

Part I. Transformations Amid Recurrence

It is my contention throughout this volume that an understanding of literate action development through the lifespan needs to have, at its center, the *lived reality* of that development—that is, the ways in which moments of development are experienced by those doing the developing. I attend to the lived reality in a material sense: how do actors work with talk, tools, and texts around them to engage in different kinds of writing over time? How, in other words, do individuated actors co-construct new practices that propel them into future situations.

But this positioning brings with it a number of questions, at the heart of which is the meaning of “recurrent” and “different.” As Miller (1984) argues, material situations are not, in and of themselves, recurrent—rather, each situation is unique in a range of ways. Just as no person can step in the same river twice, no one situation can actually repeat. Actors grow older, new materials are introduced, the organization of material is slightly altered. Rather, that which is *recurrent* is an intersubjective accomplishment: a situation is the same as a previous situation because we define it as such.

Research emerging from rhetorical genre studies (RGS) focuses on the recurrence of social action: how and when recurrence is recognized, why, and how people make sense of that recurrence. In Part I, I do indeed attend to that which recurs. However, my focus is not so much on what *does* recur, but rather how meaningful transformations emerge amidst acts of recurrence, and how those transformations endure in future recurrences for individuated actors. It is in this site—individuated novelty amidst a perceived recurring social situation—that I locate literate action development.

To guide my attention toward such individuated novelty, I draw from research in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002), which I elaborate in Chapter 1 and throughout the text. Ethnomethodology, as the etymology of the word suggests, is the study of members’ methods—in particular, members’ methods of constructing social order. Ethnomethodologists see social order as emerging through interaction with both people and objects. Ethnomethodologists look to the ways in which social order is not pre-existing, but rather emergent as people interact with one another and their environments. The idea of recurrence—that is, a situation involving literate action perceived as “happening again” for the actors involved—will, throughout Part I, direct me to particular moments of literate action, which I can then study for signals of transformation.

A Note on Methodology for Part I

The pursuit of the novel within the recurrent begins with understanding the recurrence of particular social actions with particular groups of social actors. This

“particularity” is important in the search for individuated transformations. Even simple acts of development, such as handing—that is, giving an item from one person to another (see Scollon, 2001)—cannot be seen without some sort of history of the individuated actor engaged in that work. Consider, for instance, my child, a toddler who has learned to hand things to his parents. The act of handing something to one of us to begin an activity—a book to read, for instance, or food to open—can be understood developmentally only in context of the earlier work that my son did to learn to put objects from his hand into mine: the novel experience of handing something to me, followed by multiple experiences of handing *anything* to me regardless of whether I needed and/or wanted it, serve as some of the many stepping stones upon which his current practice of handing is built. I can recount the development of my infant son’s process of “handing,” and can articulate particular moments when handing became more complex for him (such as handing me several objects in quick succession), became laminated with other activities (such as handing me a toy to put in the tub for later use once the bath was ready), and served as a starting point upon which more complex social actions were constructed (such as handing toys to other children at daycare as part of “sharing”), but any given snapshot of that work would not yield insights about developmental moments to a researcher who lacks an understanding of that history. My methodology undergirding the analysis in the following chapters, therefore, begins by attending to the broader emerging histories of the students and the classroom that they co-construct with one another and their teacher.

I articulate the ongoing work of the classroom in Chapter 2, largely through terminology repurposed from ethnomethodology. However, my understanding of this classroom world began with the orienting questions of interactional ethnography (Green, Skukauskaite, & Baker, 2012). After understanding *what counts as writing* in these classes, I was able to begin articulating the ways in which these social actors came to orient themselves and others toward the act of writing in coordinated ways throughout the academic year. Understanding this work set the stage for the individuated attention that I develop in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Throughout this process, I paid close attention—through notes, interviews, documents, and video—to what these students did with and through writing throughout the academic year. By attending to these students’ writing as the year progressed, I was able to see the consequentiality of particular moments of literate action for these students: that is, I could see the ramifications of a particular decision with and through literate action across future instances of “recurrence.”

This longitudinal perspective allowed me to identify the transformations that occur amidst recurrence. In the coming chapters, I frequently turn back to that knowledge of what students are doing and how they have been doing it to make sense of candidate moments of literate action development. No doubt some readers may see this emerging attention to a single site of overlapping lifeworlds (that is, the classroom) as “thin” data. However, in unpacking the complexity of literate action in a given moment, particularly in the early stages of developing a robust

conceptualization of tracing the lived reality of literate action development, this becomes a necessary data reduction move (and one that, as we shall see, incorporates multiple lifeworlds anyway, given the laminated nature of them). The analyses in Part II will move more directly into multiple lifeworlds across wider swaths of time once the initial framework has been developed.