Most teachers of English language learners are not fluently bilingual, and many don’t receive formal professional development in teaching emergent bilingual students. Thus, they aren’t always adequately prepared to meet the challenges of working with this growing demographic of K–12 students. Alvarez argues that teachers’ greatest resources are the students themselves, with both a facility in their home language and ties to their home communities.

After-school programs focused on English learners offer a way for parents, teachers, and volunteers to collectively navigate school systems and the English language, share stories, and develop facility in reading and writing across languages. Alvarez offers ideas for approaching, engaging, and partnering with students’ communities to design culturally sustaining pedagogies that productively use the literacy abilities students bring to schools. Drawing on the NCTE Position Paper on the Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners (ELLs), Alvarez highlights the importance of building mutual trust, or confianza, between students, schools, and communities, both inside and outside of the classroom.
Toward Rich Accounts of Writing Development

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In this issue, authors consider the complex semiotic processes on the scene when students, parents, and communities write. The research reported in these papers offers a set of methodological possibilities for studying persons and groups, mobilizing the semiotic processes caught up with writing processes and practices. Paul Prior’s Forum essay helpfully frames these issues. Responding to the February 2017 RTE Forum piece by Bazerman, Applebee, Berninger, Brandt, Graham, Matsuda, Murphy, Rowe, and Schleppegrell (“Taking the Long View on Writing Development”—hereafter, “The Long View”), Prior contemplates the epistemological, methodological, and disciplinary considerations research must attend to in order to begin “working through difference” rather than simply “identifying consensus” (p. 211) in writing research. Prior agrees with “The Long View” on two points: that we “need research designed to understand the complex development of writing across the lifespan” (p. 211) and that multidisciplinary research approaches are needed to accomplish such a goal. Yet he articulates concern that the principles put forth by “The Long View” are not particularly actionable, that no principled framework was undertaken in the discussions surrounding the formation of these principles, and that centering the principles on writing as the unit of analysis undercuts what he sees as important research agendas for moving forward. Instead, Prior suggests that research that reaches across borders will best help the field to provide “rich accounts of writing development” (p. 217) and that it is “long past time for us to accept that embodied, mediated, dialogic, semiotic practice is the matrix of all so-called ‘modes’ and recognize that semiotic (including literate) development is a ubiquitous cultural process, not the special provenance of school” (p. 217). Prior so urges attention to more-than-linguistic ways of conceptualizing and situating writing development. Such attention entails recognizing how writing emerges in tandem with, and in coordination with, other sign systems such as bodies, visual signs (e.g., painting), sounds, and so on. It also means examining how various technologies (not just digital) mediate writing and surrounding semiotic activities in and out of school contexts for learning. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, literate learning is always situated, transcending borders of formal schooling (e.g., as evoked in rhetorical educational notions of “mode” such as EDNA [exposition,
description, narration, argument] that, despite numerous and sustained critiques, live on in school-based instructional practices and standards).

In particular, Prior asks the field of writing research to consider the evidence we already have that refutes one claim made by “The Long View,” namely that students are “less likely to learn [genres, skills, and strategies] that are ignored or rejected [in schools]” (Bazerman et al., 2017, p. 356). Prior notes that many studies have already documented evidence that this claim is not true. A substantial and growing body of literacy studies has traced the development of literacy in home, online, community, and work contexts. Each of the papers in this issue responds to Prior’s call by providing “rich accounts of writing development” (p. 217) and illuminating some of the accompanying methodologies for offering such rich accounts. They also raise questions about how the field can methodologically attend to the many and various semiotic processes writers draw upon when writing. What should we be attending to? When we attend to some modes, aren’t we always leaving others out? What’s the way forward?

In “‘She’s Definitely the Artist One’: How Learner Identities Mediate Multimodal Composing,” James S. Chisholm and Andrea R. Olinger explore the collaborative multimodal composing practices of three 12th-grade students—Leonard, Louise, and Nick—as they co-compose a painting in response to Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Malamud’s (1952) The Natural. Specifically, the authors explore how the students’ literate identities shift or become reified as part of the collaborative composing process. Drawing upon discourse analysis from linguistic anthropology (Wortham & Reyes, 2015), Chisholm and Olinger analyzed a 25-minute interview and two 60-minute video recordings of multimodal composing sessions, which were transcribed to include both what Leonard, Louise, and Nick said, as well as their “embodied actions such as facial expressions, gestures, and intonation” (p. 129). In this way, Chisholm and Olinger answer Prior’s call for research on writing that accounts for the “matrix of all so-called ‘modes’” (Prior, p. 217) that authors draw upon when they compose. Chisholm and Olinger then consider how these semiotic resources interact with the relationships between the three authors in the study, Louise, Leonard, and Nick, and how the composing event in the study influences the three students’ identities as writers.

Chisholm and Olinger’s analysis reveals that the collaborative multimodal composing process reifies Louise’s identity as an artist, while the artistic skills of Leonard and Nick are “devalued” over time as Louise becomes the main or sole author of the painting they are composing together (p. 131). For example, as the students begin composing their response, Leonard draws upon Louise’s experience as an artist, asking her if she wants to “draw it or paint it” because he “do[esn’t] do that” (p. 132). As the group continues composing, Louise continues to be the person mainly responsible for painting, while Leonard and Nick “look busy” when the teacher approaches (p. 143). In interviews, Louise identifies herself as a visual person and an artist, whereas Leonard and Nick identify Louise as the main artist of their group. Chisholm and Olinger note that across time, “Louise’s robust identity as an artist—co-constructed by herself, her classmates, and the teacher—emerged
in tandem with the devaluing of other participants’ artistic skills” (p. 131). These findings raise questions about the decisions teachers make about heterogeneous grouping in writing events (the teacher had designed each group to include a student who already had a propensity toward visual art) as well as the materials available to students during composing events (the students were only composing on one main sheet of paper, perhaps discouraging participation of multiple students at once). Chisholm and Olinger call for more attention to “how the production of multimodal texts reflects and constructs students’ identities, how students’ identities shape these processes and texts, and how new identities emerge, solidifying but also shifting across moments, days, months, years, and lives” (p. 147).

Chisholm and Olinger’s paper certainly attends to the rich literate practice of art, and does so in the context of a classroom space. In particular, this paper attends to the complexity of students’ engagement with literate practices by extending beyond the assignment and task, illuminating the ways past identities of students become reified through literacy practice in the classroom. In their methodology, Chisholm and Olinger attend to both the words and body language of Louise, Leonard, and Nick. However, most of the claims about Louise’s identity as an artist are supported through the spoken language of the participants, raising questions about how writing research that accounts for the full range of modes can do so without losing depth; perhaps inevitably, a few modes become the focus of this paper. Still, Chisholm and Olinger attend to a literate practice that is often explored in out-of-school spaces.

In “Escribiendo Juntos: Toward a Collaborative Model of Multiliterate Family Literacy in English Only and Anti-immigrant Contexts,” Jessica Singer Early describes an after-school family literacy program in a state marked by anti-immigrant policies and conditions. In particular, she asks: “(1) What does it mean to co-construct a multiliterate family literacy community?” and “(2) How is a multiliterate family literacy community designed and enacted within a school space located in an English Only, anti-immigrant context?” (p. 159). As part of the family literacy program, children classified as English language learners by a public elementary school and their parents shared their written texts in an after-school environment in which multilanguage use—Spanish and English—was encouraged. Participants were invited to write about their family’s relationship to literacy and share that experience by reading their written narratives out loud. Children and their parents also answered questionnaires about their experience in the family literacy program.

Early’s analysis focuses on texts as the unit of analysis, drawing upon different organizations of the texts to contextualize her analysis and to examine “written text production as a socially embedded, shared, and evolving practice within a community” (p. 168). She first read the written texts of each individual author, then read the texts by familial unit, and finally read the texts by chronological writing event. Her analysis reveals that “Latino parents are deeply invested in, engaged with, and supportive of their children’s school- and home-based language and literacy practices” (p. 169). Furthermore, it is “possible and essential to create collaborative, school-sponsored, and school-based multiliterate family literacy communities
within English Only and anti-immigrant contexts,” and the family literacy program in this study shows “how a family literacy community became a space where the ordinary acts of honoring and privileging participants’ languages, cultures, lived experiences, stories, and literacy knowledge become extraordinary within a school and state context grappling with and embroiled in issues of language use, race, and racism” (p. 169). Her call for collaboration echoes Prior’s call for reaching across schoolish borders for accounts of writing development, and her methodology accounts for more than just the written texts. Early showcases the relational aspect of writing for participants in her study. And yet, while Early foregrounds the writing of participants and the various social webs in which they write, less attention is paid to gesture, body language, gaze, and other semiotic processes.

In “(Dis)Identifying as Writers, Scholars, and Researchers: Former School-teachers’ Professional Identity Work during Their Teacher-Education Doctoral Studies,” Ann M. Lawrence highlights how identities are mediated by and mediate the writing process in the context of extracurricular writing groups focused on academic writing. Lawrence conducted a five-year linguistic ethnographic study, drawing both on her time in sessions with 12 doctoral student writer-researchers as part of academic writing groups and on their quick-write responses to examine the ways in which these former teachers of writing and literacy disidentified and/or identified with the roles of writer, scholar, and researcher in the context of academic research.

Across her analysis, thematic similarities emerged from the written responses by women in the study—their disidentification as writers “fluctuated with seemingly little connection to their participation in education-research-writing activities” (p. 195). Specifically, women in the study disidentified with the “positional identities” of real writers, or writers who had more knowledge, power, or prestige in academia than they imagined or claimed for themselves. Across time, however, responses to quick-writes revealed “turning points” (p. 197) in participants’ development of writing identities in which they came to reinvent or reimagine visions of writers and scholars that more closely matched their “personal values, practices, and goals” as writers (p. 195). Lawrence suggests that these findings reveal the “impostor syndrome” experienced by these women, which may have been compounded by their role as former PreK–12 teachers and as doctoral students of education, a discipline historically marginalized in the academy. The narratives of these doctoral students across their years of study suggest that disidentification with writer identities may persist once participants enter the profession and that research should consider how the identities developed as part of an extracurricular writing group might suggest possibilities for faculty-led writing groups (p. 206), especially because (due to their extracurricular nature) the writing groups in this study “lacked the institutional authority of the doctoral-program figured world” (p. 206). Lawrence’s study attends to the identity work that writers do through writing and accounts for a context in writing that, while connected to purposes of school or doctoral work, happens outside of it.

Across these papers, researchers explore the various contexts in which writers
engage in literate practices, and carefully attend to how identity and writing intersect. Yet, with one study taking place in a school, one in an afterschool program, and one in an extracurricular writing group, these papers are still connected closely to school spaces. How can the field get beyond the in-school/out-of-school divide, as Hull and Shultz (2002) urged? Almost all research contextualizes the site of the study; so, how can we account for context without reifying the already-present divide between school and the out-of-school? If one side calls for recognizing the rich literate practices that occur outside of school (Prior), how can we have research that attends to school spaces without ignoring the out-of-school practices? In other words, what does “cross[ing] these borders” (Prior, p. 217) look like in writing research?

Across these papers, we also see evidence of inventive methodologies that work against the reduction of writing to written products. At the same time, these papers still foreground written products and “the speech event” (Chisholm & Olinger, p. 126), even as they account for other semiotic processes as part of the speech event. We’re left wondering how research can account more fully for the “matrix of . . . modes” (Prior, p. 217) without losing coherence. We’re also left wondering what these studies tell us about the principles of research that undertakes “semiotic practice” (Prior, p. 217) as the unit of analysis. The studies in this issue offer research that unfolds in one direction in terms of research scale and methodology; however, it seems equally important to gather data at larger scales to help demonstrate the extent of laminated practices.

REFERENCES


