

MULTIPLE LITERACIES  
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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A REFLECTIVE MOMENT  
IN THE HISTORY OF LITERACY

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The 1998 Watson Conference and the related chapters presented in this volume represent but one moment in the complex and emergent history of literacy. More specifically, these documents represent one moment in the history of reflection on literacy.

It is hardly surprising that we should reflect about literacy, for literacy is an overwhelmingly reflective activity. We think when we read and when we write, as meanings play out in our mind, and we frequently think about what it means to read and to write and to be caught up in the meanings mediated by reading and writing. One reason we think about these things is that we are constantly making choices as we read and write—about what to read and write, how to do it, what meanings we should take from our own and others' texts, how these meanings should affect our understanding and action. As literacy educators it is even less surprising that we should reflect on literacy, for our profession demands we think about what it is we are teaching, how it may be taught and developed. Moreover, we constantly look on students grappling with the tasks of literacy and wonder what is happening with them, what their difficulties are, and what we can do to help them.

The history of literacy extends about 5,000 years, the history of inscription even longer. And the history of articulate reflection on literacy

goes back to the earliest extant texts. The Epic of Gilgamesh, dating to the middle of the second Millennium BC, reports the hero's inscription of knowledge as one of his accomplishments:

the lord of wisdom, he who knew everything, Gilgamesh,  
 who saw things secret, opened the place hidden,  
 and carried back word of the time before the Flood—  
 he travelled the road, exhausted, in pain,  
 and cut his works into a stone tablet.

(II.4-8)

We know how much the inscription, education, and knowledge industries have expanded since then. Currently, 3 to 4 billion people are literate, and most of them were taught by somebody, using some kind of teaching book. In the United States alone, the publishing industry in 1997 had \$117 billion in shipments, with more than \$6 billion of that being textbooks—primary through university (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

So three October days in Louisville, near the end of the fifth millennium of literacy and the first millennium of printing, in the middle of the sixth century of printing and publishing in the west, and the second century of expanding public education is indeed just a small spot on a very large map.

That map is a very rapidly changing one, however, with the Internet being only the most recent of a series of transformative technologies in the last two centuries—including steam and rotary presses, cheap paper, pencil, fountain and ball point pens, railroads to carry books and newspapers rapidly to distant markets, telegraphy, paperback books, the filing cabinet, and paper clips—that have made the written word cheap, convenient, and ubiquitous, transforming the economy, government, politics, knowledge, religion, entertainment, and education.

The material technologies that mediate literacy have changed the conditions of literacy and enabled expanding and creative uses of the written word. The earliest clay counters that are believed to be the precursors of literacy early elaborated into business accounting and commercial contracts, both of which took on new forms as they became the heart of the commercial system in early Renaissance Italy. Early letters to agents elaborated into the modern world of corporate and bureaucratic records and files. Inscribed laws and decrees became complex systems of governance and adjudication, with volumes of legislation, regulation, court records, precedent, and commentary. Early letters of useful news led to newsletters and newspapers, news commentary, and news magazines, and now the entire complex of news media. Scriptures beget commentary, scholarship, and prayer books. Transcriptions of public performances become poetry and drama and narra-

tives and novels and detective potboilers and Harlequin romances (Bazerman, 2000a, 2000b).

Each of these elaborating documentary forms are part of elaborating social systems, roles and activities. Written law has spawned judges and appellate judges and Supreme Court justices, lawyers and clients and paralegals, law librarians and law professors and law students, and fundraisers for law schools. Financial records and financial instruments created professions of accountants, bookkeepers, clerks, typists, bankers, middle-level managers, and IRS agents. And for each field, complexes of activities and roles become built on the spine of written genres that stabilized and regularized relations within increasingly differentiated and elaborated activity systems (Bazerman, 1997). As literate artifacts grew in complexity and variety, tied to increasingly specialized activities and forms of knowledge, schooling became crucial for the maintenance of social systems and the fates of people whose lives were ever more caught up within those systems. The literacies, literate practices, and literatures of schooling become accordingly extensive and complex in relation to the multiple literacies of societies that they prepared people for.

Each area of social activity—law, business, finances, government, politics, entertainment, education, knowledge production—is now creating new presences on the internet and other electronic media. In turn, each of the new presences are changing the activities and social organization of these worlds of social action, creating new forms of life for us to live in and through.

This dazzling growth and articulation of new literate practices has created the information age. For several centuries our lives have been increasing tied up with literate practice—so that we live not only in the built world of cities and roads and electric grids, but in a built symbolic world of inscriptions. These inscriptions now move so fast, are so ubiquitous and cheap, proliferate so rapidly, and are becoming so essential for the activities of our lives, that the manipulation of these symbols is seen as the defining characteristic of the foreseeable future—the information age.

One of the talmudic commentaries on Genesis asks when exactly Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge and began sinning. The commentary answers, early in the morning of the eighth day. People seem in a headlong rush to eat of the fruits of knowledge and live the life that knowledge will give us. Comedian George Burns died shortly after his 100th birthday. Within his life he saw the development of the internet, computers, television, radio, the expectation of universal literacy and universal secondary education, and wide access to the universities. The lives of two George Burns span the development of modern journalism and cheap printing, mass education, and the modern research university. Six George Burns would have seen Gutenberg, only 50 George Burns the birth of writing, and

500 George Burns perhaps the very origins of language. What will be the world of literacy that the George Burns born today will see? And what will the schooling be like to prepare people to participate in that world? And what will the writing instruction be to support these students in their schooling and in the social literate worlds beyond school?

So what are the parts of literacy that we reflect on at this moment in this volume? This is to ask what parts of literacy are we now building and rebuilding. What adjustments are we contemplating between the social orders we live in and the literate activity that sustains those orders and provides means for individuals to participate? What are we foreseeing as the literate needs of coming generations?

A major theme in this volume, and the conference it comes out of, has been an issue with us since the beginning of literacy: the power that comes with literacy and who should have access to it. Even though the earliest scribes were slaves or others low in social power, they served the powerful who used literacy to extend their military, political, religious, and commercial empires. No matter how low their origins, scribal classes soon learned how to use their monopoly on communicative power-at-a-distance to entrench their place and extend their authority, within the bureaucracies of state, church, commerce, or later, schooling—as lawyers, civil servants, priests, accountants and economists, corporate managers, professors, and all the other literate professionals that hold sway over the dominant institutions of modern life. As literacy has increasingly become the lifeblood of almost all aspects of life, access is no longer just about who will have the good fortune to rise, but has become about whether all people will have the ability to carry out day-to-day interactions, to protect themselves within those literate systems which encompass their lives, and to make a living in an information economy. Even athletes now need the information, habits, and regimen that are associated with modern literate practice. Chapters in this volume note with disapproval the stigmatization of those who remain unlettered and the way those stigmatizations serve to entrench the interests and ideology of the lettered (Gleason, Chap. 2; Ball, Chap. 19). But they also note approvingly and with interest those who gain literacy despite not being historically favored with direct access to extensive formal literacy education (Branch, Chap. 1; Gleason, Chap. 2; Hogg, Chap. 4). By such negative and positive tales we reaffirm our commitment to universal access to literacy—seeing it as a fundamental human right and necessity in the modern world.

As professional literacy educators, all the authors in this volume realize their commitment to access to literacy through teaching. Questions of teaching underlie most of the essays here and are the explicit focus of a large number of them. What to teach? How to teach? How to organize classrooms? How to develop and train teachers? Such questions also have a long

history, but they gained force and focus in the last century as those employed in schools became recognized as professionals requiring specialized knowledge and training. The teaching of writing became such a research-based profession only in recent decades. Now the range of teaching concerns and approaches include the development of rhetorical reading (Wardle, Chap. 5), large group discussions (Beach, Eddleston, & Philippot, Chap. 7), ESL students in writing classrooms (Leki, Chap. 6), the use of portfolios in GTA training (Bell, Chap. 3), the use of technology to enhance learning (Tannacito, Chap. 9; Schendel, Neal, & Hartley, Chap. 10; Pence, Chap. 13), and disciplinarily specific forms of writing (Patton & Nagelhout, Chap. 8).

The great value placed on literacy currently has, several authors in this volume recognize, resulted in other realms of human knowing and accomplishment being inappropriately demoted in value. At stake is the worth of people who have pursued paths alternative to or in addition to literacy, our support of these other forms of development, and an understanding in the way the development of these other capacities may influence literacy learning. Chapters in this volume recover the forms of knowing associated with sports (Cheville, Chap. 17), music (Sohn, Chap. 14), the visual arts (Swiencicki, Chap. 16; Bruch, Kinloch, & Marback, Chap. 20; Gray-Rosendale, Chap. 21), and mathematics (Johanek, Chap. 18). To increase the value of these skills authors label them as forms of literacy—which ironically maintains letters as the paradigm of skills. One chapter also recovers the role of affect in what is sometimes mistaken to be the rational and cognitive world of literacy. The chapter explores the regimes of emotion and relation that pervade and constrain writing. If we remain emotionally undeveloped and unaware, our writing becomes limited and enlisted into ideologically driven regimes of meaning and social order (Langstraat, Chap. 15).

Literacy has, since the 18th century, been viewed as a tool of critical consciousness, closely associated with democratic revolution and reform. Modern democracies based as much on literacy as rhetoric have a different cast than classical rhetorical democracies, with a new emphasis on widespread information, rational bureaucratization, and critical inquiry (sometimes carried out through specialists in journalism or the academy). Chapters here examine the role of journalism in expressing critical consciousness (Swiencicki, Chap. 16; Gray-Rosendale, Chap. 21) and the role of the literacy classroom in developing critical consciousness (Gleason, Chap. 2); other chapters take on the direct role of critical analysis of our culture (Ramey, Chap. 11; Wysocki, Chap. 12; Langstraat, Chap. 15; Bruch, Kinloch, & Marback, Chap. 20).

Literacy has always developed hand in hand with the technologies by which it is realized—whether clay tablet, printing press, or microchip—

and people have almost always immediately wondered about and commented on how the newest technology might be used and its consequences. The latest technological changes of the electronic revolution have, however, come at a time when a large class of literacy education professionals have developed, there are large schooling responsibilities for literacy, the technological changes are being adopted widely and rapidly in society, and schools have for internal and external reasons been reasonably quick in responding to (or at least worrying about) the increasing pace of changes. Whether or not technology is the most fundamental issue literacy professionals must address over the next few decades remains to be seen, but it is certainly the most pressing. Chapters in this volume examine the meanings being enacted within these latest transformations of literacy (Wysocki, Chap. 12; Ramey, Chap. 11) and how the technology is changing the practices of literacy learners (Tannacito, Chap. 9; Schendel, Neal, & Hartley, Chap. 10).

Literacy and literacy education are ongoing processes, caught up with the power, institutions, practices, technologies, and other forms of communication and practice of the time. Literacy is always recreated with every act of reading and writing, always local, always of the moment, but also always part of past and future literate acts for texts travel through time. If we were to put this volume in the time capsule to be opened at the Watson Conference on Literacy in 2100, the particulars of literacy would certainly be different, maybe substantially different, perhaps because of the way in which technology and the accompanying social changes will have rearranged power and access, institutions and practices, and opportunities. But I suspect the themes will be recognizably continuous with the issues we worry about now—unless literacy educators are not there to be pondering over them. I wouldn't put my money, though, on literacy education going out of fashion for some time.

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