

## I

## INTRODUCTION: TEXTS, POWER, AND IDENTITY

### **Puzzles and pluralities of literacy**

Literacy is a curious thing. It seems to envelope our lives and be central to modern living, yet most of humanity has done without it for most of human existence. As a term, it points to a striking range of possibilities – such that we now speak not only of “school literacy” and “vernacular literacy” but also “cultural literacy,” “computer literacy,” “moral literacy,” and even “emotional literacy” (Steiner, 1997). But the term is also subject to notable recent efforts to define and restrict its essence, for example, through legislating a particular way that reading or writing must be taught in school. As a field of study, literacy entangles some of the most difficult problems in social analysis – among them the question of text, that is, of language, situation, and meaning – yet it is also a very familiar topic, the source of many proclaimed crises and the subject of many slogans and sound-bites about how to live, raise children, and prepare for the rigors and excitements of the new century.

Literacy often seems to pervade our lives. Increasing numbers of people make their living interacting with a computer screen. Many find reading a welcome escape, and they “bury” themselves in a good book, perhaps a romance or a futuristic fantasy or, if young, a tale of the wise doings of the cleverly marketed Harry Potter. Many compose themselves by composing: diaries, letters (now of course often electronic), jotted-down poems, songs, especially in late adolescence, and, for those many adults working with “information,” there are ubiquitous notes, memoranda, schedules, and reports. And yet this intensive intertwining of text and life is a fairly recent phenomenon and of limited societal scope.

Human life in its recognizable essentials – involving us big-brained primates with families and social living, full-fledged language, sophisticated art, and complex technology – has existed for more than fifty thousand years. Yet the earliest precursors to writing – tokens used in farm produce and, later, manufactured goods (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992) – appeared no earlier than ten thousand years ago, and systematic record-keeping for political–economic and religious purposes developed only with the rise of ancient city states (e.g. in Mesopotamia) about five thousand years ago. In addition, these early literacies

were restricted for the use of tiny elites. Indeed, it was not until the last 150 years, and primarily in the twentieth century, that universal education – that is, literacy for everyone – became a goal of most nations. Many fundamental human achievements predate the rise of city states, let alone the twentieth century. From the early Neolithic through the post-Neolithic, i.e. from about 8000 BCE to 3500 BCE, well before the onset of full-fledged writing, was one of the most creative periods in human history. Agriculture and the domestication of animals occurred, as well as expanding knowledge in technology. Each of these testifies to a careful and cumulative process of intellection: observing, comparing, testing, communicating, reworking, what Lévi-Strauss (1966) famously called “the science of the concrete.” As far as can be known from ethnological, historical, philological and archeological investigations, humans have always observed, classified, philosophized, and told stories throughout their existence (Postgate, 1992; Redman, 1978). Like language, kinship, and engagement with nature, myths and stories appear to be part of a pan-human condition and capability, and often the form and content of myths and stories are surprisingly complex. Many educated people know that the Homeric epics such as the *Odyssey* began as oral tales, but fewer know that many comparable “oral literatures” (e.g. the Vedic hymns) were found throughout the world, in societies largely unencumbered with states or literate traditions. Although literacy often seems essential to our lives, many aspects of what make us human – language, intellect, the capacity for social living, technical resourcefulness – do not rely on literate practices or do so only recently and secondarily.

If we turn from the sweep of human history and restrict our attention only to the contemporary period, literacy presents us with other puzzles. On the one hand, the term refers to highly diverse undertakings; on the other hand, we are currently witnessing a steadfast effort to restrict what “really counts” as literacy. Concerning the diversity, in addition to bread-and-butter “reading” and “writing,” there have been numerous calls in recent years for other kinds of literacy. One, “cultural literacy,” was proposed in the late 1980s as part of the controversy over multicultural education; such literacy referred to a supposed body of shared knowledge, the basis for an envisioned common national culture (Hirsch, 1987). A few years later, a former Secretary of Education and national drug enforcement official called for “moral literacy,” which seemed to consist of character traits preached, if not practiced, by US conservatives (prudence, monogamy, self-reliance, etc. [Bennett, 1996]). Throughout the 1990s, educators were exhorted, and exhorted others, to prepare the young for “computer literacy”: a reasonable knowledge of and facility with the current state – changing every few years – of personal computer or web-based information technology. A specialized variant along this line is the proposal, from a researcher of how people use digital technology, for us “to develop in our children ‘readership skills for a culture of simulation’” (Turkle, 1999, p. 82). This impressive diversity of possible literacies – from moral literacy to simulation reading – suggests

that “literacy,” as a key word in our culture, has a status in the current era rather like that of “science” in the nineteenth: it refers loosely to any body of systematic useful knowledge. This plurality of senses is, however, countered by a contrary pressure to determine precisely and authoritatively which practices, which ways with text, legitimately fall under the rubric “literacy”; or, more colloquially, to ask what “real literacy” is.

The 1990s in the United States saw a rise of direct political involvement in methods of literacy teaching. What some have called “the Reading Wars” (Lemann, 1997) have pitted those with a broad and generous view of early learning and reading and writing development, the so-called “whole language” camp, against those with a narrow or more prescriptive view of just how reading and writing are to be taught, the so-called “phonics” camp. A conservative coalition of legislators, foundations, fundamentalist Christians, and their allied academics, the “phonics” camp is currently quite influential. It has managed to pass legislation prescribing reading teaching methods in major states, such as California and Texas; to promote a series of regimented intervention programs nationally; and, as well, to change federal research criteria for what would count as acceptable research on literacy (Allington and Woodside-Giron, 1999; Schemo, 2002). What is most notable about this are not the successes of the phonics movement, for those could turn out to be short-lived. Rather, it is that seemingly narrow and mundane aspects of classroom pedagogy – how many minutes per day are to be spent reciting the alphabet or reviewing spelling rules – have become a heated public political issue.

The striking variety of kinds of literacy that people describe or desire and the fundamentalist impulse to control how literacy in school shall be taught illustrate seemingly contrary aspects of the nature of literacy. It seems there is no single literacy, instead a multiplicity of practices and values get the same label. Indeed, the label “literacy” can be and is extended to areas that have no or little connection to text, or at least to processes of decoding entextualized information; “moral literacy” does not in itself require reading. Nonetheless, the control of literacy, its use, and the conditions under which people become literate is an enduring political and religious preoccupation. The various inconsistencies just noted – that literacy seems essential to contemporary lives but of secondary importance in a fuller account of humans and their potentials; that the term refers to highly diverse phenomena, but also that there is a current struggle in the US to decree just what reading or writing really are – are foreshadowed in academic debates about the nature of literacy.

Research in this field has often presumed dichotomies such as literate versus illiterate, written versus spoken, educated versus uneducated, and modern versus traditional. The title of this book itself presents a dichotomy – literacy/literacies – which it initially develops, then complicates and reformulates. At issue will be a distinction between universalist or “autonomous” models (Street, 1984) of *literacy* – which conceive it as a uniform set of techniques and uses of

language, with identifiable stages of development and clear, predictable consequences for culture and cognition – and relativist, sociocultural or situated models of *literacies* – which conceive literacies relationally, that is, as intrinsically diverse, historically and culturally variable, practices with texts. The former concern with unitary literacy is associated with the early work of historians on the technology of printing, of anthropologists on the evolutionary consequences of literacy as a “technology of the intellect,” and of comparative and historically inclined psychologists on the cognitive divide between literates and nonliterates. The autonomous view assumed that there is a clear, cumulative distinction between literacy and orality, and, in initial and subsequent formulations, it has argued that the literacy of the West is somehow exceptional to all other literacies. Since it sharply divides speaking and writing, and initially placed much emphasis on the alphabet, it roughly lines up with the “phonics camp” in the current reading controversies.

Conversely, the situated study of multiple literacies has focused on the diversity and social shaping of those ways with text we call literacy, emphasizing the *ways* as much as the *texts* (Heath, 1983; Lofty, 1992). It emerged from anthropological and historical criticism of claims made for a unitary or autonomous literacy, questioning literacy’s causal role in social or cognitive development. The situated perspective was developed by revisionist historical scholarship, which reframed the debate about literacy and social development in the West (Graff, 1981a). The perspective is perhaps best exemplified in detailed ethnographic studies of inscription and discourse, which undermine the notion of separable domains of orality and literacy. Since it insists on the interrelation of speaking and writing, and questions the priority given to alphabetic coding in social evolution, the situated perspective loosely supports a “whole language” view of literacy (Edelsky, 1996).

As with many complex and consequential debates, there are no easy resolutions. Facts and information, or new research perspectives, do not of themselves carry the argument. Historical perspective does not settle the issue of what literacy is, nor do ethnographic field studies. Detailed field studies of how people actually practice and value reading and writing as part of their wider conduct and communication have demonstrated that social life is not easily divided into spoken and written domains. They have further shown that how speaking or writing are understood and valued has as much to do with politics and economics – that is, with institutions, resources, and struggles to obtain, impose, and resist authority – as with any given technique or technology of inscription. Nonetheless, although situated studies have presented intriguing counter-cases, widening the range of phenomena discussed, situated studies have often operated with the same categories as autonomous studies, making it difficult for them to change the terms of debate.

As we will see, adherents of the autonomous model of literacy have made arguments about the difference and superiority of Western culture and intellect

Cambridge University Press  
0521593565 - Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity  
James Collins and Richard Blot  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

*vis-à-vis* nonliterate or differently literate societies. These claims are untenable and have been systematically criticized; nonetheless, echoes of these claims continue to inform policy and scholarship about literacy. Understanding why flawed perspectives have such a hold on our current thinking has practical value – it will give insight into why the field of literacy pedagogy is so politically polarized, why “whole language” and “phonics” pedagogies are seen as polar opposites. Such understanding also has a more general intellectual value, for it forces us to also explore why historical and ethnographic cases are necessary, but insufficient, for rethinking inherited viewpoints.

It is our argument in this book that although revisionist historical research has deflated and undermined the grander claims about the “consequences of literacy,” it still has to account for the abiding significance of ideas about, institutions of, and practices involving literacy in modern Western societies. In addition, although ethnographic scholarship has demonstrated the pluralities of literacies, their context-boundness, it still has also to account for general tendencies that hold across diverse case studies – for example, the frequent historical correlation of female gender and restricted access to literacy and schooling. In what follows, we argue for a way out of the universalist/particularist impasse by attending closely to issues of text, power, and identity. We begin with the question “What is a text?” because it is so self-evidently involved in disputes central to the literacy debate: whether a written document, or other form of inscription, has meaning separable from the contexts in which it is produced and consumed. This apparently simple question about text-and-meaning has generated much discussion and argument in philosophy, literary criticism, and anthropology. What has been most significant in these debates, for our purposes, are post-structuralist or practice-theory arguments about the role of writing in intellectual traditions as well as in everyday social life. Central to the post-structuralist or the practice-theory argument is the claim that writing is usually associated with power, and particularly with specifically modern forms of power. But in taking up this claim – that literacy is shaped by power – we have been led to a further question “What is power?” This has in turn led to some interesting positions. Most basically, and of greatest relevance for understanding the puzzling legacies of literacy, it has become clear that power is not just some concentrated force that compels individuals or groups to behave in accordance with the will of an external authority, be it parent, boss, or public authority. Instead, power has “microscopic” dimensions, small, intimate, everyday dimensions, and these are constitutive as well as regulative; they are the stuff out of which senses of identity, senses of self as a private individual as well as a social entity in a given time and place, are composed and recomposed.

As we grapple with the unresolved dichotomies of literacy research while also exploring questions of text, power, and identity, we will of necessity develop a complicated argument. In order to do our subject justice, we proceed by presenting and criticizing influential texts, sometimes at considerable length,

and by developing historical and ethnographic cases of differing scale. These cases will enable the reader to see how texts, power, and identity frequently intertwine. We also draw upon the work of French scholars associated with post-structuralism and practice theory – particularly, Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault – because they have been at the forefront of arguments about texts, power, and education. We use their work to engage with and reformulate a debate about literacy that, at least within anthropology and psychology, has been a largely Anglophone controversy. As we will see in the next chapter, certain concepts that have scarcely entered the literacy debate among anthropologists, such as de Certeau’s notion of a “scriptural economy,” provide a surprisingly apt lens through which to re-evaluate longstanding arguments about literacy, social development, and rationality.

### **Plan of the book**

Our next chapter addresses the general debate about literacy, but it begins with a brief description of a Native American language revitalization program in which the question of an appropriate writing system was particularly vexed. The way in which politics, spelling, and history play out in this particular case provides a useful entree to the heart of this chapter, which is an assessment of arguments about the “consequences of literacy” (Goody and Watt, 1963). We focus upon the arguments and evidence that comprise “the literacy thesis”: that there are unified, cumulative effects of literacy, in social and cognitive development. Put more bluntly, we assess claims that literacy underpins the uniqueness of the West and the superiority of Western minds. Our account develops by examining and critiquing claims about literacy and development, especially those presented in two influential books – Jack Goody’s *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1986) and David Olson’s *The World on Paper* (1994). The former presents a standard account of the role of literacy in the development of social complexity, while Olson’s arguments about the development of knowledge and the self begin by disavowing strong versions of the literacy thesis, but then return to sweeping claims about the historical consequences of reading practices. The central claims in these works have at their root an untenable literacy/orality contrast with implications for how we think about culture, language, and mind. It is important to understand the tenacity of this untenable contrast, however, and in this regard we turn to de Certeau (1984), whose exploration of “everyday life” also connects to the ongoing ethnographic critique of the literacy thesis.

Early counter-arguments to literacy thesis claims occurred in research advocating and demonstrating an ethnographic approach to the study of literacy. Prominent among such work was that of Shirley Brice Heath, Ruth Finnegan, and Brian Street. By illustrating the multifaceted, dialectical relations that hold between texts and social forms, their research and writing called into question many of the general consequences initially claimed for literacy. Although

chapter 3 deals with numerous situated studies, it focuses on the analytical and empirical contributions of Heath's arguments about language socialization and "literacy events," Finnegan's "performance" approach to unifying talk-and-text, and Street's proposals concerning an "ideological model" of literacy. Detailed examples from each researcher's *œuvre* are presented, in order to illustrate the real advances of these ethnographic approaches to literacy and orality, but also to identify the limitations of such approaches. Chief among the shortcomings we discuss are underdeveloped conceptions and analyses of text and power.

In order to explore how literacies are implicated in the operations of social power, in our fourth chapter we present an extended historical case study of the uses of literacy, the development of modern nation states, and the emergence of universal education. More specifically, this chapter discusses in detail the complicated dialectic between textual practices, political subjectivities, and economic dynamics in early and mature stages of the American nation. In this account, the public school system plays an ever more central role in defining and distributing an official literacy. Our analysis of schooled literacy provides a relatively familiar account of expanding educational participation and rising literacy rates while also exploring the less-often-noted exclusions, resistances, and forms of gender, race, and class domination that accompanied the spread of modern schooling. As we will see, subtleties, transgressions, and subterfuges are an ongoing *sub rosa* accompaniment to the "official story," whether we deal with the nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

The official story has been optimistic about the transformative powers of literacy and education, perhaps the most durable element of an otherwise battered modern liberalism (Graff, 1979). In liberal thought, if literacy and education were to be the means for enlightened social progress, it was to be through a merging of social development and individual growth and autonomy. However, this joining of the social and individual has grown increasingly problematic. Indeed, in our current late modern or postmodern era it often seems that social developments and individual growth proceed along different vectors. In chapter 5 we analyze the relation between literacy and identity in order to explore the fault lines of self, inscription, and the social in both modern and postmodern America. As in other chapters, we proceed with an anthropological sensibility, via examination of detailed cases. In particular, we discuss ethnographies and educational memoirs dealing with literacy, education, and social identity, which also articulate an increasingly problematic view of salvation through education. In critically examining these studies, as well as confronting them with a set of feminist counter-cases, we are led to see how the social exchanges surrounding and carried out through acts of reading and writing necessarily involve the dynamics of class, gender, and race in contemporary America.

In the sixth chapter we explore the articulation of inscription, power, and identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts, presenting a number of analyses which show how the "uses of literacy" in non-Western settings both draw upon

and transform Western textual legacies. In particular, we will analyze how among indigenous and subaltern peoples of North and South America, as well as the Caribbean, literacy, religion, and the secular salvation promised by education form a colonial and postcolonial terrain for conflicts over identity, authority, and visions of the self and the future. In dialogue with arguments developed in previous chapters, chapter 6 focuses upon the interplay between literacy practices and identity dynamics, but in substantially different historical settings. For example, across a diverse range of historical and contemporary cases, it explores the commonalities involved in constructing and subverting religious as well as educational authority.

Our book ends with a beginning, for in the seventh and concluding chapter, we return to the theme of the origins of literacy in prehistory, in literary and cinematic imaginings, and in ethnographic and ethnohistorical cases. Picking up the thread of Derrida's deconstruction of the idea of origins, his expansion of the concept of writing, and his links between inscription and power, we discuss again the Tolowa language revitalization program. This program and its ethnographic setting provide an example of the "beginning" of writing in which writing as practice and ideology is already long presupposed, in which contemporary identity politics are paramount, and in which the minutiae of transcription reflect familial as well as institutional rivalries. Understanding such a case requires a post-structuralist as well as ethnographic understanding of literacy. Such understanding neither accepts text/talk polarities nor ignores the cumulative, value-laden role of such polarities in the development of Western thought and its effort to understand and control civilization's marginalized or disenfranchised "Others."

Drawing out the implications of this insight requires us to return to Goody's arguments about archives and power. Made in his earliest essays, these are also made in his latest contribution to the literacy debate (Goody, 2000), in which he challenges Derrida's views on writing and archives. That debate raises anew the question of technology which, as we show, has ongoing implications for questions of power, for claims about the "end of literacy," and for understandings of identity, especially in the globalized world of so-called electronic literacy. The nature of such computer-assisted literacy is the newest topic in the ongoing debate about technology, communicative practices, social arrangements, and the human condition. The shifting, imprecise, yet value-laden notion of literacy has been a central trope in such discussions for over four decades.

## 2

## THE LITERACY THESIS: VEXED QUESTIONS OF RATIONALITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND SELF

The invention of writing was the greatest movement by which mankind rose from barbarism to civilization. How vast its effect was, may be best measured by looking at the low condition of tribes still living without it, dependent on memory for their traditions and rules of life, and unable to amass knowledge as we do by keeping records of events, and storing up new observations for the use of future generations. Thus it is no doubt right to draw a line between barbarian and civilized where the art of writing comes in, for this gives permanence to history, law, and science. Such knowledge so goes with writing, that when a man is spoken of as learned, we at once take it to mean that he has read many books, which are the main source men learn from.

(Tylor, 1898, pp. 179–180)

### Introduction

Debates about the nature of literacy have been politically important because they involve claims about “great divides,” that is, about fundamental differences in humankind, in particular in the social, cultural and cognitive development of literates and nonliterates. This can be seen in the quote above from E. B. Tylor’s *Anthropology: an Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* which clearly expresses the social-evolutionary thinking that held sway a century ago. As might be expected, such sweeping claims and broad debates have led to numerous specialist controversies as well as policy-oriented studies. There have been longstanding controversies about the formal differences and similarities between spoken and written language, which are supposed to underlie many educational problems (for example, Purcell-Gates [1995]; Tannen [1982]; Whiteman [1981]). There have also been ongoing discussions of the role of literacy in economic betterment, whether concerning historically prior periods (Cipolla, 1969; Graff, 1981b), developing nations within the post-World War II economic order (Freebody and Welch, 1993; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; UNESCO, 1957; Wagner, 1987), or marginalized populations within the world’s developed economies (Canada, 1996; Farkas, 1996; Friedmann, 1960; Ohmann, 1987).

These debates have largely been inconclusive. Where there have been substantive advances, such advances have depended upon reformulating the terms of the debate – as in Biber’s (1988) demonstration that the formal linguistic

Cambridge University Press

0521593565 - Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity

James Collins and Richard Blot

Excerpt

[More information](#)

differences attributed to spoken versus written language modes are either nonexistent or due to genre rather than mode. In Biber's case, he directly questioned and empirically demonstrated the invalidity of the oral/written contrast, rather than disputing the consequences after the conceptual dichotomy has been granted. Such reformulation is quite difficult, however, and frequently of limited impact – Biber's research, for example, appears to have had little influence on discussions of literacy. As we will see, the tenacity of the spoken/written dichotomy, despite its questionable empirical basis, is due to the way in which acts of reading and writing are intertwined with how Western intellectual culture understands itself as distinct from, yet related to, others: other races, other classes (the “folk” or “masses”), and those more shadowy others, primordial and sexualized, that constitute the psychic sense of self.

As the Tylor quote shows, it is an old argument within Western thought that there are fundamental differences or “great divides” in human intellect and cognition, differences tied to stages of civilization, grammatical elaboration, or racial order (Lévi-Bruhl, 1926; Stocking, 1968). The criticisms of such views are also longstanding and are or should be well known (Boas, 1911; Gould, 1981; Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Nonetheless, intellectual concern with essential differences between human populations remains a current topic, for various ideological reasons, as attested to by the recent “hereditarian” controversy about race, intelligence, and inequality in the United States (Fischer, 1996; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Lewontin, 2000; Patterson, 1997). In the discipline of anthropology in the post-World War II period, “great divide” theories were reformulated. Fundamental differences in human cognition and human social and cultural conditions were attributed not to differences in human nature, or stages of civilization, but rather to literacy, conceived as a “technology of the intellect.”

The reformulation was only partial, however, for it has proven difficult to disentangle arguments about literacy from Tylorian assumptions about progress and the direction of history, about civilization and modernity. This is because the connections are both deep and pervasive. Our very concept of civilization has taken writing as essential.<sup>1</sup> The existence of writing has been presumed to be a feature which distinguished civilizations, with their cities, advanced economies, and specialized arts and technologies, from simpler forms of human societies which, lacking cities, social classes, and differentiated realms of politics and law, religion and art, were deemed primitive (Friedman, 1994; Gelb, 1963; Lévi-Strauss, 1964). To provide education and literacy was one aspect of the *mission civilatrice* that European colonial powers proclaimed as they secured control of much of the globe. As we will discuss more fully in chapter 6, such education was typically in a European language and script, and it was consciously viewed as a way to transform, to remake the morals and minds of, colonized peoples (Asad, 1992).