

# Afterword. Near Final Reflections on Literacy and Literacy Studies, 2022: Excerpts From Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies

**Abstract.** In the popular and political imaginary, literacy is synonymous with culture and progress. It exists in dizzying varieties; there are hundreds of proclaimed literacies. But literacy also resists universal transmission. Literacy's place in popular culture is ambiguous. Corporate capitalism celebrates reading and writing in consumer terms. Inclusive and useful definitions of literacy must be anchored in reading and writing across languages, symbol or sign systems, media, and domains of communication. They may be spoken, written, printed or pictorially formed, electronically produced and distributed. Literacies are interactive, dialectically related, and require translation and negotiation.

## Chapter I. Back to Basics

In the popular and political imaginary, literacy is a *sine qua non of culture and progress, for individuals, societies, nations.*<sup>1</sup> It exists in dizzying varieties; there are hundreds of proclaimed literacies. But literacy also seems to resist universal transmission. The reasons commonly given are as many as they are contradictory. They range from individual to institutional and political failings (Graff and Duffy, 2007; Hamilton, 2012).

Literacy's place in popular culture is one tellingly ambiguous sign. Corporate capitalism celebrates reading and writing in normative, consumer, and durable terms—for its own benefit.

These proclamations are revealingly, though poorly, expressed. Other voices are more mixed.

In their prime time and website videos promoting a line of “Kids” pens, BIC Pens declares awkwardly and apparently without irony, “Fight for your WRITE.” Tritely playing with the concept of “right,” the company announces unequivocally: “Writing helps children become more confident, creative and awesome!”

---

1. This material originally appeared as the first chapter in *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies*, by Harvey J. Graff, 2022e, pp. 3–27, *Palgrave Macmillan*, (<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96981-3>). It has been reproduced exactly as it appeared in its original publication without further editing. Reprinted with permission.

Writing is an important learning tool that gives children the power to share their thoughts and ideas with the world in a meaningful way. That's why BIC wants parents, teachers and caregivers to join us and Fight For Your Write!"

### Why Fight For Your Write with BIC?

Join BIC on our mission to save handwriting and Fight For Your Write. Writing is an important vehicle for communication because it distinguishes us and promotes individuality. Did you know that writing is also a critical learning tool for children? Writing helps kids become better readers, boosts their confidence and sparks their creativity. Together we want to show children just how great writing can be and how great they can be!<sup>1</sup>

But write what? Communicate what? How does writing do this? Are we even meant to take this seriously? These promotions are so badly written that they seem to parody the very arguments they make.

The bottom line is "PRODUCTS. Transform Boring Into Fun with These Amazing BIC® Products—Colorful and Bold Pens and Pencils with Personality." With no evidence, we are to believe that

The perfect BIC® pen, pencil or marker can make a child feel inspired to write. At BIC, we understand how our products can reflect a child's personality, express what they want to become one day, or just let the world know, "Purple is my signature color." We offer so much variety and style; kids and adults will be amazed by what they find.

"Fight For Your Write," indeed.

In an age with an expert to cite on any subject, BIC's efforts to back up its claims are laughable at best.<sup>2</sup> The vague and unfocused nature makes these claims almost impossible to support. That provides an important clue to exaggerated estimates of the value of literacy when taken out of meaningful contexts. It is also a powerful clue to the uses and abuses of literacy—reading and writing across modes of communication and comprehension—as an object of commodification and consumption.

Is it noteworthy that BIC's claims for writing with its Kids pens are virtually the same as those of the promoters of laptops, tablets, and other electronic devices—their marketplace competitors?

Does this translate into anything more than a high-tech effort to sell low-tech pens under the thin cover of "Join us. Support our mission to save handwriting"?<sup>3</sup>

Without a word about the relationship to its own profitability, Scholastic, the large publisher of school-age and school-related print and digital materials, promotes "A Child's Right to Read" and an effort to "Encourage a child to Read Every

Day.”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, with false personalization, it informs consumers that “Your Purchase Puts Books into the Hands of Kids.”

Selling “five books that shaped your life,” it asks “What’s Your Bookprint?”

Even more emphatically, its deterministic formula for a better world—“Read Every Day. Lead a Better Life”—embellishes “The Reading Bill of Rights.” Adopting and all but parodying the discourse of human rights used in governmental and NGO national and local literacy campaigns, this declaration is part of “Scholastic’s global literacy campaign” to sell books. Breathlessly, Scholastic begins a mixed metaphorical roster of “beliefs” with this prelude:

Today we live in a world full of digital information. Yet reading has never been more important, for we know that for young people the ability to read is the door opener to the 21<sup>st</sup> century to hold a job, to understand their world, and to know themselves. That is why we are asking you to join our Global Literacy Call to Action. We call this campaign “Read Every Day. Lead a Better Life.” We are asking parents, teachers, school- and business-leaders, and the general public to support their children’s right to read for a better life in the digital world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Literacy is “the birthright of every child in the world as well as the pathway to succeed in school and to realize a complete life.” Every child has a right to a “textual lineage”—a reading and writing autobiography which shows that who you are is in part developed through the stories and information you’ve experienced.” “We believe that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ability to read is necessary not only to succeed but to survive—for the ability to understand information and the power of stories is the key to a life of purpose and meaning.” But, apparently, not to write particularly well or to appreciate literacy in the context of actual lives.

Meanwhile, Swedish furniture and housewares giant IKEA addresses parents, pushing the power of its “bookbook” (aka product catalogue) to sell its products, including books, pens, desks, and bookcases. Its paean to the catalogue in the form of a traditional printed and bound book is meant to be poetic and amusing. The video is clever. A sweet Swedish voice announces, “Once in a while something comes along that changes the way we live, a device so simple and intuitive, using it seems almost familiar . . . It’s a bookbook.”<sup>5</sup>

Under the heading “Books & games,” IKEA also sells print: “Home improvement *books* for you, coffee table *books* for a rainy day and bedtime *books* for your favorite little bookworms . . .” But the ad can do no better than play obviously with the terms and elements of so-called smartbooks and ebooks.

### From Sales to Performance

On other hand, a very different viewpoint emerges in rap artist Kanye West’s breakthrough album. Celebrating “The College Dropout,” West memorably

describes poor African American young people, lacking BICs and IKEA:

You know the kids gon' act a fool  
 When you stop the programs for after-school  
 And they DCFS, some of 'em dyslexic  
 They favorite 50-Cent song "12 Questions"  
 We scream: "rocks, blow, weed, park", see, now we smart  
 We ain't retards, the way teachers thought  
 Hold up, hold fast, we make more cash  
 Now tell my momma I belong in that slow class  
 Sad enough we on welfare  
 They tryna put me on the school bus with the space for the  
 wheelchair

As a result:

Drug dealin' just to get by  
 Stack ya' money 'til it get sky high  
 (Kids, sing! Kids, sing!)  
 We wasn't s'posed to make it past 25  
 Joke's on you, we still alive  
 Throw your hands up in the sky and say:  
 "We don't care what people say."<sup>6</sup>

West evokes a more practical and gritty everyday reality than BIC and IKEA for a different population whose use of reading and writing connects much more closely to survival than to consumption. His world's "uses of literacy" constitute a different set of spaces (Hoggart, 1961).

No less memorably, and likely in response to West, comic and video artist Weird Al Yankovic defends good grammar and criticizes "Word Crimes." He directs us to another putative dimension of literacy. To the critics of prescriptive and inflexible grammar, who hold one reflexive definition of literacy, Weird Al was instantly anathema. But it is quite likely that he raised his voice and his fancy video technology in parody, satirizing such censures.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, scholars missed this move. Listen:

If you can't write in the proper way  
 If you don't know how to conjugate  
 Maybe you flunked that class  
 And maybe now you find  
 That people mock you online  
 [Bridge:]  
 Okay, now here's the deal  
 I'll try to educate ya  
 Gonna familiarize

You with the nomenclature  
 You'll learn the definitions  
 Of nouns and prepositions  
 Literacy's your mission  
 And that's why I think it's a  
 [Chorus:]  
 Good time  
 To learn some grammar  
 Now, did I stammer  
 Work on that grammar  
 You should know when  
 It's "less" or it's "fewer"  
 Like people who were  
 Never raised in a sewer  
 I hate these word crimes  
 Like I could care less  
 That means you do care  
 At least a little  
 Don't be a moron  
 You'd better slow down  
 And use the right pronoun  
 Show the world you're no clown  
 Everybody wise up!<sup>8</sup>

Consider the contradictions. Superficially, the clash between West and Weird Al is cavernous. The one celebrates success—of a sort—but to which reading, writing, and arithmetic may contribute in noncanonical, unschooled ways. The other promotes proper grammar and condemns orthographic and stylistic gaffes. Both are long traditions, albeit differently valued and certified as proper or not. Is it odd to ask if Yankovic might lean toward a strict literacy with some levity? By smiling at the new word games, as well as word crimes of text speak and much more, does he in effect point us in new directions?

These examples also suggest that inclusive and useful definitions of literacy must be anchored in reading *and* writing across languages, symbol or sign systems, media, and domains of communication. By *reading*, I refer to the means and modes of understanding or comprehending—that is, making meaning. And by *writing*, I refer to the means and modes of expressing or communicating meaning. Those symbols and media include but are not limited to traditional alphabetic, numeric, and visual systems; some are embodied in humanity, the physical and the constructed environment. They may be spoken, written, printed or pictorially formed, electronically produced and distributed. None exists in isolation from the others. In performance, each practice shapes the others. Literacies are interactive, dialectically related, and require translation and negotiation, as I will explain in this book.<sup>9</sup>

## Literacy Now

Today few subjects attract the attention or spark responses as powerful as literacy does. Claims of literacy's and illiteracy's presumed consequences surround us. Few pressing issues—whether individual and collective well-being, social welfare and security, and the state of the nation, domestic or foreign—escape association with literacy. Divisive issues of politics, and of race, class, nationality, gender, or geography constantly run up against it (Graff, 2011b).

Despite literacy's acknowledged importance, its powers on the one hand, and the dangers of its diminution, on the other hand, are taken out of context and consequently exaggerated. Literacy is seldom defined. This adds to the illusion of its efficacy and the underlying confusion (Graff, 1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1987, 1991, 1995, 2010, 2011a).

We live at an awkward and challenging moment in the history of literacy and the study of literacy. It is also a critical time for literacy as we now understand and practice it. At once, we are told relentlessly by press, pundits, and policy wonks that *literacy is declining* and the threats to civilization are dire. The indicators of decline are mixed and often far from measures of reading and writing: from school completion rates, grade levels, and diverse test scores, local, national, or international, and all but unimaginable anecdotal examples often from social media. Individual wellbeing, economic competitiveness, and national security are all at stake. The problem, it sometimes seems, is worst in the advanced societies. But to other commentators, it lies in the underdeveloping areas. We are not forced to choose among them, of course. Any such competition harms all.

At the same time, we thrive in a new era of a seemingly endless flowering of many or multiple literacies. They range from the “new” literacies” of “new media” of visuality, screens, moving and animated images, numbers and symbols, to assertions of literacies, of some kind or other, of every imaginable subject, from aural to emotional, food, sex, culture, and countless others. And we are also told, even less clearly and coherently, that literacy, as we have known it, is irrelevant in the age of post-everything. I have compiled a list of almost five hundred “literacies” that I have seen mentioned *in print* (Graff, 2011b).

No wonder confusion is rife. In this context, it is not surprising that a newly proclaimed field of literacy studies—home for almost three or four decades of an avowedly revisionist “new literacy studies”—seems to lack direction (Graff, 1979; Street, 1984; Barton, 2006). Is it ironic that a field of inquiry rooted in fundamental dichotomies—literacy versus illiteracy and literacy versus orality; autonomous conceptions of literacy as universal versus ideologically driven approaches to literacy; global versus local manifestations of literacy—veers back and forth between them?

Literacy studies never quite breaks free of dominant presumptions or stakes out fundamentally new grounds for understanding. Despite repeated recognitions of the ideological nature of the subject (sometimes termed “the bias of literacy,”)

prominently by my own book *The Literacy Myth* in 1979 and Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* in 1984, the study and understanding of literacy remains riddled with unacknowledged ideological assumptions. The most pervasive and persistent pivots around a "great divide," as Goody and Watt (1968) conceived it in "The Consequences of Literacy" (originally published in 1963).

It remains unfortunate that Street's important argument that different views of literacy tend to understand it as "autonomous" as opposed to "ideological" obscured the fact that both the "autonomous" or universal, ahistorical, and uncontextual *and* the "ideological" approaches are themselves riddled with ideological assumptions. The reigning assumptions and their confusions are displayed, for example, from UNESCO to the *Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* (Olson and Torrance, 2009), and the United States National Center for Family Literacy, which despite its name is a private charitable foundation. Given the importance of literacy and its complicated dimensions, the power of assumptions is inescapable. But they need to be taken into account consistently for honest and useful scholarship and subsequent policy and practice.

As an academic, and also a public interest, literacy studies obsessively proclaims its novelty. But as this book shows, *it is not new*. Interest in, studying, speculating, and worrying about literacy has a long and formative history. To an unappreciated extent, recent literacy studies are also rooted fundamentally in its own disciplinary and multidisciplinary past. It campaigns relentlessly for recognition, identification, institutional location, and funding. It also has striking applied and commercial elements. It is tied, at least in part, to quests for national economic and cultural superiority. And it promotes its commitment to making a better world. And yet, it ignores and neglects to build on its own heritage and genealogy.

At the same time, literacy studies neglects disciplinary and interdisciplinary relationships of its recent founding and to which it seeks to contribute—and their conflicts and divides. This derives from and simultaneously results in *neglect of its own history*, long and short term. Major divisions, and with them, missed opportunities, often persist powerfully. These include problems of parts and wholes, and definitions, discourse, and relationships. Promotion and exaggeration, and gross comparisons or distinction making, resulting in what I have defined as a *literacy myth* (a well-known misconception), are rampant. In repeating claims for its importance, literacy's students and proponents too often either or both implicitly or explicitly undercut their own efforts. This is one among many contradictions (Graff and Duffy, 2007; Graff, 1979, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015).

## Searching for Literacy

*Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* explores these issues from an original critical, historical, and comparative perspective. Informed by and following from my series of studies in the history of literacy and my latest book, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth*

*Century*, it asks how the study and understanding of literacy and literacies have developed (Graff, 2015). But it also inquires more broadly into what we might call the social and historical understanding of the production and organization of knowledge with literacy as its focus.

In this book, I argue that the condition of literacy studies is more expected than ironic or paradoxical. That does not lessen its consequences. It is one result of the failure of a fragmented field of study to learn from its own history, on one hand, and to seek out critical relationships between and among approaches to literacy and different modes of reading and writing, on the other hand. It also speaks to the fundamental power of what I termed “the literacy myth,” the exaggerated expectations of the power of literacy—that is, the ability to read and write—by itself (Graff, 1979; see also Graff, 2010, 2011a).

These problems matter. Why they matter should, I hope, be obvious. Literacy, I assert, is too important to be left to its proponents alone, from compositionists and digital specialists to pedagogues, on one hand, and to policy pundits, development economists and sociologists, and purveyors of books and other accoutrements of literacy and schooling, on the other. The evidence, however masked and muddled, is clear: literacy *alone* does not lead to development, health, and progress, either for individuals or for society. If literacy is to be viewed as a human right, a recent call to arms, then it must follow, or at least be inseparable from, the rights to life, shelter, safety, nourishment, and basic well-being. In other words, literacy must always be viewed as *one among other* fundamentals and *always* in interaction with other key factors.

Too often that is not the case, and the costly failures surround us. Many axiomatic formulas or prescriptions simply do not take this basic understanding and its overwhelming logical and empirical support into account. It has proven too easy (and on occasion too profitable) to do so. With some sympathy, I point to the pronouncements and programs of UNESCO, especially Education for All and Literacy for Life (see Arnove and Graff, 2008). With less sympathy, I point to BIC or IKEA or those who compete to supply textbooks and laptops to the world. When the focus shifts to conceptualizing relationships, much changes. That is a necessary but very tardy step.

What is to be done? This book is not a guide to policy. Rather it is a critique and a series of (admittedly incomplete) steps on the road to revisioning literacy *and* the study of literacy in relationship to each other. Some would call my concerns epistemological, how we understand, how we know. My concern lies principally with literacy and what has come to be called literacy studies, a very loose cluster of diverse interests in literacy and literacies of all kinds within universities, government agencies, and nongovernment organizations, a disorganized set of topics and researchers across disciplines and departments with aspirations to both disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, recognition, and organization. In significant part, I am interested in the historical sociology, organization, and production of knowledge (Graff, 2001, 2011a, 2015).



My method in *Searching for Literacy* combines criticism and historical understanding. In inquiring into the roots and webs of interests in literacy over time and across fields of study, I probe understandings and rediscover leads, openings, and understandings that have been lost, for example, from linguistic anthropology; psychology; literature and composition; science, numeracy, and graphics; and movement and performance to history, in chapters that focus on these fundamental subjects. Despite a rhetoric and some genuine efforts at interdisciplinarity and integration, more than a century of disciplinarization and departmentalization has led to substantial separation and its deleterious consequences. Among the questions asked in this book is how we may learn from the past to fashion new understandings of the present and new paths to the future.

### Literacy Studies Past and Future

Literacy studies' overarching *and underlying discourse and assumptions link it inseparably to the presumption of change, progress, and advancement, whether of individuals or larger collectivities. Dominant thinking about literacy is governed by an image—an epistemology, if you will—of change. Theories, expectations, metaphors, and analogies almost always have this set of associations at their core. The linkage dates at least from the Greek classical era. The modern heritage or legacy is overwhelmingly positive. That set of presumed “consequences,” following Jack Goody and Ian Watt, or “implications,” as Goody imprecisely revised his formula, has long dominated approaches and interpretations, obscuring more complicated or differing relationships (Goody and Watt, 1968; Goody, 1968). Both progressive and conservative proponents agree on this, even when their versions of the “proper” acquisition, practices, and uses of literacy differ sharply.*<sup>10</sup>

Closer, critical examination and shifts in emphasis reveal a different set of relationships and promote other understandings. The image is not wrong but *partial, incomplete, distorting when taken by itself*. Literacy's uses and impacts are also aligned with continuities and control. The three dominating millennial thrusts across literacy's long history are government, religion, and trade or exchange, and their developing needs. These forces contradict or, often, reshape literacy's linkages with progressive change. In a few words, literacy's impacts are dialectical and contradictory, seldom simple or unmediated.

Similarly, literacy has at least as often been associated with the life of groups as with the individualistic legacy that dominates our powerful inherited images. On the one hand, we must focus on the *collective* as well as individual uses of literacy, as people throughout the ages have done in their everyday and more exceptional practices. On the other hand, both the collective and the individual dimensions influence how the other acquires, uses, and is affected by reading and writing. Neither exists alone. Consider schooling or religious or governmental practices, or popular reading culture, or the collective aspects of artistic and scientific endeavors. How the interrelationships and their balances shift is

a matter for questions and study at any point in time or place. Simple images quickly give way.

Dominant images emphasize literacy for liberation (which can be quite restrictive) and individual advancement, and less often for collective progress (or conservative reaction). The hugely simplified temporal association of classical Athenian democracy with the incomplete literacy of male citizens (and the distortions of the search for confirming evidence) is an epochal case in point (Harris, 1989). However incomplete an association, it stimulated a powerful, indeed determinative influence and set of expectations over the past two millennia. The approximate temporal relationships and seminal (but perhaps unrepresentative) individual examples of legendary Greek and Roman thinkers and (sometimes) writers prompted a parallel association between the emergence of Greek philosophy, drama, and science following (by centuries) the development of the Greek alphabet (Goody and Watt, 1968; Ong, 1958). Eric Havelock, (1963) and his uncritical followers see the remaking of the human mind by the invention and spread of a Greek alphabet. Similar patterns echo in the images of the impact of print and now electronic media.

Although scholars of India and China point to the breakthroughs in science and other intellectual domains with nonwestern alphabets and probably lower levels of general literacy, the linkages with literacy in the establishment and operation of the Greek and Roman empires suggest greater ambiguities (Gough, 1968; Harris, 1989). Control and restriction are as much a part of the legacies and uses of literacy as liberation and progress, as Paulo Freire powerfully reminds us in his seminal work. That confusion goes hand in hand with those who conflate the impacts of restricted or limited and mass literacy, for example, on intellectual or scientific-technological advances or even the circulation of information (Clanchy, 1993; Eisenstein, 1979; Grafton, 1980; Grafton et al., 2002; Harris, 1989; Houston, 2002; Vincent, 2000).

Recognizing the ongoing relationships among the media, especially but not only the oral, on one side, and the written, printed, and electronic, on the other side, adds to a transformed understanding. Instead of the ahistorical and anti-human notion of world-redefining (and formulaic) shifts *from* one dominant medium (or communicative-cognitive regime) *to* another—quintessentially the oral to the written and onward—the oral *never* loses its importance and lifeshaping impact. Nor does writing in whatever form of performance, reproduction, distribution, or transmission totally replace it. Too often understandings of literacy's development and impact take the formula of a transition or transformation from X to Y, often if not always in the form of a dichotomy. The following chapters explore these complications.

Despite more than a millennium of constructs of a dichotomous remaking of the known world, speech across diverse media and writing across other domains continue to interact, shaping and reshaping each other. It is no accident that ethnographers never cease to rediscover that people still talk . . . and then pat

themselves on the back for their perspicacity and powers of observation. Multiple, multimodal, and “new” literacies call out for comparative study; that is, in relationship and interaction with each other, as they are actually used.

Remaking literacy studies requires an adjustable, multi-focal historical lens. Often longer term, it moves between the wide angle and the close focus, the larger and the local. It refuses to dichotomize apparent oppositions that turn out to be critical relationships when examined directly. Similarly, it requires the study and assimilation of historical and contemporary investigations to replace the appropriation and repetition of images, illusions, and icons. Seemingly powerful and formulaic short-hands—from “oral to literate,” “the domestication of the savage mind,” or “the world on paper,” with scant regard for source criticism, contextualization, or representativeness can stand no longer. The deeply rooted faith in the power of literacy itself must be understood as itself a historical development. The power and impact, along with the quantity and quality of literacy—among the media—need to be demonstrated, and not simply presumed and equated with expected outcomes. Powerful but incomplete and misleading dichotomies must be replaced with complicated narratives.

Literacy and literacy studies are best understood with more attention to a longer chronological span of intellectual and socio-cultural development. It demands a broader, more dynamic focus on literacy’s place and play among a wide array of disciplines and institutional locations. Subfields in disciplines or interdisciplines that deal with literacy include reading, writing, anthropology, child and human development, cognitive studies, formal and sociolinguistics, comparative and development studies, communication and media studies including popular culture studies, science and mathematics, and the visual and performing arts. How seldom they address one another. Cross-, multi-, and interdisciplinarity are among the grounds for comparative studies of literacy.

Literacy studies also suffers from an “internalist” bias. How easily literacy is conceptualized as an “independent variable” in the tradition of Brian Street’s autonomous model. Once there is literacy, all else follows—more or less. The need for study dramatically declines.

“External” factors and developments—sometimes listed as affecting levels of literacy, most famously by Lawrence Stone (1969) in a roster of seven elements—demand more systematic (and less random or superficial) attention.<sup>11</sup> Social, cultural, demographic, and political economic forces—such as wartime demands or anticipated economic or civic needs, consequences of global cross-cultural contacts and colonialism, the cycles of the “discovery” of new social problem—all combine in fact and perceptions, often with contradictions, and with shifting currents within and across disciplines. Sometimes they stimulate changing views. Yet, studies of highly localized, limited populations, times, and places, and ecological macrocorrelations of highly aggregated, often ambiguous quantitative data are seldom compared or contrasted. Causes and consequences are seldom identified or clarified. In the context of universities and their organization

of knowledge, those shifts in interest and approach should lead to criticism and comparison, different assertions, and sometimes institutional articulations both within and outside the boundaries of departments or divisions that take the name of interdisciplinarity. Literacy's relationships, for example, with demographic behavior, economic performance, or political participation are among the telling cases in point.

### Historicizing Literacy Studies

A more complete and useful approach to literacy studies begins no later than the 1920s and 1930s, not the 1970s and 1980s. It looks back carefully to the period spanning the modernizing currents of mid-eighteenth century through the early twentieth century. It embraces a longer glance back to the Renaissance and also classical antiquity. It locates in historical context the dynamic building blocks for our expectations, understandings (including theories and policies), institutions, and expectations that culminate in modern literacies and their complications, and literacy studies, the principal disciplines and where and when they cross.

Modern arrangements and judgments, typically institutionalized in distinct fields of study, grew from the foundational currents of Renaissance rediscoveries of scholarship and knowledge and Enlightenment emphases on human malleability, perfectionism, learning capabilities, environmentalism, and institutionalism. They were partly reinterpreted by Romanticism's deeply divided recognition of the power and significance of the "other," the alien or primitive within ourselves and in "strangers," both within the modernizing West and in "newly discovered" regions. Questions about language—and its media and forms—and social order lay at the core of both.

The beginnings and foundations of literacy studies also lay in "civilization's" encountering many "Wild Children" (*enfants sauvages*), noble or savage, and South Sea islanders and other indigenous peoples whom explorers confronted around the world. The reading and writing of the "primitives"—across media and modes of understanding—was sometimes recognized. Inseparable were missionaries (whose work in creating alphabets and written languages initially to "translate" the Bible in aid of their proselytizing is fundamentally a part of literacy studies and linguistics); and conquerors, colonizers, and colonists. They all deployed early (and later) modern notions of Western literacy and its expected influences in their efforts at expansion, "conquest," and domesticating and elevating the primitive and different. Herein lay often missed points of contact between psychology and anthropology, among other fields.

Then and later, at home and abroad the poor, "minorities," immigrants, and others became more threatening than those farther afield. In anthropology and the arts, the primitive and the oral were grounds for celebration at times, complicating positive associations of literacy and negative associations of illiteracy. Strong currents from the Enlightenment and Romanticism intertwined,

sometimes contradicting but sometimes supporting expectations about progress and modern development—and their connections with literacy (written culture). Herein lay, in part, the origins of modern social science, the arts, and literature.

From earlier eras, including the Renaissance and classical antiquity, came, haltingly at first, the conviction that writing, and the reading of it, were, at least in some significant circumstances, superior to other means of communication, especially the oral. On one hand, this was a functional development, but, on the other hand, personal and eventually collective cognitive change might follow, some persons of influence thought. So commenced early literacy studies, its theories and institutions.

The first general uses of reading and writing derived from the needs of religion, government, and commerce. Slowly there developed a faith in the powers of formal instruction in places called schools, initially for the relatively few, primarily boys but with informal tutelage for others including girls. Some agendas stressed socialization for citizenship and its correlates. Other agendas emphasized literacy in terms of useful or necessary practices or abilities, from clerks to clerics, rhetors to rulers.

Over time, places for instruction expanded to include many more and to focus especially on the young. This was an epochal conjuncture, with a powerful influence on future generations, and the realms of learning. In these formulations, literacy stood at the center of training that embraced social attitudes and control, and civic morality, along with at least rudimentary intellectual practices, and training in skills for productive contributions to economy, polity, and society. The tools began with simplified alphabets that helped to link signs and sounds to words and sentences, and expanded to include paper, pens, and various means of reproducing and circulating texts that were first handwritten and later printed. The superiority of technology and the inferiority of the “unlettered” stood as certainties, framing constructions of literacy. Literacy’s story, right and wrong, came to occupy the center (though often implicitly) of the rise of civilization and progress in the West and over time the rest of the world.

These elements became inseparable as they joined capitalism’s efforts to remake the world—and the word, written, printed, and reproduced—in the image of the marketplace and its institutions (with other images and sounds). Equally inseparable was the quest to remake the young, in particular, for the strange new world. These efforts mark, and also serve as representations of, literacy in the traditions that emerged to study and understand literacy from the Renaissance (or earlier) forward. They also stimulated uses of literacy, in conjunction with other media and collective action, for resistance and reform.

Not surprisingly, the development and institutionalization of disciplines in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western university incorporated the understandings of literacy to which they were the heirs, especially but not only in the social sciences—anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology, economics, politics—and the humanities—classics, history, literature, philosophy. Early

relationships resisted efforts at change. The resulting disciplinary fragmentation not only contributed to efforts to build interdisciplinary literacy studies, but also limits them. They underwrite the many contradictions—what I call “the literacy myth,” for one—in the place of literacy in Western cultures, and the lives of many persons yesterday and today.

### Disciplining and Undisciplining Literacy Studies

Possibilities and limits on opportunities for novel understanding stem from the interplay within and across what I call “disciplinary clusters.” (The humanities, arts, social sciences, and basic sciences constitute major disciplinary clusters.) No less important is the sometimes very dynamic interplay—critical and complementary—between disciplines. Of this, the key disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology provide powerful examples. Among them, orality and oral literature, everyday and privileged writing practices, the ubiquity of “reading” across multiple media, and the search for cognitive and noncognitive “implications” of literacy are telling. So, too, is literacy’s active presence as values, ideology, and cultural, economic, and political capital. Destabilizing times can become opportunities to advance or to fall from favor for disciplinary approaches, and moments for interdisciplinary movements—and, importantly, literacy and literacies. These are the focus of this book, and the stimuli for writing it.

For literacy studies, across the past two centuries at least, one of the most powerful forces has been the fear, and often the certainty, that literacy is declining (or not rising), and that with it, families, morality, social order, progress, and socioeconomic development are also declining. This accompanied one of the most momentous transformations in the history of literacy and its study: from a premodern order in which literacy was feared and (partly) restricted, to a more modern order in which illiteracy (or literacy gained and practiced outside of formal institutional controls) constitutes a great threat.

When taken comparatively, and further heightened by international conflict or competition, social disorder and division, international migration of “aliens,” rising fertility and mortality, failure of “human capital” to grow, and similar circumstances, literacy levels all become flashpoints for study and action to reverse the dreaded tide. Schools and popular culture attract attention which has in turn the potential to propel disciplinary action and conflict, and, sometimes, interdisciplinary efforts.

The apparently endless “crisis” of literacy in the mid- to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is inseparable from Cold War and more recent international anxieties, global economic restructuring and collateral social and cultural change, communicative and media transformation, and both new and persisting inequalities. Seemingly unprecedented “social problems” become calls for and stimulants of interdisciplinary “solutions.” Literacy campaigns stir passions in the underdeveloping and developed worlds. Literacy’s roles as either or

both causes or consequences are very tricky to unravel, a complication in literacy studies' development.

For literacy studies, these complications often impinge on one or another of the "great divides" prominent among approaches that see literacy—almost by its very nature—as universal, unmediated, and transformative in its impact (the autonomous model). Often cited are reading or writing as the "technology of the intellect," the power of the Greek alphabet, the impact of print, cognitive shifts from alphabets, writing, or reading, and the like. Constructing this tradition of study and understanding—comparatively—was relatively uncomplicated. In recent decades, however, others have emphasized increasingly the socio-cultural influences and contextual effects from literacy as acquisition, practice, and use. Among the elements stressed are psychological theories, schools and other environments, families and communities, cultures of practice, and practice and use of reading and writing among media old and new. The reorientation remains incomplete.

Literacy studies' paths are revealing. In the second half of the twentieth century, in conjunction with other disciplines and interdisciplines, literacy studies has taken social, contextual, cognitive, linguistic, and historical, among other "turns." With the turns came the adoption of signifying French theorist "godfathers" from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Claude Lévi-Strauss to Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour. These developments at times interact with and deepen conflicts among disciplines and promote interest in interdisciplinary resolution. The turns, with inadequate testing and criticism, become dead ends.

Recent years witness an emphasis on the everyday and the practical, including the concept of practice itself. This has led to an incomplete and halting but revealing effort to overturn the dominance of grand theories that stressed the universal importance of the written over the oral, the printed over the written, the literate over the unlettered and untutored—consequences and implications of literacy. Practice and context, explored in a variety of circumstances and traditions, partly supplanted presumptions of the unmediated powers and advantages of literacy.

In part, recent literacy studies' emergence stemmed from perceptions of the inadequacy of earlier conceptualizations and presumptions, the search for new methods and sources on which to base a major revision, and reactions to it.

Literacy studies continues to struggle with foundational dichotomies—the making of myths and images—between oral and literate, writing and print, print and electronic, and literacy as transformative. They continue to guide and divide opinion and orient studies. Consequently, the long-standing neglect of rich research on orality and oral literature to which this book returns is almost as much a mark of the limits of many interdisciplinary endeavors as of the power of disciplines. The proponents of the New Literacy Studies have not reclaimed Albert Lord, Milman Parry, or Lev Vygotsky, among others. The persistence and importance of orality is regularly rediscovered across disciplines, as are the newly fashionable "multiple literacies," new emphasis on multilinguality or translation,

and curiosity about visuality. None is new. Nor are the collective foundations of reading, writing, and “written culture.” The heterogeneity of constructions of the cognitive domain also plagues literacy studies, another instructive matter of connections.

Among the most important—and least appreciated—critical elements are the absolutely crucial connections among myths and images—historical and contemporary—*and* expectations, and the ways that they are embedded in and come to undergird attitudes, policies, institutions, and judgments. To deal with this set of world-shaping conjunctures, we must cast our nets widely. We need to study literacy and literacies in new ways in their widest living circumstances and relationships, lived and written, experienced and recorded.

It is seemingly easy to study writing and “print.” But it has been so hard to study reading and writing as practiced across media and modes of understanding and expression, especially in their formative and fundamental relationships to conceptions, ideologies, policies, institutions, and expectations.

~~~

Striving for recognition, literacy studies occupies ambiguous ground, both disciplinarily and interdisciplinarily. In part, this is a question of location. But it is also a question of status. The “rise” of literacy studies, part of its emergence and development, contributes to its presence in many academic departments and disciplines. This holds for education, the social sciences, and the humanities, but also (to a lesser extent) the sciences, medicine, public health, the law, and business. This pattern is problematic in some critical respects. It is dis- and unorganized. In the pantheon of disciplines, centers of interest in literacy studies usually do not rank highly. That the study of literacy, for reasons good and bad, is often seen as basic or elementary does not boost its standing. By reputation, it is often viewed as inseparable from schools or colleges of education.

Proclaimed interdisciplinary literacy studies at times become promotional labels: new, relevant, sexy—in academic terms—and appealing for applied and practical reasons to citizens, governments, and corporations, from “how to” to publishing texts and other aids. Perceptions of crises or at least serious problems with popular literacy abilities add to this mix. Such promotion, which is less problematic in professional schools than other institutions, aims to benefit programs and their home departments, colleges, or universities. It also can provoke negative reactions (Graff, 2015).

In addition to education, the social sciences of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology are often the homes of literacy studies and the New Literacy Studies. At one time or another, each of these disciplines has claimed the status of a science, applied if not always “pure” or “basic.” Psychology, followed by linguistics, exhibits the greatest ambitions, with strong interests in reading, writing, development, and cognition. All three are divided between scientific and cultural, quantitative and qualitative, cognitive and material, hard and soft orientations. All



three stress contemporary and sometimes comparative relevance, usually reserving the strongest claims for the perspectives, methods, and theories of their own discipline, even when also proclaiming their interdisciplinarity. Practitioners in these fields often occupy central places in interdisciplinary literacy centers, programs, or concentrations in Education. Claiming attention, they remain divided and disconnected from historical perspectives. Each is the subject of a chapter in this book.

*Searching for Literacy: The Origins of Literacy Studies* begins an applied intellectual, cultural, and institutional history, taking literacy studies back to its pre-disciplinary and disciplinary foundations: identifying and probing its roots. Relationships are sought, and with them, clarifications and revisions, new beginnings and steps toward a different future for literacy studies and fundamental literacies. It is an experiment in the social history of knowledge.

Toward that end, in the following chapters, I explore literacy and literacy studies in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary domains of linguistics, psychology, anthropology, literature-reading-writing, arts and sciences, and history. Education is highlighted throughout. I probe both achievements and limits within a historical context of the history of literacy and the history of literacy in the disciplines. In searching for the origins of literacy studies critically, historically, and comparatively, my goal lies in the intellectual and practical reconstruction of the field of literacy studies.

## Notes

1. See <http://bicfightforyourwrite.com>
2. See the thin “report” from Hanover Research entitled “The Importance of Teaching Handwriting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” with footnotes mainly to newspaper articles, on the BIC website. No specific documentation is provided.
3. On the history of handwriting and its ideologies, see Thornton, *Handwriting in America* (1996).
4. See <http://www.scholastic.com/readeveryday>
5. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOXQ07nURso](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOXQ07nURso)
6. See <http://genius.com/albums/Kanye-west/The-college-dropout>
7. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GvoH-vPoDc>
8. See <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/weirdalyankovic/wordcrimes.html>
9. Graff and Duffy (2007) elaborate: “We define literacy here not in terms of values, mentalities, generalized knowledge, or decontextualized quantitative measures. Rather, literacy is defined as basic or primary levels of reading and writing and their analogies across different media, activities made possible by a technology or a set of techniques for decoding and reproducing printed materials, such as alphabets, syllabaries, pictographs, and other systems, which themselves are created and used in specific historical and material contexts. Only by grounding definitions of literacy in specific, qualified, and historical particulars can we avoid conferring upon it the status of myth” (Graff, 2011a, 37).

10. Full references to Goody's subsequent writing and the debates over the "Goody thesis" appear in Chap. 3.
11. Compare Stone, "Literacy and Education in England" (1969) with Schofield, "Measurement of Literacy in Pre-industrial England" (1968). Schofield criticized the very general nature of Stone's factors, which ranged from religion to stratification, but was more concerned about primary sources and literacy's role in economic development.

## References

- Arnové, Robert F., and Harvey J. Graff, eds. (2008) *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- Barton, David. (2006) *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Clanchy, Michael T. (1993) *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*. 2d ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth. (1979) *The Printing Press as An Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, Jack. (1968) "Introduction: The Implications of Literacy," *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–26.
- Goody, Jack, and Ian Watt. (1968) "The Consequences of Literacy," in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27–68.
- Gough, Kathleen. (1968) "Implications of literacy in traditional China and India," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 69–84.
- Graff, Harvey J. (1979) *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*. New York and London: Academic Press.
- . (1981a) *Literacy in history: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography*. New York: Garland.
- , ed. (1981b) *Literacy and Social Development in the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1987) *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Society and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . (1991) *The Literacy Myth*, with new introduction. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- . (1995) *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present*, rev. and exp. ed. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- . (2001) "The Shock of the 'New Histories': Social Science Histories and historical literacies. Presidential Address, Social Science History Association, 2000," *Social Science History*, 25: 483–533.
- . (2010) "The Literacy Myth at Thirty," *Journal of Social History*, 43: 635–661.

- . (2011a) *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- . (2011b) "Many Literacies: Reading Signs of the Times," in *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*, ed. Graff. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 15-33.
- . (2012) "Literacy Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies: Reflections on History and Theory," in *Valences of interdisciplinarity: Theory, practice, pedagogy*, ed. Ralph Foshay. Cultural Dialectics Series. Edmonton, Alberta: AU/Athabasca University Press, 273-307
- . (2014) "Epilogue: Literacy Studies and Interdisciplinary studies with Notes on the Place of Deborah Brandt" in *Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing and Research after Literacy in American Lives*, ed. Julie Nelson Christoph, John Duffy, Eli Goldblatt, Nelson Graff, Rebecca Nowacek, and Bryan Trabold. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 202-226.
- . (2015) *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ., and John Duffy. (2007) "The Literacy Myth," *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, vol. 2, *Literacy*, ed. Brian Street; Nancy Hornberger, general editor. Berlin and New York: Springer, 41-52.
- Grafton, Anthony T. (1980) "The Importance of Being Printed," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11: 265-286.
- , Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, and Adrian Johns. (2002) "How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?" *American Historical Review*, 107: 84-128.
- Hamilton, Mary. (2012). *Literacy and the politics of representation*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, William V. (1989) *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Havelock, Eric A. (1963) *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press.
- Hoggart, Richard. (1961) *The Uses of Literacy: Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture*. Boston: Beacon.
- Houston, R. A. (2002) *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education, 1500-1800*. 2d ed. London: Longman.
- Olson, David R., and Nancy Torrance, eds. (2009) *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, Walter. (1958) *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Schofield, Roger S. (1968) "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-industrial England," in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 311-325.
- Stone, Lawrence. (1969) "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past & Present* 42: 69-139.
- Street, Brian. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornton, Tamara Plakins. (1996) *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vincent, David. (2000) *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* Cambridge: Polity Press.