

Harvey J. Graff: A Tribute

John Duffy, University of Notre Dame

Social historian Harvey J. Graff is nothing if not prolific and wide-ranging across time, space, and disciplines. In an academic career spanning some fifty years, Graff has published on interdisciplinarity, the history of childhood, and urban history, among many other topics. In recent years, as professor emeritus of English and history and Ohio Eminent Scholar and Academy Professor at Ohio State University, Graff has established himself as a formidable public intellectual, weighing in on issues in higher education, contemporary politics, and the U.S. media.

Yet for many of us in the field of writing studies, Graff is best known as a historian of literacy. In such essential works as *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City* (1979), *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (1987), *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections of Literacy Past and Present* (1987), and, most recently, *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* (2022), Graff challenged scholars studying literacy to move beyond representations of the ethnographic present that were characteristic of much early work in the literacy studies.

Graff's work, in contrast, called upon literacy researchers to address the historical dimensions of literacy development, practice, and pedagogy. It seems fair to say that if Graff did not invent the field of literacy studies as we know it today, he did much to shape its present intellectual and methodological commitments. Perhaps no contribution has been as significant as Graff's conception of the literacy myth, described by Graff and Duffy (2008) as

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 (Graff 1979, 1987).

Graff argued that faith in literacy as an independent and critical variable necessary for social change obscured the role of multiple factors and forces—economic, political, cultural, or individual—that create or constrain conditions for such change to occur. A quarter century after its publication, *The Literacy Myth* can perhaps be best understood as the unmaking of a myth. After Graff, it was difficult for literacy researchers to maintain the belief, perhaps aspirational, perhaps naïve, that the teaching of literacy by itself could address the inequities that education was supposed to resolve.

Graff's work in literacy has been for many a touchstone. In recognition of his contributions, several scholars whose research owes a debt to Graff decided to offer at the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Portland, Oregon what was in essence a festschrift to Graff, a public testament of how his vision of literacy scholarship enhanced their own. Several of those papers are collected here, along with a summary reflection by Graff himself. We have chosen to publish these papers, those of us who were present in Portland, well after that event. We do this not because Graff requires additional acclamation—the list of awards and honors is extensive—but rather as an

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affirmation of his enduring influence on our work, on literacy studies, and on writing studies more broadly.

For Harvey Graff

Mike Rose, University of California, Los Angeles

Always late to the party, I discovered *The Literacy Myth* eight or so years after it was published in 1979. What a book! I'm holding my battered copy of the hardback, flipping through the pages, every one of which—every one—has underlining or an arrow, check mark, or wobbly star in the margins. There are also tons of comments. *The Literacy Myth* does what first-class scholarly books should do: it provides a probing and well-documented argument about the issue at hand, but it also educates the reader about the topic more generally. I learned so much from this book.

In the close to 30 years since I discovered *The Literacy Myth*, I've read a number of other of Harvey's books and articles, and every single one of them has taught me things I didn't know and helped me think differently or more broadly. There are not many writers who can do that for us.

One more thing I want to say about Harvey's work, and as an illustration I'll use a new book, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century*. Harvey can take a huge topic, such as interdisciplinary studies, wrap his head around it, read breathtaking amounts of literature on it, and think of a conceptual frame to write about it in a sensible and revealing way. *Undisciplining Knowledge* examines twelve fields, from genetic biology to cultural studies, and in just under 250 pages, Harvey fashions a creative and penetrating analysis of interdisciplinary work in our time. I haven't read another book quite like it.

I don't know how the hell you do it Harvey. But I'm sure glad you do.

See Harvey J. Graff, or, A Necessary Beginning for the New Humanities

Michael Harker, Georgia State University

In a relatively recent report entitled, "The Heart of the Matter," the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) warns of "grave, long-term consequences for the nation if full literacy is not supported by the humanities. Harvey J. Graff's scholarship teaches us that perennial notions of literacy crisis and decline go hand-in-hand with ambiguous characterizations of literacy and exaggerated claims about the powers of literacy, as well as the tendency to confide in literacy myths. Such tendencies underlie the logic of the AAAS's report as well as more recent proposals for educational reform, especially debates about the effectiveness and purpose of composition in higher education.

As recently as October of 2016, Joseph Teller's "Are We Teaching Composition All Wrong?" appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Consistent with one of composition's most notorious genres—the tradition of complaint (Greenbaum, 1969)—Teller lobbs the same tired criticisms about composition instruction we're accustomed to hearing in the halls of our departments, and now seeing with greater frequency in our newsfeeds on social media: students can't write clear sentences; they can't think critically or write focused arguments; they're incapable of revision, especially editing; sometimes, when drafting, they use the wrong word. Like critics who have come before him, Teller bemoans the point of his job, explaining that he's tried everything—he's even read some composition scholarship; we know this because he once uses the expression "current-traditional rhetoric."

We also know ways to productively address many of the problems vexing Teller.

In “We Know What Works in Teaching Composition,” Doug Hesse (2017) offers an evidence-driven rebuke of Teller’s criticisms, citing the results of his analysis of a 500,000-word corpus of student writing in which, as he notes, “well over 90 percent of student sentences coded clear and error free.” With the nuance, patience, and awareness of composition theory that only a seasoned and credentialed specialist can muster, Hesse turns on its head the claim that “substantial revision doesn’t happen in our courses,” pointing out that claims like Teller’s, while not entirely false, are grounded in lore. The truth is that revision strategies vary tremendously from one composition class to the next, even from one student to the next in the same class. Hesse politely eviscerates Teller’s claim that “composition courses must focus on product, not process,” pointing out that for over 70 years now composition pedagogy has drawn threads from genre theory and the history of rhetoric to provide students and instructors clear objectives and productive end points toward which they may aim their pedagogy and writing.

I find tremendous wisdom in Hesse’s response to Teller. His words offer an exemplary model—a playbook of sorts—for teacher-researchers in composition who find themselves on the business end of a current-traditional diatribe.

Yet, for all of the merits of this exchange, it is what is not said that I find the most remarkable. Although both polemics deal with the teaching of reading and writing at the university level, outlining pedagogical approaches, and drawing on anecdotes and examples of composition, the word, literacy is mentioned only once. Somewhat surprisingly, I think, is that the expression shows up in Teller’s essay when he notes, “For too long, I have deluded myself into thinking that my job in a composition course was to introduce students to a rich academic topic, make them read difficult texts, make up for years of barely-more-than-functional literacy and book aversion, teach them to be critical thinkers, and help them understand the oppressive structures of late capitalism—all the while helping them write focused arguments, revise, polish paragraphs, and edit sentences.”

When I read this passage, I am reminded of Arnove and Graff’s (1987) claim in *National Literacy Campaigns*: “To ask of literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much” (p. 27). Even Teller acknowledges that asking too much of the composition course is part of his problem, but Teller’s passage is particularly revealing in the context of the tradition of complaint because of the way Teller’s goals for composition hinge on generalizations and imprecise characterizations of functional literacy and its relationship to book aversion.

In my work, I have relied greatly on Harvey J. Graff’s scholarship to argue that when literacy is imprecisely defined, not defined at all, or expressed only in figurative terms, we find ourselves in the same place time and time again: criticizing instructors, students, and ourselves for not achieving the impossible, pursuing poorly identified pedagogical problems with unsustainable solutions, and perpetuating the tradition of complaint in unhelpful ways. Some might argue that these debates are necessary, but as I have argued—again drawing considerably from Harvey J. Graff—when these debates grow out of a sense of literacy crisis, they restrict our vision of what is possible in the classroom for both students and instructors.

Even worse, polemics like Teller’s can be used by administrators and policy makers to enact back to basics movements and restrict learning outcomes and methods of assessment, potentially limiting our understanding of what Graff describes as the varied paths people take to literacy acquisition and development.

It is when we see Harvey J. Graff in these debates—in essence when we acknowledge literacy myths, legacies, and lessons—that the terms determining the trajectory of these conversations shift us away from quibbles over pedagogical differences to evidence and lessons of literacy, revealing how literacy is, as Graff notes in “The Literacy Myth at 30”, “a historical variable in culture but also historically

variable” (p. 641). In doing so we come closer to understanding what perpetuates the tradition of complaint: as I have argued, through a lens constructed by Graff and others from literacy studies, this debate has never been about the best way to teach composition. Underlying these complaints about composition and its students is confusion about the fundamental nature of literacy, its consequences, and especially its limits.

Of course, one of the problems with this type of confusion is that as Arnove and Graff (1987) note in *National Literacy Campaigns*, “nagging questions remain” (p. 9). And with our reluctance to provide evidence-driven answers to these questions it is easy, especially amidst a literacy crisis—which we are perpetually in—to latch on to something new. Innovation and newness often offer the promise of a better future, but too often, as Graff demonstrates in his Grawemeyer Award-nominated work, *Undisciplining Knowledge* (2017), appeals to “newness also offer paths destined to fail” (p. 9). In what we might call higher education’s hyper-administrative era, interdisciplinarity has emerged as a solution to the challenges that face humanities. Falling enrollments, decreased budgets, disengaged students, the problems of digital literacy, teaching students to discern between real and fake news—all of these challenges we are told might be addressed more efficiently by bringing multiple disciplines together to approach these problems in pedagogically and intellectually innovative ways.

As he has done for the better part of his career, Graff is quick to remind us in his new work that the history of higher education is less remarkable for its revolutions than its continuities. Indeed, there’s nothing new about the lure or appeal of interdisciplinarity. And as much administrators prefer getting back to basics or keeping it simple, Graff shows us that there’s not one form of interdisciplinarity, nor one single path to interdisciplinarity, “no single model,” he writes, “no standard for successful development.” In fact, despite enthusiasm for new interdisciplinary initiatives and all of this talk about “reducing barriers and creating incentives,” it’s important to remember that there’s never been, as Graff writes, “a golden age of interdisciplinarity” (14). On the contrary, disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are inextricably linked. Graff asks us, in a way that only he can: “How simply and easily do we assume differences between disciplines and interdisciplines rather than relationships and connections” (p. 6)?

Graff’s question, which is aimed toward challenging dominant characterizations of interdisciplinarity, is an important one for those of us who have been, shall we say, involuntarily enrolled in the new humanities. It has implications for how we address perennial concerns and complaints about literacy instruction. Too often the relevance of composition is couched in terms of its ability to offer interdisciplinary solutions to interdisciplinary challenges and needs, in other words, too often, freshman composition is asked to be all things to all people. The lure of interdisciplinarity, as Graff describes it, promises institutional incentives, dynamic partnerships, efficient solutions, and usually enormous costs, but these costs, as Graff explains, shouldn’t necessarily be equated with importance or need (p. 3). In fact, we might approach the interdisciplinary reshaping of composition with hesitation. In *Undisciplining Knowledge*, Graff notes, “interdisciplinarity may only make the case that the humanities faculty are all interchangeable and hence that many are expendable” (Brint, 2015, as cited in Graff, 2017, p. 8).

Douglas Hesse’s views on composition are not interchangeable with Joseph Teller’s complaints and criticisms. Deborah Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship is not interchangeable with autonomous or binaristic views of the process through which people gain access to literacy. Shirley Bryce Heath’s nuanced readings of the communities of Roadville and Trackton are not interchangeable with great divide characterizations of orality and literacy. Harvey J. Graff’s notion of the literacy myth is not interchangeable with the falsehoods which his critics have been so quick to latch on to (or the ideologies they have so conveniently ignored). Indeed, Graff’s contributions to literacy studies are indispensable, and we would do well, especially as we usher in an age of hyper-administrative

oversight and interdisciplinary pressure, to heed his lessons and legacies of literacy and his spirit of intellectual and critical deliberation.

Literacy Myths and Hope Behind Bars

Patrick W. Berry, Syracuse University

I first learned of Harvey J. Graff's literacy myth when I was contemplating doctoral study in rhetoric and composition. Then, as now, I was drawn to numerous narrative renderings of literacy's power to transform lives. Reading iconic literacy narratives such as Mike Rose's popular *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), I was caught up in literacy's potential, as was I in my own potential to make a positive contribution as a teacher. But what I would come to see was that my beliefs in literacy were somewhat naïve—and I was not alone. I remember feeling jolted and humbled by Graff's work.

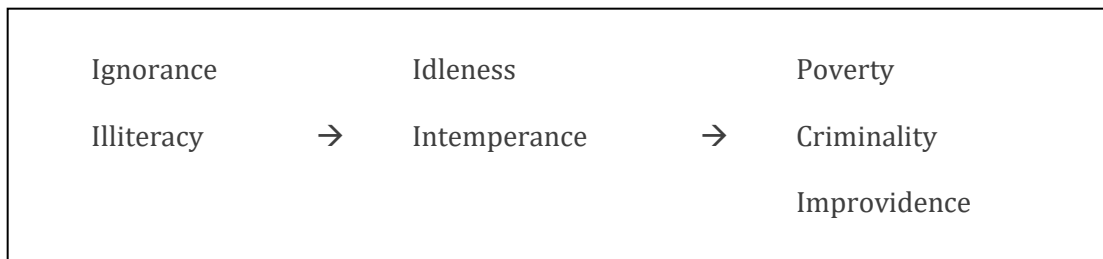
A few years later, while in graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I would get a chance to meet Graff and discuss literacy myths and the ways in which educators talk about literacy. With Graff's generous support and sometimes blunt guidance, I came to see how discussions of literacy—and, by extension, literacy myths—are far more nuanced than is sometimes acknowledged. Graff's work is a critical reminder of the need for situated and historical understandings of literacy. And for writing teachers, it is a call for a sense of humility with a reminder that hope in literacy is not enough.

Literacy myths are so persuasive that they are employed even by those who know better. In the pages of *College English*, Kirk Branch writes that “there is something unsettling about the quick availability—and proven effectiveness—of arguments that rely on literacy myths” (409). Referencing a fundraising letter by civil rights activist and educator Septima Clark, Branch shows how Clark evoked a rhetoric of crisis “connecting illiteracy to criminality and suggesting that such an overwhelming number of ‘illiterates’ put the power of the United States and the security of the world at risk” (408). Yet, as Branch points out, his aim is not to critique Clark, but to show this “rhetorical flexibility” at work as Clark sought resources for schools that were “systematically oppressing African Americans” (409).¹ This example underscores the rhetorics of literacy (see Duffy 2011) and how difficult it can be to explain its nuances in a world where literacy myths have such high currency (see also Graff and Duffy 2008).

Branch goes on to discuss the tension between hope and violence concerning literacy, referencing J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* (1991), a sobering text I recall reading at the start of my graduate career. It left me with nagging questions about what literacy, and educators, could really *do*. Given literacy's connections with myth, violence, and empowerment, the answers were not immediately clear. In my work on literacy and higher education in prison, I had similar questions about literacy's potential. There has been a tendency to prioritize basic literacy skills in prison education, often hoping that they might “cure” the criminal mind and prepare the incarcerated person for reentry into society.

Although Graff's groundbreaking study of literacy focused on nineteenth-century Canada, he illustrated how illiteracy became (as I would say it is still to some extent viewed to be) “the visible and measurable sign of a lack of schooling” and part of a larger discourse that positions it as a transformative agent that is key to the prevention of criminal behavior. Such hopes about what might happen through literacy exemplify the literacy myth, in which morality without literacy is presumed

to be impossible. This simplistic trajectory can be understood as a movement from illiteracy and ignorance to criminality:



(Graff, 1979, pg. 240)

The problem with this framework is that it makes illiteracy the sole actor in a drama in which it is in fact only one player. As Graff (1979) illustrates, a persistent central tenet of this framework is that “education [can] prevent criminality, if not cure it” (p. 235).² “Illiteracy,” Graff writes, “to be sure, was often symptomatic of poverty and lower-class status, which were also associated with arrest and punishment, but it was only one element among a complex of factors” (p. 236–37). The belief persists in discussions of incarcerated people and how best to rehabilitate them—that education, and by extension literacy, can single-handedly prevent crime. And yet while lack of literacy and poor schools are part of the problem, neither is the sole cause of criminality or mass incarceration.³

It is critical for educators, especially progressive ones, to recognize the shortsightedness of offering education and literacy as the answer to a myriad of social problems. I am reminded of a talk in which Michelle Alexander cautioned against imagining that if only we had better schools, fewer kids of color would find themselves in prison (Joe Friendly, 2010). Bad schools and poverty, she emphasized, had always been a part of poor communities, including the African American community, as Branch’s example underscores.⁴

Of course, Graff, Alexander, and I are not against the desire for better schools or literacy, but we recognize that “[e]ducation alone, like literacy by itself, does not provide an answer” (Graff, 1979, p. 267) to larger social problems. Graff is not asking us to abandon hope in literacy, but to abandon a naïve kind of hope in literacy instruction. In 2009, I heard that Ira Shor was coming to The Ohio State University to give a talk entitled “Can Critical Literacy Change the World?” Unfortunately, I was unable to attend, but when I met with Graff a few months later, I asked him for the answer to this question and he replied “Sometimes”—a response that encompassed the unpredictability and contingency of literacy-related work and offered a reminder that literacy can never be separated from discussions of context.

The critical literacy about which Shor writes—or Freire’s own pedagogy, for that matter—is not the same as the literacy featured in the U.S. Department of Education’s studies. For example, a 2007 study entitled *Literacy Behind Bars* begins with the all-too-familiar point that education and literacy matter:

Adults with low levels of education and literacy are more likely than adults with high education and literacy levels to be unemployed or to have incomes that put them below the poverty level (Kutner et al. 2007). Adults who have not obtained a high school diploma or any postsecondary education are also more likely to be incarcerated than adults with higher levels of education.... (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner 1)

Such statements provide an insufficient account of the causes of imprisonment and can create the false impression that literacy and education are all that is needed for success.⁵ This causal connection, as suggested by Graff, is flawed due to its singular focus on literacy, narrowly conceived, without reference to the social and cultural forces at work.

Many who work in prison education (and outside it) may feel obliged to rely on grand promises of literacy's power as related to employment and reduced recidivism, but I question whether this is the best tactic, for it creates a distorted and reductive view of what literacy can (sometimes) do. Graff's work has generated much thought about how we define literacy and how we access it, and I'm grateful for his contribution to our field and those allied with it.

Town, Village, Farm: Another Look at Early Twentieth-Century Mass Literacy

Peter Mortensen, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

My tribute to Harvey J. Graff is a reflection on two ways one can take up his work—as provocation and as invitation—and an argument for choosing the latter over the former.

Graff entered my consciousness in 1988 at the MLA Right to Literacy conference in Columbus, Ohio. Papers delivered by Deborah Brandt and Kathryn Flannery referenced Graff's *Legacies of Literacy*, a monumental scholarly contribution that had appeared just the year before. A few years later, following breadcrumbs in *Legacies*, Janet Carey Eldred and I would make good use of Graff's *The Literacy Myth* in our project on "Reading Literacy Narratives."

But it's possible that Graff, or at least his thinking about literacy in history, may have gotten lodged in my subconscious mind earlier than the late eighties—in fact, probably around the spring of 1982. It was then, as an undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego, that I took a course on the history of journalism with a young assistant professor by the name of Michael Schudson, who, early in the term, had us read his newish book, *Discovering the News* (1982).⁶ I don't have the class notes to prove it, but I do recall Schudson stepping us through an early chapter in which he argues for there being a complex relationship between the rise of mass literacy in nineteenth-century America and the growth of press institutions.² Schudson argued that the keys to understanding this complexity were sociological, and not to be found in crude historical records, such as census returns or employment logs. It would be a long time before I would find this very argument set down in Schudson's excoriating review of *The Literacy Myth*, published in the *History of Education Quarterly* the same year I took his class. And so, although I had no direct knowledge of Graff's scholarship in 1982, I had witnessed in Schudson a performance of critical pique that might well have been provoked by Graff's bold claims about literacy's multiple and contradictory legacies.

Funny thing is, when I read *Discovering the News* today, I don't find much disagreement in what Schudson and Graff have to say about literacy in nineteenth-century North America. What I do see in Schudson's review is a young scholar patrolling the boundary between sociology and history, and calling out Graff for having the audacity to step over it.³

I have to admit, though, that I've had my own moments of Schudsonian pique when returning over the years to engage Graff's critique of the literacy myth. Sure, in the representations of central and southern Appalachian illiteracy that poured from the presses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I've found ample evidence of the literacy myth's economic imperative doing corrosive work. "Bring literacy to the mountains, and prosperity shall follow!" is a common refrain, ignoring the demonstrable fact that literacy was already there, and that its local application could do little to slow the extraction of wealth by industries owned at far remove (Mortensen, Afterword). No

quarrel with Graff so far. But more recently, as I've been researching representations of literacy and illiteracy in the rural Midwest, I've come to wonder whether Graff's critique of literacy's role in economic growth holds for all time and place.

Here's why I say this. In their 2009 book, *The Race between Education and Technology*, economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz demonstrate that for about two decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, acquiring the advanced literacy needed to complete a high school degree seems to have paid generous dividends over a lifetime of wage-earning, at least for white women and men in the Midwest. Indeed, the life-long wage premium for holding a high school diploma from this period was so high that it has never been equaled since, even when compared with the wage premium earned by college degree earners in the 1950s and 60s (pp. 163-246). In my own research on the so-called high school movement, which spread rapidly across Illinois after 1911, I see ample evidence of public words leading to public deeds that were in turn productive of economic growth. That is, in townships and communities across the state, advocacy for new local school taxes met with approval at the ballot box, new high school districts were formed, buildings were built, college-trained teachers were hired, and graduates populated the professions that enabled both agriculture and emergent manufacturing to thrive, at least for a time (Mortensen, "A Rhetorical Approach"; Mortensen, "Revisiting Assumptions").

Doesn't this put the lie to Graff's hard critique of the literacy myth? Doesn't it also suggest more broadly that such critique, applied universally, might limit visibility of historically specific instances in which the acquisition of literacy really did lead to economic growth and social mobility? And shouldn't we be concerned that in being so blinkered we ignore the possibility that everyday people a century ago acted not as dupes of the myth but rather as intelligent agents making sensible choices given facts on the ground?

You can find Graff's answers to my three questions in "The Literacy Myth at Thirty," a 2010 *Journal of Social History* essay in which he joins political scientist Andrew Hacker in expressing skepticism about the causal logic that undergirds Goldin and Katz's argument. Graff's answers are, in turn, no, no, and no—or at least that was my impression when I first read "The Literacy Myth at Thirty" a decade ago. Looking at it again several years ago, I read his "noes" as somewhat softer than I had remembered, not so much provocations as they are invitations.

Graff's invitation took me back to his *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America*, published in 1995 and only infrequently cited in our field's scholarship. In this magnificent book, Graff distills from some 500 autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries a sense of the generational continuities and discontinuities that marked growing up in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Particularly on point is Graff's analysis of Loren Reid's two memoirs about his rural upbringing in Missouri, 1905 to 1921, and, later, in Iowa, where he graduated high school in 1922. For Graff, Reid's path to adulthood exemplifies the emergent life-paths that greeted new high school graduates at the time: for many, a respectable career with a good income in town; and, for a few, a college education that led to careers far away from home.

Reading Reid's memoir at Graff's invitation, it dawned on me that in focusing only on local instances of rhetorical and material efforts to establish rural high schools in Illinois, I had missed an important dimension of cultural thought about early twentieth-century Midwestern literacy. It's a dimension captured well in the autobiography of Carl Van Doren, published in 1937, at the height of his career as a literary critic and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer (*Three Worlds*).⁴ Van Doren, a product of rural east-central Illinois, speaks to what he calls "the revolt from the village," a phrase he originally used in a 1920 review of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (see also Hilfer; Noe; Russell). Masters' poem sequence, hugely popular for years after its publication in 1916, makes the case, in its frequent reference to school and schooling, that rural literacy is failed literacy, unable to deliver on

its promise of moral uplift and cultural enlightenment (*Spoon River Anthology*; see also Masters, *Across Spoon River*). I'll spare you further analysis and simply say that, thanks to Graff's invitation, I worked to surface historical records that document Midwestern rural communities' rejection of the metropolitan distortion of village life served up by Masters and his contemporaries.

Let me conclude this way: It's easy to read Harvey Graff's work and to be provoked to disagree. But giving in to provocation means missing his invitations to ask better questions, to seek better evidence, to make better arguments—invitations we can find on almost any page of the many, many pages that Graff has dispatched over the course of a remarkable and remarkably generous career.

The Man in The Work: Remarks on Harvey Graff

John Duffy, University of Notre Dame

Sometimes when a scholar cuts as wide a swath as Harvey Graff has carved in his remarkable range of studies, which include history, literacy, childhood, the city of Dallas, and, most recently, interdisciplinarity, it can be easy to lose sight of the person behind the work. In my brief remarks today, I want to take a moment to talk a little bit about Harvey Graff the person, who in every way is as singular and exceptional as Harvey Graff the scholar. Harvey, of course, could not be here today, but sends his regards and appreciation for this session.

Like many of you, I knew the work before I knew the man. In the early 1990s, I was living in Wausau, Wisconsin, working with a Hmong refugee community organization. I had long been interested in the literacy experiences of the Hmong, and I was just beginning to dip my toe into academic studies of the subject. I was traveling familiar pathways, reading a lot of the linguistic-anthropological-ethnographic material, from Del Hymes to Shirley Brice Heath, and when I thought of Hmong literacy, those were the books that were shaping my understanding of literacy and literacy research.

Then a friend of mine sent me a copy of *The Legacies of Literacy*. And that changed everything. I had never read anything like it before—so scrupulous, so comprehensive, so magisterial! Harvey made it clear, not only to me but, I believe, to virtually every serious literacy researcher in our field, that the close, fine-grained research on literacy practices that so many of us were engaged in could never fully explain what Harvey would call the continuities and contradictions of literacy without an equally dedicated engagement with the history of those practices. More plainly, Harvey made it clear for us that “the ethnographic present” was not self-generating, an expression of unique cultural characteristics, but was instead an outcome of historical interactions and engagements, often between peoples of unequal power. In a metaphorical sense, Harvey taught us, taught an entire field of researchers, how to read. And that's no small accomplishment for a literacy historian.

So that was the work, at least as it spoke to me then, and as it continues to speak to me today. As to the Graff the person, I had no idea who he was and didn't give him much thought. I do distinctly remember thinking once, as I held a copy of *Legacies of Literacy* in my hands, that the author, whoever he was, must have been a very old man. How else could he have read so much, synthesized so much, and understood so much? And how long must it take to write a book like that? I assumed he must be in his nineties, or at the very least his eighties. An image formed in my mind of Harvey Graff as a craggy-faced old man, full white beard, probably a pipe smoker. Kind of like Ernest Hemingway, only older. Turns out I was more than a little bit off on the age and the visage.

Fast forward several years, and I am a graduate student writing about the literacy history of the Hmong. The Cs conference was held that year in Minneapolis, and my advisor, Deborah Brandt—and if there are two indispensable scholars of literacy, Deborah Brandt is the other—lets all of the grad students know that Harvey Graff will be coming to the conference, and that he may drop in on our

sessions. I am at the very beginning of my project, not really sure or confident about my work, and the last thing I want, if I may be truthful, is for Harvey Graff to come to my session. But sure enough, he shows up, and someone points him out to me. (How could he possibly be that young?) And not only does he sit through all the papers, but afterwards raises his hand, and most dreaded of all, says he has a question for me. I can tell you that my overwhelming instinct at that moment was to flee the room, dreading what I expect will be a stinging rebuke of my sketchy methodologies and my not quite-ready-for-prime-time conclusions about literacy. But his question isn't anything like that at all—it's generative, and it's generous, and it inspires me, weeks and months afterwards, to keep working at my project.

Afterwards Deborah invites us all to dinner with Harvey, and this feels like a gift. We are all bombarding him, all of the grad students, with questions—about literacy, about historical methods, about the academic life and more. We're not really letting him eat, but he's patient, and thoughtful, and he asks us about our work, and he listens as though our answers actually matter. And I begin to discern that evening the qualities in Harvey that I would later come to know well: his solicitude, generosity, and kindness. Since that night, Harvey has visited Notre Dame, where I work, to give a talk, and I have several times visited Ohio State, where he and Vicki have been warm and welcoming hosts. And I have seen again and again those personal qualities that I so admire in the man.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate to those qualities is to recall two occasions that I happened to spend time with Harvey, in which I observed him interacting with his graduate students. The first was the Expanding Literacies Conference at OSU that Harvey organized in 2009. The conference was to mark the achievement of the Literacy Studies program that Harvey built at OSU. Most of you know this program, so I will not say much about it other than it promotes interdisciplinary, critical, and comparative perspectives on literacy, and that there is nothing else quite like it in the country—at least nothing I know of.

The conference attracted some 250 scholars, many of them drawn, I am assuming, by Harvey's imprimatur. Harvey and Shirley Brice Heath were the keynoters, and Harvey was busy with the million unending details that occupy anyone brave or foolish enough to organize a conference. But when I had dinner with Harvey the opening night, he didn't want to talk about his speech, or the Literacy Studies program, or his own scholarly work. What he talked about mostly, were his graduate students—the projects they had undertaken, how far along they were, why this project or that one had the potential to really change things, and so on. The conference was in a sense a celebration of what Harvey had accomplished in five years at OSU. But you wouldn't know that from listening to Harvey. Instead you would have learned all about the work his graduate students were doing. And you would have learned something about their teacher.

I saw that same deep solicitude at the Social Science History Association conference in Toronto some years later. Harvey was accompanying three of his graduate students to the conference, where they presenting together on a panel. I was there as the panel chair. The papers were diverse, and really quite good: studies of literacy in China, in Kenya, and in Haiti. But when it was time for the panel to begin, the room in which the students were to present, and which seemed enormous, was completely empty. Not a single chair was occupied, and not a single person was in the room, other than the presenters, Harvey, and me.

And it didn't matter. Not one bit. Harvey took a seat in the front row, and listened to each presenter in turn. He was locked in, really listening, and they were really reading, or so it seemed for me, to the person who genuinely cared about their work, who thought as about it as deeply as they did, and who was fully committed to its success. Other people eventually drifted in, the room did start to fill, but my sense was that it didn't matter whether there was one person in the room or one thousand, as long as one of those people, that day, for those presenters, was Harvey Graff. And when it was done,

the feeling in the room among those graduate students was like a party, almost like a family gathering. And that's what Harvey does for people; that's how he makes them feel.

I could go on. I could talk about the countless letters he's written—lending his name and prestige to the job letters, the tenure letters, the letters to publishers and granting organizations. I could talk about all the advice he's given—how to approach a topic, write an article, how to be a professor. I could talk about these things, and so could many others. Because Harvey has done these things for so many people; and done them so very often.

Harvey could not be here with us today, and given what I've just said, it's probably as well. I'm guessing it would be excruciating for him to sit through such panegyrics. But this session is listed in the program as a "Tribute Session," or a session in which we express appreciation. And when I think of what I appreciate about Harvey, I think of the person as well as the work.

If Harvey had made it out here to Portland, I'd thank him for his enormously important scholarship. I'm one of many people whose intellectual architecture was forever changed as a result of reading his books. But I also want to offer thanks to the person for the countless acts of kindness he has done for me and for so many others in our field. He has been a friend to many of us—some here today, and many more who could not be here today. And along with those others who have been touched by Harvey's friendship, I would say, paraphrasing just slightly the poet Yeats, Think where our glory most begins and ends/And say our glory was we had such a friend.

Response

Harvey J. Graff, The Ohio State University

The sudden death of our colleague and inspiration, and member of this panel, Mike Rose, prompted me to reread these comments for the first time in more than four years since the panel was held. I remain moved personally and professionally. If nothing else, and each one stands on its own arguments, they testify to my success as a scholar and mentor who has had a powerful influence in the founding and development of literacy studies as an interdisciplinary field of research and teaching. With the exception of Rose, I first met the other panelists when they were graduate students or new assistant professors. They are tenured and at work on second or third major projects.

I sincerely thank each of them: Patrick Berry, Michael Harker, Peter Mortensen, John Duffy, and Mike Rose. With Mike and me ill and unable to attend in person and Amy skyping in, we set a precedent for pandemic scholarship.

My response is short. I am pleased to accept each of their comments without debate. There is no need for minor quibbles. That underscores what an honor this set of critical assessments and reports on their own research represents. My more complete response, not to them individually but to the field of study, comes in my assessment of the field's past, present, and future, *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* (2022).

Whether at the time of the tribute in March, 2017 or today, we cannot rest on our achievements. Much more needs to be done in research and teaching. The major battles over the myths of literacy as I named them in *The Literacy Myth* in 1979 (and elaborated in a series of books and articles, summarized in "The Literacy Myth at Thirty" [2010]) have not ended.

The gross exaggeration of the power of literacy by itself—taken outside of any meaningful context, including foundational reading, writing, and in some cases arithmetic—continues, often tied to profit-seeking and commercialization. The effort to gain credibility by proclaiming anything and everything a literacy proceeds. The temptations and the appeal are too great. And the endless

proliferation of what I call the many literacies is unceasing. We can all draft long lists of literacies, dominated by the trivial and the distorted.

My favorite contemporary examples include the ignorant marketing campaign led by a group of banks and one online “education academy” called FL4ALL, or financial literacy for all. Among its lesser offenses is that no one will recognize FL for financial literacy. Marked by its total lack of knowledge about any kind of accepted literacy, this promotion was launched in a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* in August, 2021. Its contradictory promises and contradictions serve as a caricature of several hundred years of the misrepresentation and promotion.

Only recently coming to my attention, a second is Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE), “an inclusive organization of teachers, tutors, and administrators across ranks, all working to improve access to quality literacy education at all levels.” This entirely virtual world of webinars, conferences, and online certification, is solely concerned with writing and composition but chooses literacy for its name and its sales pitches. In 2021, it is captive to the literacy myth. For elaboration, see my *Searching for Literacy* (2022) and “The New Literacy Studies and the Resurgent Literacy” (2022).

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Notes

- ¹ For a discussion of Clark's contributions to civil rights in South Carolina and the Citizenship Schools, see her first-person narrative *Ready from Within* (1986).
- ² Graff's analysis is based on the manuscript gaol registers of Middlesex County, Ontario, for the years 1867–1968. He shows how individuals were often arrested for moral offenses—most often vagrancy and idleness—and were probably victims of discriminatory practice, not unlike what can be seen today.
- ³ For an expanded discussion of this topic, see Berry (2018). See also Sweeney, particularly pages 27–40, for a discussion of the history of bibliotherapy.
- ⁴ See also Alexander's *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (2010).
- ⁵ See also Karl Haigler, Caroline Harlow, Patricia O'Connor, and Anne Campbell's 1994 study *Literacy behind prison walls: Profiles of a prison population from the National Adult Literacy Survey* for an earlier study that relies on a similar rhetoric.
- ⁶ Schudson (1982) presents and then critiques what he calls "the literacy argument" that others had advanced to explain "the revolution in journalism" (pp. 31, 35-39, 42-43).

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