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Introduction*

Literacy and history have much in common. Both are prone to perceptions of crisis and decline—precipitous declines that are sometimes claimed to threaten civilization as we know it. Both literacy and history attach themselves to discourses of legacies and lessons. Both are susceptible to mythologization and are hard to define and measure. With attention to the calls for “many literacies” and the long reign of “the literacy myth,” Chapters 2 and 3 introduce some of these threads. Subsequent chapters develop them.

New interdisciplinary histories of literacy challenge those charges, among other presumptions about literacy that have been influential in many academic disciplines, in public debate, and among policymakers (see *Recent Emphases in Historical Literacy Studies* and Chapters 4 and 5, below). (For example also compare Hirsch, 1987 with my own work cited below and Gagnon, 1989; Stearns, 1991, 1993; Kaestle, et al., 1991; Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998.)

The study of literacy is prominent among both historical and contemporary subjects that have attracted significant interdisciplinary attention (see Chapters 7, 8, and 5 in this book). For example, it is an established interest of social, economic, cultural, and demographic historians, their colleagues in fields of contemporary studies, and other interdisciplinary scholars across the disciplines (see for example my own work, listed below and in the Bibliography). At the same time, historical studies have influenced research and understanding—including great debates over literacy’s impacts—well beyond the boundaries of the discipline of history. This collection of studies reflects and speaks to those relationships from a number of perspectives and with special attention to literacy myths and interdisciplinary research and interpretation (see also Vincent, 2003; Graff et al., 2005).

The history of literacy is an instructive example of interdisciplinary history with respect to its founding and the course of its development. Chapters 7 and 8 tell this story, each amplifying and complementing the other, first in general terms of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary dimensions of literacy studies, and second in the specific case of Literacy Studies @ Ohio State University (LiteracyStudies@OSU), a university-wide interdisciplinary program that I developed beginning in 2004.

Literacy Studies followed a path common to new social science influenced histories of the 1960s-1980s (see *New Historical Literacy Studies*, and Chapters 7 and 8 below). (See, in general for what follows, Graff, 1987, 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Graff et al., 2005; Kaestle et al., 1991.) On the one hand, pioneering social science historians of the 1960s and 1970s confronted a diffuse historical, and more general, literature that made easy (if poorly documented) generalizations about the distribution of literacy across populations and also (even though vaguely) the great significance of literacy's presence, absence, or degree of diffusion. On the other hand, they confronted a social science literature, some of it with theoretical aspirations, generally derived from modernization approaches that placed literacy squarely among the requisites for progress by individuals and by groups.

The historical writing rested on a thin base of mainly anecdotal evidence, with little concern about its accuracy or representativeness. The social science writing included modernization theories with stages and threshold levels, macrosocial correlations from aggregate data, and, occasionally, contemporary case studies. Taken together, the studies that constitute this book explore complicated, confusing, and very important aspects of this history and its continuing legacies and consequences, from the life and times of the literacy myth, to reading "signs of the times," and matters of conceptualization, theory, institutions, expectations, and policies.

Writings in both areas treated literacy uncritically and as unproblematic, whether conceptually or empirically. Literacy's key relationships, they assumed, were simple, linear, and direct, and its impact was universally powerful. At the same time, most scholarly writing neglected the subject of literacy even when it was highly relevant. These were among the characteristics, indeed hallmarks, of common views of literacy, elements that I identified collectively and designated "the literacy myth" in my book of that name, published in 1979, and whose more critical, often interdisciplinary study an international group of scholars, including myself, promoted from the 1970s on. Chapter 5 tells that story

in broad strokes, Chapters 3 and 4 probe the literacy myth. Chapters 2 and 6 reconsider outcomes and expectations. Chapters 7 and 8 probe the interesting relationships among disciplines and interdisciplines in the pursuit to understand literacy.

Critical of earlier work, the new literacy studies that emerged in the 1970s and especially the 1980s questioned the received wisdom that tied literacy autonomously and directly to individual and societal development, from social mobility (+) and criminal acts (-) to revolutions in industry (+), fertility (-), and democracy (+) [+ = positive relationship; - = negative relationship]. Skeptical about modernization models and with at least some of the conclusions taken from aggregative data, researchers from an impressive number of nations, disciplines, and specializations were wary about imprecise formulations, levels of generalization, and their evidential basis.

Critical and revisionist in intellectual orientation, a generation of scholars sought to test old and newer ideas, hypotheses, and theories with reliable and relevant data (see *Recent Emphases and New Historical Literacy Studies*, below). This included my books, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (1979), *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987), and related work.

Initially, this meant identifying measures of literacy that, ideally, were direct, systematic, routinely generated, longitudinal, and comparable—mainly quantitative indicators—and building databases to promote their use and enhance their accessibility to other researchers. In Sweden, this meant church registers; in France, marriage and military records; in Britain, marriage and census records; and in North America, manuscript census records. As research matured, the challenge became to interpret this material, increasingly in combination with other primary sources in its social, cultural, political economic *and* historical contexts (see Chapter 5 in particular; also Chapter 4).

The goal of a fully critical and comparative history of literacy remains elusive, despite the advances in research to which demographic and social databases contribute. Literacy studies have taught us to make comparisons and assessments more carefully, often restricting their range. As a recognizable field of literacy studies emerged, literacy's significance as an important variable for many subjects across the realms of social science, cultural studies, and other interdisciplinary histories became accepted (see Chapters 6 and 5 in particular). Its relevance expanded just as expectations of its universal powers were qualified and contextualized. That is a lesson which the chapters of this book explicate. Equally im-

portantly, as our understanding of the past has changed, so too has that of the present. That set of connections is an important part of the story of the literacy myth told in these pages.

Earlier expectations (and theories) that literacy's contribution to shaping or changing nations, and the men and women within them, was universal, unmediated, independent, and powerful have been quashed (see Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5). Literacy—that is, literacy by itself—is now much less often conceptualized as independently transformative. To the contrary, we now anticipate and recognize its impact to be shaped by specific historical circumstances as context-dependent, complicated rather than simple, incomplete or uneven, interactive rather than determinative. Literacy's influences are mediated by a host of other intervening factors of a personal, structural, or cultural historical nature rather than universal. In other words, literacy is a historical variable, and it is historically variable.

The Chapters

The chapters in this book confirm this point. The seven wide-ranging and diverse essays speak to each other's central concerns about the place of literacy in modern and late-modern culture and society, and its complicated historical foundations. They are supported by a final chapter, a Bibliography of the History of Literacy. The essays reflect different origins; for example, several saw first life as public lectures or keynote addresses: Chapters 2, 5, and 7. Four were invited presentations. All were drafted for interdisciplinary audiences. Together, they reconsider central questions related to literacy, and are critical, comparative, and historical. The collection is noteworthy for its attention to my critical reflections on the path-breaking identification of “the literacy myth” as well as my recent work in developing the LiteracyStudies@OSU initiative.

The studies also deal with fears about literacy, or illiteracy, that are shared by academics and concerned citizens. The nonspecialist essays speak to both academic and nonacademic audiences across disciplines and cultural orientations.

Selected from my recent writing, the chapters draw on my recent academic experiences. As a body, they reflect and are influenced by my relocation in 2004 to Ohio State University as the first Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies and Professor of English and History, and my building LiteracyStudies@OSU as an experiment and a model for university-wide interdisciplinary programs. That story is told explicitly

in Chapter 8 “LiteracyStudies@OSU in Theory and in Practice,” but in various ways, it touches all the pieces of the book. This represented a shift in my academic interests back to literacy studies, a return to my concentration in graduate school and the first decade and a half to two decades of my academic life. In the late 1980s my interests had shifted more to the history of children and youth and the history of cities. More recently, my research focuses on the social history of interdisciplinarity.

Together, the chapters are the reflections of a scholar who has influenced the understanding of literacy for more than 30 years. Landmark essays, they are interdisciplinary, critical, and historical. They are also new, different, and timely perspectives on an important subject of widespread interest and concern. My studies represent a variety of relevant topics, approaches, styles, and genres exploring the meanings of literacy and alternative ways to understand them. And as mentioned, my critical reconsideration of my fundamental identification of “the literacy myth” and recent work in developing the university-wide, interdisciplinary LiteracyStudies@OSU initiative are special features of this collection of accessible, nontechnical, and nonspecialist essays.

Introducing the Chapters

Chapter 2 “Many Literacies: Reading Signs of the Times”

Every now and then, I look up and out from the past (where, as a historian, I live more or less comfortably much of the time) to ask if matters relating to literacy, its condition, relationships to lives and to its lessons, and our understandings, have improved or changed? Have we learned from our own experience?

In asking such questions, I try to read “signs of the times”—which typically tell me that the answer(s) is not much, not enough, not as much as we need. Many implications follow, that we might theorize or historicize, or both.

Among the many relevant questions, consider these:

What is the state of play between *practices* of literacy and *talk* about them? How do matters of discourse and ideology shape practices? What are the *limits* of current conceptualizations?

What are the *new literacy myths*? What is their relationship to social, cultural, economic, and political change ... and to historical change?

Literacy or Literacies? What’s wrong with these terms and the conceptualizations on which they stand?

Literacy's *place(s)* in American culture and society—ambiguous and contradictory, sometimes surprisingly so.

Chapter 3 “Literacy Myths,” co-authored with John Duffy

Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.” Such presumptions have a venerable historical lineage. Taken together, these attitudes constitute what I have called “the literacy myth.” Many researchers and commentators have adopted this usage.

Such attitudes about literacy represent a “myth” because they exist apart from and beyond empirical evidence that might clarify the actual functions, meanings, and effects of reading and writing. Like all myths, the literacy myth is not so much a falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes. For these reasons, the literacy myth is powerful and resistant to revision.

Chapter 4 “The Literacy Myth at Thirty”

This chapter reviews the thirty year history of *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (1979). I reflect on *The Literacy Myth* and the critical concept of “the literacy myth” that it proposed on the occasion of the book’s thirtieth anniversary, a special and also a sobering moment. On the one hand, I speak to its broad influence in a number of fields of study. I also consider some of the criticisms encountered. On the other hand, I discuss what I think are its principal weaknesses and limits. The success of *The Literacy Myth* may be determined at least in part by the extent to which it stimulates new research and thinking that begin to supplant it. After considering the relevance and value of its general arguments for both persisting and newer questions and issues, I reframe my conclusions about social myths and in particular “the literacy myth.”

Chapter 5 "Assessing the History of Literacy: Themes and Questions"

The history of literacy is well established as a regular, formal, significant, and sometimes central concern of historians of a wide range of topical, chronological, and methodological inclinations. The active thrust and exceptional growth in historical literacy studies over the past two decades have propelled the subject to new prominence. Highlighting increasingly the spheres of reading and of writing, stimulating searches for interdisciplinary approaches (methods and interpretive frames), and probing relations of past to present stand out among the impacts. The maturation of the historical study of literacy has been enormously beneficial, inside the academy and on occasion beyond its walls. Nevertheless, this significant body of scholarship demands attention more broadly, both in terms of what it may contribute to other researchers, planners, and thinkers, and in terms of its own growing needs for inter- and intra-disciplinary cooperation and constructive criticism.

Chapter 6 "New Introduction" to National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, with Robert F. Arnove

Reflecting on the publication of the first edition of *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, we find that the lessons learned from surveying comparatively four centuries of literacy movements are as important today as they were two decades ago. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning announced on September 6, 2007 that "International Literacy Day provides an occasion to put the spotlight on the neglected goal of literacy which is crucial not only for achieving education for all but, more broadly, for attaining the overarching goal of reducing human poverty." Despite major international initiatives spanning over five decades to reduce illiteracy and provide basic education to all, current data indicate that more than 860 million adults lack minimal capacities to read, write, and calculate. Two-thirds of this number are women. Within regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, over 50 percent of the population is illiterate.

Chapter 7 "Literacy Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies: Reflections on History and Theory"

This chapter brings together my current interests, including the social and cultural history of interdisciplinarity and the building of a univer-

sity-wide interdisciplinary program or set of integrated programs in Literacy Studies at a large and disciplinary-ordered public university (LiteracyStudies@OSU, my Ohio State University endeavors since 2004). Taken together, they embrace and interrelate conceptually and theoretically both intellectual and institutional articulations, and social and cultural criticism: the history of interdisciplinarity from the late nineteenth century to the present, and the delineation of an interdisciplinary field of study with attention to its critical, comparative, and historical foundations.

In this chapter, I explore the development of literacy studies in terms of the history of interdisciplinarity. It also compares that narrative to the principal explanations of interdisciplinary developments in higher education. At the same time, I argue, our general understanding of interdisciplinarity over time and across “disciplinary clusters” needs new critical, comparative, and historical approaches and understandings.

Chapter 8 “LiteracyStudies@OSU as Theory and Practice”

Question: What happens when you cross a 50-some-year-old social historian who is a recognized authority on the history of literacy and who has long pursued interdisciplinary programs and their development, with a faculty position as Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies (and professor of English and history), a huge Department of English, an Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities, and a mega-university in the middle of Ohio in the early twenty-first century?

Answer: You get LiteracyStudies@OSU, a campus-wide interdisciplinary initiative and an experiment in university-wide interdisciplinarity. You get a series of remarkable transformations, challenging relationships, and complicated questions. And a potentially unique case study in the sociology of interdisciplinary knowledge and organization, with some general lessons to draw. All in a few years beginning in 2004.

Lessons: Literacy beyond Myths and Legacies

Literacy’s students now understand that the equation or synonymy of literacy acquisition with institutions that we call schools and with childhood is itself a fairly recent historical development. Other arrangements were once common. They included families, workplaces, and peer, religious, and political groups. We recognize that the environment in which one learns to read or write has a major influence on the level of ability to use and the likely use of those skills.

Social attributes (including ascribed characteristics like gender, race, ethnicity, and social class) and historical contexts, which are shaped by time and place, mediate literacy's impacts, for example, on chances for social or geographic mobility. Literacy seems to have a more direct influence on longer distance migration. When established widely, that relationship will carry major implications for the historical study of both sending and receiving societies and for immigrants. Literacy's links with economic development are both direct and indirect, multiple, and contradictory. For example, its value to skilled artisans may differ radically from its import for unskilled workers. Literacy levels sometimes rise as an effect rather than a cause of industrialization. Industrialization may depress literacy levels through its negative impact on schooling chances for the young, while over a longer term its contribution may be more positive.

Experiences of learning literacy include cognitive and noncognitive influences. This is not to suggest that literacy should be construed as any less important, but that its historical roles are complicated and historically variable. Today, it is difficult to generalize broadly about literacy as a historical factor. But that only makes it a more compelling subject, another theme of the chapters of this book. (See the sections *Recent Emphases in Historical Literacy Studies*, *New Historical Literacy Studies*, and *Lessons from the History of Literacy*, below.)

Literacy Studies has succeeded in establishing a new historical field where there was none. Statistical time series developed for many geographic areas and historical eras limit cavalier generalizations about literacy rates and their strong meanings, whether by demographers, economists, linguists, or literary historians. Three decades of scholarship have transformed how interdisciplinary historians and many other students conceptualize literacy. Both contemporary and historical theories that embrace literacy are undergoing major revision because of this body of research and recent studies that point in similar directions.

The view that literacy's importance and influences depend on specific social and historical context, which, in effect, give literacy its meanings—that literacy's impacts are mediated and restricted, that its effects are social and particular, that literacy must be understood as one among a number of communication media and technologies—replaces unquestioned certainty that literacy's powers were universal, independent, and determinative. (See *Recent emphases in historical literacy studies*, *New historical literacy studies*, below.)

Literacy's historians know how recently these ideas about literacy's transforming and developmental powers were central to theories that

held sway in major areas of economics, demography, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and the humanities. The challenge to probe previous understandings with suitable historical data and test the strong theories of literacy attests to the contributions that interdisciplinary history can make. (See Lessons, below.)

The emergence of literacy as an interdisciplinary field for contemporary scholars opens the way for a richer exchange between historians and other researchers for the mutual reshaping of inquiry past, present, and future that is part of the promise of literacy's history.

Historical studies of literacy, finally, contribute to public discourse, debate, and policy talk internationally. The many crucial points of intersection include the demonstration that no golden age for literacy ever existed, that there are multiple paths to literacy for individuals and societies, that quantitative measures of literacy do not translate easily to qualitative assessments, that the environment in which literacy is learned affects the usefulness of the skills, that the connections between literacy and inequality are many, and that the constructs of literacy (its learning and its uses) are usually conceived far too narrowly.

Historians of literacy need to bring their criticisms and new conclusions to audiences throughout the academy and beyond. That ranks high among the aspirations of this book. Both historians and other students of literacy need to probe the nature of literacy as a historical subject and variable. In part, they can do this by bridging the present gap between the history of literacy and new research on printing, publishing, and readership, on the one hand, and new perspectives in the humanities, anthropology, and psychology, on the other hand. Literacy studies join other interdisciplinary histories in exploring new approaches to society and culture through narrative, feminist theories, literary theories, critical theory, and many other connections across the human sciences in the early twenty-first century.

Recent Emphases in Historical Literacy Studies

- Economic history—greater criticism, greater efforts at more precise specification
- Demography—to a lesser extent but more subtly
- Readers and their readings: Impacts, difference/differentiation
- Learning literacy(ies)/Using literacy(ies) including levels, limits, contexts, practice, performance
- Ethnographies of literacy in practice
- Deconstructions of literacy as promotion, expectation, ideology, theory

- Multiple literacies & multi-media contexts (including multi-lingual)
- Reading/textuality/criticism/reader response/literary theory
- Publishing & distribution/circulation/communications
- Religion: influences & impacts, consequences
- Cultures, high, middling, popular, etc.—intersections, interactions, separations
- Reading & writing: Creation, expression, performance
- History of emotions
- Political culture/political action
- Gender, social class, race, ethnicity, generation
- Connecting past, present, & future

New Historical Literacy Studies

1. Historical literacy studies must build upon their own past while also breaking away from it: sharper contextual grounding; time series; linkages, and interrelationships.
2. Comparative studies.
3. New conceptualizations of context for study and interpretation including material conditions, motivations, opportunities, needs and demands, traditions, transformations, historical “ethnographies,” and micro-histories.
4. Critical examination of the conceptualization of literacy itself—beyond independent and dependent variables.
5. Literacy and the “creation of meaning”—linguistic and cultural turns, reading, and so on; for example, history of literacy and transformation of cultural and intellectual history; history of the book, and history of literacy.
6. Sharper theoretical awareness of the relevance of the history of literacy for many important aspects of social, economic, and psychological theory; history as grounds for testing theories.
7. Has the tradition of taking literacy as primary object of analysis—“the history of literacy”—approached its end point? From the history of literacy to “literacy in history”?
8. Policy issues: social problems, development paths, costs and consequences, alternatives and understandings.

Lessons from the History of Literacy

1. The historicity of literacy constitutes a first theme from which many other key imperatives and implications follow. Reading and writing take on their meaning and acquire their value only in concrete historical circumstances that mediate in specific terms whatever general or supposedly “universal” attributes or concomitant may be claimed for literacy.
2. That subjects such as literacy, learning, and schooling, and the uses of reading and writing are simple, unproblematic notions is a historical myth. Experience, historical and more recent, underscores their fundamental complexity—practically and theoretically, their enormously complicated conceptual and highly problematic nature.
3. Typical conceptions of literacy share not only assumptions about their unproblematic status, but also the presumption of the central value neutrality.

Historical literacy studies demonstrate that no means or modes or learning is neutral—all incorporate the assumptions and expectations, biases or emphasis of production, association, prior use, transmission, maintenance, and preservation.

4. Historical studies document the damages, human costs that follow from the domination of the practical and theoretical presumptions that elevate the literate, the written to the status of the dominant partner in what Jack Goody calls the “Great Dichotomy” and Ruth Finnegan the “Great Divide.”
5. Hand in hand with simplicity and superiority have gone presumed ease of learning and expectation of individual along with societal progress. Historical studies reiterate the difficulties experienced in gaining, practicing, and mastering the elements of alphabetic literacy—seldom easy; learning literacy, and whatever lies beyond it, has always been hard work.
6. Multiple paths of learning literacy, employment of an extraordinary range of instructors, institutions, environments, and beginning texts, and diversity of conflicting or contradictory motivations pushing and pulling v. simple notions and images. Long transformation to twentieth-century notions that tie literacy acquisition to childhood.
7. Expectations and common practice of learning literacy as part of elementary education are themselves historical developments. The presumption holds that given the availability of written texts and elementary instruction, basic abilities of reading and writing are in themselves sufficient for further developing literacy and education. Failure reflects overwhelmingly on the individual.
8. Just as individuals followed different paths to literacy and learning, societies historically and more recently took different paths toward achieving rising levels of popular literacy: no one route to universal literacy and its associated “modern” concomitants.

These lists appear in Harvey J. Graff, “Assessing the History of Literacy in the 1990s: Themes and Questions,” Chapter 5 in this book.

Note

- * This introduction draws, in part, on my “Introduction,” in *Literacy and Historical Development: A Reader* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 1-9 and “Introduction to Historical Studies of Literacy,” *Understanding Literacy in Its Historical Contexts*, ed. Harvey J. Graff, Alison Mackinnon, Bengt Sandin, and Ian Winchester (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), 14-22.

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