

## Foreword

International and national commissions, along with publishing companies and independent booksellers, keep up a steady chorus of cautions to the public sector about drastic changes in the nature, appreciation, and expectations of literacy. Ironically, however, most of these warnings agree that uses and types of written texts have exploded since the opening of the twenty-first century. At the end of the last century, literary scholars could confidently name and describe the majority of written genres that could be found in nations with advanced economies. In classrooms throughout these nations, teachers taught and tested students for their competencies in producing and interpreting specific genres (such as the essay, laboratory report, etc.), believed to be central to the academic enterprise.

We now know that into the foreseeable future, neurologically sound individuals with reasonable access to role models who use technology both to produce and receive information and to network socially will learn to read and write more through goal-driven trial-and-error and practice than through formal instruction. Individuals will read and write a host of brief genres (ranging from word-limited texts to notations associated with visual images). Choices of timing and purpose for reading extended texts (such as how-to manuals and guidebooks, collections of short stories, biographies, or film scripts) will depend almost exclusively on stage of life, roles, and layers of identity. Different timescales, as well as definitions, will henceforth apply when we talk of “learning” to read or write. Many individuals now in their sixties have just begun to learn to read text messages from their grandchildren or the reports of medical test results emailed from their physicians. In the future, a perspective on life-long learning has to guide us to expect that multiple temporal dimensions, along with roles and needs, will shape individuals’ engagement with the extended texts generally associated with being *literate*.<sup>1</sup>

Sooner or later, those living in the midst of change want to know the history of specific phenomena for which strong feelings, both negative

and positive, remain. Literacy is no exception, and Graff has stepped in to offer an overview of the historical development of not only the myths of literacy, but also some central tenets of the protean shapes of its past. This is not a volume that attempts to detail how technological demands will continue to multiply the shaping and learning of reading and writing. Instead, Graff looks at intersections of academic valuations and occupational realities, acknowledging the consequences that follow when high-performance workplaces, outsourced labor, and low-service consumer sales owe relatively little to either the literacy instruction or concepts of *literate* we have known in the past.

Readers of this volume will surely recall their own histories with literacy. Few of us can remember precisely how or when we learned to read or write, though we all have our high moments of history with written texts—our own and those of others. Graff’s volume suggests that such moments are less likely in the future to be characterized as mountain peaks but more as dunes—rolling, shifting, linked to specific shores of exploration and discovery. But this is not to say that the multiplication of technologies for producing and receiving written texts will eliminate the thrill and challenge that mountain peaks give us in terms of both new perspectives and widened horizons. Many of those whose occupations keep them climbing dunes—engaging with short uneven bursts of texts for most of each day—are highly likely at some point to find the time and means to take on the peak experiences that result from fiction, autobiography, history, and poetry. Publishers keep bringing out these established genres, as well as specific extended texts that relate to visual representations (e.g., film scripts and case studies of film and television stars). The social networking the internet makes possible generates interest not only in those directly involved in one’s immediate social network. Also much desired are insights beyond this network into the lives of the famous who recount their paths to success (or colossal failures) in the worlds of business, culinary arts, entertainment, finance, and politics in their autobiographies, novels, confessionals, annotated cookbooks, etc.

Such texts, whether between the covers of a book or transmitted via technological devices that give readers easy access to multiple extended texts, travel with readers into those periods of time when certain types of forced leisure or “away-from-work” chunks of time are either chosen or imposed (e.g., in long airplane flights or travel by train or bus). Whether novels, narrative histories, or how-to books, these texts share a key quality with those volumes of literature that literacy instructors

have for generations held up as the ultimate reward of engagement with extended pieces of writing: *truth*. The writer John Updike often spoke of this quality of fiction. Readers and writers want texts that “ring true,” and this quality overtakes others that suggest mere instrumentalism or functionality. The “point” of truth never stands still, and it is toward that point that each new generation heads in their reading as they reach young adulthood and move through the lifespan. Readers and writers of long texts seek the privacy of self-reflection, psychological insight, thrill of the mystery, or seductive power of narrative that stimulates inner dialogue.

Sought most frequently in extended texts are narratives of human life. The animated characters of cartoons and videogames, as well as the actors within (auto)biographies, seven-step advice books, confessionals, and novels, repeatedly tell stories of the capacity of individuals to overcome problems, to rise to challenges of the human spirit. Even in the multiplying social webs that technology makes possible, most of us are likely at some turning point in our lives to seek some sense of what is *true* for us. This realization leads us to step away, even temporarily, from the seductive bliss of alternatively drifting and navigating the vastness of the Internet sea. We are drawn to stop for a longer look at the direct human truth of the lived experiences of others and hence of ourselves.

Knowing the history of literacy with its “myths, legacies, and lessons” enables us to look at the changes and new directions of reading and writing ahead with some sense of “truth.” Sooner or later, that which is vital in extended texts will come into the lives of most of us. Books give a permanence not tied to changes in either hardware or software but to our own personal histories, timescales, and physical spaces. When we carry or move our books around with us, memories come with them, whether in the textbook of a beloved class once taken or the gift of a now-forgotten lover. Books remind us not only of where we have been (museums, bike trips, vacations, family reunions), but also of where we may yet go in our travels, careers, or roles as parents, worshippers, citizens, or healers (of ourselves or others). Through books as our most permanent artifacts of literacy, we have the privilege of holding not only the past and present but of contemplating the future.

The intellectual and social history embedded in this collection will stir readers to reconsider the dire warnings of the “end” of the book (or of literacy, reading, and the like). Though the young and technologically enamored, addicted, and dependent may seem not to give great hope of their turning toward sustained pursuits of leisure time with books or

other extended texts any time soon, history suggests that they will not do away with books. As they mature, questions will remain that cannot be answered in the quick bursts of instant wisdom the Internet spits out (along with “matched” marketing). The young will, in the main, come to need more in-depth trusted and faithful stories and explanations. This volume helps us believe in this characteristic of what it means to be human. As did Graff’s earlier volumes on the history of literacy, this volume asks us to see beyond what may seem imminent. Graff leads us to take the long view and to know that we gain nothing by believing the world today reveals a gaping divide between the magnificent promise we would wish literacy to hold forever and the miserable decline we may fear it suffers at the hand of the demons and angels of technology.

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#### Note

1.    Wortham, Stanton. 2006. *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.