an orienting mechanism both creates the groundwork for a shared vision of research priorities and leaves open the possibility of startling and evocative new insights. Below, I suggest some next steps that might be best taken advantage of for building interdisciplinary efforts in lifespan writing research.

Steps toward Interdisciplinary Work

In this section, I attend to the interdisciplinary possibilities that emerge from the totality and its treatment as an infrastructure for studying lifespan literate action development. Below, I attend to three areas of research that have as yet been minimally attended to in this text: interiority, functional systems of activity, and cohorts of writers across wide swaths of time. These starting points may usefully connect to ongoing work in recent issues of *Writing and Pedagogy*, *Literacy in Composition Studies*, and an edited collection of lifespan writing research (Dippre & Phillips, in press).

Attending to Interiority

Throughout this text, I have remained focused on the scenic production of social order and, through it, insights into development. I have deliberately sidestepped cognitive explanations of social action that was not scenic—that is, cognition that was not evident as being distributed through particular arrays of objects. The ties across materials in the production of literate action were demonstrably empirical, in following with ethnomethodology's radically empirical tradition. However, this should not be read as a complete rejection of cognitive activity. On the contrary, I envision cognitive and neurological studies of literate action to be important as twenty-first century writing research unfolds, and have merely positioned this project as providing a framework from which future cognitive re-search can move forward in ways that continue to attend to the contexts in which cognition occurs.

Future research on writing development from cognitive, psychological, or neurological perspectives can benefit from beginning with the lived reality in mind and, by extension, the situated work of cognition, interiority, and synaptic firings. If we are to think about writers as developing via a participation in the ongoing production of local social order, how does that transform the ways in which we make sense of the ways in which cognition activates? How might longitudinal studies of cognition in writing be productively attended to using the lived reality as a starting point? What might emerge from an understanding of cognition that began as distributed and worked inward, into the mind, rather than outward from the firing of neurons, the activations of concepts, or the steps of cognitive acts?

Attending to Functional Systems of Activity

Throughout this text, I have attended as tightly as possible to the lived reality of literate action development. This focus occluded the wider literate activities that this lived reality was caught up within so that a portable frame of analysis could be devised that would carry through the lifespan and across lifeworlds. The broader, mutually constitutive systems of literate activity would have lost the phenomenon of the lived reality. However, now that the lived reality has been productively established as a logic-in-use, researchers can begin building out from the lived reality to wider functional systems of activity.

In my use of the term "functional systems of activity," I am drawing primarily on the language of Prior (1998) and have at heart the systems of activity that he describes in his text. However, this term could also be taken more generally to mean any analysis of activity and genre systems, such as those proposed by Russell (1997), Engestrom (1987), and others. These analyses have been typically located within particular sites, such as higher education or health care centers, but, with the lived reality as a starting point, the tracing of multiple, interacting sys-

tems of genre and activity through the lifespan of individuated actors can become possible. The key problem of studying functional systems of activity throughout the lifespan is the massive amount of data that emerges from it: individuals move through countless systems of activity throughout their lives, and tracing those systems and their interaction makes data collection challenging and data reduction incredibly problematic. With the totality, however, researchers may be able to more easily engage in productive data reduction that attends to the lived reality without losing the phenomenon of development as haecceitically situated.

Attending to Cohorts and Timespans

In the process of developing a framework for attending to literate action development from the perspective of the lived reality, I have not had the opportunity to look to wider collections of writers across broader swaths of history. Future research might benefit from taking a "life course" approach to studying literate action development across wider segments of time. "Life course" studies, which has its home in sociology, attends to sociological patterns of development within broader patterns of historical change. Elder (2008), for instance, attends carefully to the impact of the Great Depression and World War II on the life course trajectories of men and women of various generations. Beginning with the totality of the literate experience, future researchers may productively locate the lived reality of literate action development within emerging historical threads and the ongoing production of sociological change.

The life course studies expansion of this foundational infrastructure is most directly at odds with the ethnomethodological base of this work. It is interesting to note that in neither recent publications on life course research and methods (Elder & Giele, 2009) nor in wider surveys of the field of sociology (Bryant & Peck, 2007) did ethnomethodology or any of the branches of sociology near it come into contact with life course studies. The "micro" level attention, as some sociologists (see Coser, 1975) erroneously call it, does not seem to fit into the wider, "macro" level attention of life course studies. Despite this disconnect, however, the accomplishments, concepts, and theories of life course research may still prove to be useful in elaborating upon the totality.

A Lifespan Perspective as a Starting Point

At one of the first virtual meetings of the *Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration*, Diana Arya remarked in passing that understanding how writing develops through the lifespan was "where we should have started" in building curricular frameworks for writing all along. At the end of this text, I cannot help but think of a lifespan perspective as exactly that: a starting point, a new beginning from which our many understandings of writing, writing development, and writing activity come to be understood anew. The field's metrics for tracking development,

talking about development, and understanding development have been and continue to be temporally bound by the limitations of our most expansive longitudinal studies. But examining literate action development through the logic-in-use of the totality may offer a productive way out of these bounds, of seeing the connections between moments of literate action and broader patterns of transformation, of renovated worlds of literate action. By seeing moments and patterns interacting and unfolding on a sea of ongoing, joint action, writing researchers may develop a flexible, responsive understanding of what it means to engage in literate action development not in a particular setting, or in a particular kind of genre, but as an integral part of what it means to be human in contemporary society.