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CONTEMPORARY LITERACY SCHOLARSHIP AND THE VALUE OF CONTEXT

Theoretically, large-scale writing assessment measures students' ability to work with written language, i.e., their literate ability. The relationship implied here between assessment and literacy, however, is deceptively simple. On the one hand, assessment operates from the premise that tests can reflect some measure of ability. This premise relies on a historically positivist paradigm which accepts both the possibility of measurement and the value of it. Of course, some scholars, such as James A Berlin (1994) and Peter Elbow (1993), challenge the notion that such measurement is even possible, but since testing remains a significant part of the landscape, these challenges are largely ineffectual and the premise remains. Still, like these scholars, contemporary literacy scholarship does not share assessment's traditional value system and instead tends to reflect a concern for social and individual welfare, values less interested in objectivity than in interpersonal relations and community norms.

The idea that "literacy scholarship" embodies a single value system, however, strains the imagination. "Scholarship" here is a broad term, and by it, I mean to include both research and practice—and their intersections, particularly in pedagogical forums. My use of this term is in no way intended to suggest that scholarly work on literacy is monolithic, but rather that certain tendencies appear in the body of the scholarship on the subject, whether that scholarship takes the form of theory, ethnography, historiography, teacher research, or classroom accounts. Part of the work of this chapter is to analyze these tendencies and to argue that, taken together, they can be described as a paradigm. The argument in the first chapter made much the same claim about assessment; in the area of literacy, this idea is more difficult to accept, in part because the term "literacy" applies to a much broader area in composition studies than does "assessment." A paradigmatic analysis of each, however, allows us to compare their assumptions, guiding metaphors, and research agendas.

My first chapter argues that assessment research and practices tend to exhibit characteristics consistent with an objectivist paradigm. This chapter argues that literacy research, practices, and pedagogy tend to exhibit

characteristics consistent with a contextual paradigm. Although these paradigms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, neither are they particularly compatible. Contemporary literacy scholarship focuses on rhetorical and social context: on the ways in which the location and purpose of literate ability influences not only what counts as “literacy,” but also the ways in which literate ability matures, the social and political impact of literacy, and the limitations—economic, social, rhetorical—imposed by the situation in which literacy develops. This emphasis on context suggests that contemporary literacy scholarship relies on a social constructionist epistemology, or even that it operates within a social constructionist paradigm, a connection I will return frequently in this book. This chapter analyzes the value of context in contemporary literacy scholarship in order to delineate more clearly the distinctions between the prevailing scholarly tendencies in literacy and those in assessment.

As in the first chapter, part of the analysis is historical. Suzanne de Castell and Allan Luke (1986) describe historical changes in literacy education in terms of a series of paradigms: classical, progressive, and technocratic. This chapter extends these categories to include what I argue is yet another paradigm shift—to the contextual—and, drawing on the work of the first chapter, analyzes the connections between literacy practices and assessment practices at various historical moments. In each case prior to the most recent paradigm shift, assessment practices sufficiently reflected the prevailing values in literacy pedagogy so that they complemented each other. In the most recent shift, however, the aims of literacy education have diverged from those of assessment practice, so that while assessment scholarship has maintained roots in objectivism, literacy scholarship has embraced instead the implications of situation and the limits of location. Contemporary literacy scholarship breaks radically not only with prior conceptions of the meaning of literacy and its value in society, but also with the values of assessment as currently articulated in ways that strain attempts to assess literate ability.

CONTEMPORARY LITERACY SCHOLARSHIP

When “literacy” is understood as the ability to read and write, a certain universality adheres to the concept. After all, “reading” and “writing” are arguably abilities that virtually all people are capable of possessing, if only in an ideal world, however complex the actual processes. Contemporary literacy scholarship challenges the idea that literacy is a universal concept by emphasizing the contextual boundaries of any literate act. That is, instead of talking about literacy in general terms, contemporary literacy scholars

insist that the context of the literacy act be made an explicit part of the definition, and some even attach a qualifier to the term “literacy” (e.g., *cultural literacy* or *formal literacy*). Their claim is that reading and writing differ depending on the context in which such abilities are learned and employed. By thus emphasizing boundaries, contemporary scholars recognize that literacy is most meaningful when situated in specific contexts.

Harvey J. Graff (1987), long-time historian and scholar of literacy, argues that any study of literacy requires a definition of “literacy” that will serve across time and space, but which is neither ahistorical nor acontextual. He claims that the “*only*” sufficient definition is “[*b*]asic or *primary levels of reading and writing*” where the definitions of “basic” and “primary” are determined by the context of the literacy under discussion (1987, 3–4, Graff’s emphasis). Specifically, he argues that literacy study means understanding literacy as a technology of reading and writing for the purposes of communication and understanding in a particular social, historical, and cultural context (1987, 4). He carefully emphasizes that literacy’s “meaning is established only in precise historical contexts; it is not universally given or proscribed. It need not connote dimensions of the liberal, the polished, or the literary, and may not even contrast strongly with illiteracy” (1987, 374). Graff uses his model of literacy to argue in historical and cultural detail that the relationship between social movements and consequences on the one hand and literacy instruction and levels on the other is far more complex than effect and cause.

Graff emphasizes the historical dimensions of literate ability, but other contemporary scholars ground literacy in specific *social* contexts, focusing their arguments on the ways in which literate acts are meaningful only in the specific communities in which they arise. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole’s definition—a “set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it”—makes context implicit throughout; they argue that literacy is meaningless without a social context for its use (1981, 236). Similarly, David Bleich argues that literacy “is the study of language use in intrasocial situations. This meaning for literacy already suggests that to be literate is to have a socially governed strategy or set of customs and habits for *any* use of language, either oral or written. To study literacy is to study the social prompts and styles that call for the use of language” (1989, 22). Bleich’s definition emphasizes the social practices of communication and the particular contexts in which those practices are grounded. Implicit in these definitions is the notion that apart from context and social practices, the written (or spoken) word has no particular meaning.

Unlike Graff, Scribner and Cole, and Bleich, who arrive at their definitions analytically, other contemporary scholars contrast different models of literacy using qualifiers to develop categories that roughly correspond to contextual literacy and acontextual literacy. For example, in *Institutionalizing Literacy*, Mary Trachsel (1992) distinguishes between “formal” and “functionalist” theories of literacy. “Formal” literacy, for Trachsel, connotes a mastery of the skills of reading and writing, focusing on written text as an abstraction, an objectification of thought, and a separation of the writer from the context of the reader. This, she argues, comprises the literacy of standardized tests. “Functionalist” literacy—the literacy that Trachsel is most interested in—foregrounds purpose and understands reading and writing to be social acts connecting reader, writer, and context through language. This is the literacy that most educators in English studies would claim they teach, and she argues that this bond through literacy could “become the site where English studies at last confronts and overcomes its split personality”—the split she sees between knowledge production and service that has resulted in a significant gap between literature and composition (1992, 179). Trachsel numbers Walter Ong and Eric Havelock among those subscribing to largely formal definitions of literacy and Shirley Brice Heath and Deborah Brandt among those who advocate functionalist definitions, although she acknowledges that these two sides are not entirely dissimilar and that their theories overlap. Trachsel uses the distinction to argue that formal literacy inappropriately dominates English Studies through apparatuses such as the SAT, and that in order to overcome the hold of such objective testing, English professionals should adopt a functionalist approach to literacy.

Other scholars develop and rely on structures similar to Trachsel’s. For example, Brian V. Street, working in anthropology, distinguishes between “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy (1984, 1).¹⁴ The autonomous model derives from “the assumption that [literacy] is a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts”; scholars using this model treat literacy most often as a set of skills which develop progressively (1984, 1). In contrast, the “ideological” model focuses “on the specific social practices of reading and writing,” showing that literacy grows out of social rather than formal institutions (1984, 2). To develop these models, he illustrates the differences in literacies taught through formal schooling and those generated in response to specific social needs. For example, he contrasts the relative failure of traditional educational approaches to adult literacy campaigns with the success of need-based programs. He concludes that, unless the adult learners’ goals

include pursuing formal education in academic settings, adult learners miss nothing significant if they do not learn academic literacy.

Working in composition studies, Deborah Brandt (1990) also contrasts contextually-oriented literacy with an acontextual notion, which she calls “strong-text literacy.” “Strong-text literacy,” she argues, focuses on the “interpretive demands” of text, treating literate activity as distinct from social interaction and thus decontextualized (1990, 2–3). In contrast, she presents a process model of literacy that references not only the context of the reader and writer at work, but also “the implicit process by which intersubjective understanding is getting accomplished” (1990, 4). For example, Brandt contrasts schooling in the features of language—phonetics, spelling, and grammar—with the active process by which children learn to read and write in the home prior to schooling, in which literacy develops in response to the needs of social interaction. Missing in the strong-text approach, she maintains, are the “human ties” that connect real people to language (1990, 126).

The particular merits of each of these models—Trachsel’s, Street’s, and Brandt’s—are less at issue here than the structure they propose. The acontextual halves of their contrastive definitions treat literate ability as distinct from any particular historical and cultural framework for reading and writing, while the contextual halves find the connection between location and literate ability necessary to understanding literacy at all. More precisely, Trachsel, Street, and Brandt would argue that acontextual theories of literacy fail to acknowledge their always already situatedness, while contextual literacies foreground situation. The qualifiers these scholars add to “literacy” do more, however, than clarify the meaning: they also enact the models they describe. Without the qualifiers, “literacy” could be taken as an overarching concept. Instead, the qualifications outline the limitations their authors envision. In all three cases—and throughout contemporary literacy scholarship—these limitations explicitly reflect a concern for the social context in which literate activity participates, regardless of whether the qualifying term embraces or disavows context as a necessary piece of the literacy puzzle.

In addition to proposing contextual principles for theorizing literacy, contemporary literacy scholars tend to treat literacy pedagogy as a contextual endeavor. For example, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* (1983) argues that a child’s literate ability is directly tied to the oral and literate practices in her immediate context—most particularly in the language practices of her family, which are, in turn, tied to the historical and economic context of that family. J. Elspeth Stuckey, in her Marxist analysis,

argues that literacy instruction in schools participates in “social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity” by enforcing conformity to hegemonic values, which perpetrates violence on those without power to define those values (1991, vii). Perhaps most familiar of all—and a good example of the type of hegemonic inculcation Stuckey argues against—E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* (1987) argues that in order for students to be literate in a meaningful way, they must learn the dominant cultural context in which they live. And while a number of scholars have pointed out the problems with Hirsch’s position—not the least of which is the ethnocentric and masculinist emphasis of the culture he delineates—he explicitly argues that literacy is contextual, and he defines his understanding of that context not only through his arguments about what students do and do not know, but also through his list of “What Literate Americans Know.”

This type of concern for context typifies contemporary literacy scholarship, and stands in stark contrast with the emphasis on objectivity and universality in psychometrics. Even Hirsch argues explicitly that context is crucial to literacy; in his case, national boundaries are crucial to delimiting the subjects that schools should address in order to help students become literate. Contemporary composition pedagogy also reflects this emphasis on context. For example, instruction on composing processes—a staple in writing courses—includes a concern for the individual writer’s particular methods and the situation in which she is writing. The *Standards for the English Language Arts* developed by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996), which I will return to in chapter five, enacts the ideals of context in myriad ways, not the least of which is the authors’ refusal to provide grade level objectives, which they claim should be designed at the local level. While various scholars and educators take up literacy in different ways, their work shares a common premise: the idea that literacy—whether theoretical, practical or pedagogical—is virtually meaningless without a context for its use.

LITERACY IN THE CLASSICAL PARADIGM

Of course, literacy education in the United States has not always looked like this. Prior to the twentieth century, literacy educators focused primarily on developing appropriate moral and aesthetic responses in students, and considered the same responses appropriate for all students in all situations. Then, from the turn of the century through approximately the mid-1970s, literacy education focused on reading and writing as universal skills to be taught to every person, without particular concern for the

ways that reading ability, for example, was influenced by cultural attitudes toward print.

De Castell and Luke describe these changes in terms of a series of paradigms: “classical,” “progressive,” and “technocratic” (1986, 87), and their discussion is helpful as an introduction to the primary methods of literacy instruction until approximately the last quarter of the twentieth century.¹⁵ The classical paradigm dominated until roughly the late nineteenth century, and literacy instruction during this period focused on the inculcation of proper morality and behavior. The progressive paradigm replaced the focus on morality with an interest in the incremental development of skills and lasted from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth centuries. Finally, the technocratic paradigm, which the authors argue persists at the writing of their text, treated education in general—and reading and writing in particular—as composed of discrete skills which should reach a “functional” level through sequential drills. These terms are not intended to designate clear lines of demarcation by de Castell and Luke—or by myself. Instead, the authors posit these models to get at the “normative context” in which literacy instruction has taken place at particular times, arguing that “[e]ach educational epoch has framed literacy instruction in terms of principles, norms, values, and beliefs considered to be worth reading and writing about” (1986, 87). Thus, the differences among these models tend to reflect cultural and historical differences in prevailing values as much as they reflect differences in literacy theories and practices.

De Castell and Luke delineate three paradigms; however, I want to use only two of theirs: the classical and the technocratic. While the progressive paradigm can be considered a separate model, the distinctions between it and the technocratic paradigm—which I do explicitly examine—seem more a matter of degree than kind, and the details on the former are not particularly relevant here. According to de Castell and Luke’s argument, the emphases on practicality and reason introduced in the progressive paradigm easily became central tenets as positivist thinking took hold in the technocratic paradigm. For my purposes, these distinctions are more appropriately seen as a continuum that broke radically from the classical paradigm, and from which, I argue, contextual literacy has since broken.

The tension between contemporary literacy scholarship and assessment reflects traces of these earlier paradigms, a situation reinforced by historical changes in the definition of “literacy.” In the classical paradigm, a “literate” person was an educated person, educated specifically in

matters of literature or religion. The conventional meaning of “literacy” today—the ability to read and write—did not become common until near the turn of the century, with the rise of the progressive and then technocratic paradigms. In fact, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “literacy” did not come into regular usage until the 1880s, when it was formed in specific opposition to “illiteracy.”¹⁶ Prior to the rise of progressive and technocratic literacy, possessing the ability to read and write could not make a person “literate”; while these skills were considered necessary to being “educated,” they were not sufficient for that appellation. “Educated,” “learned,” and even “literary” are much older definitions for “literate,” dating from the mid-fifteenth century. Within these denotations for “literacy” and “literate,” there are two primary definitional categories: the first focuses on the quality of being educated and knowledgeable, particularly in moral and aesthetic terms; the second emphasizes proficiency in the skills of reading and writing.

Prior to the turn of the century, to be literate meant to be educated, and to be educated meant to be familiar with hegemonic values and to be disciplined by those values. Literacy instruction in the classical paradigm aimed at cultivating “educated” persons by instilling moral and aesthetic values considered appropriate by the dominant culture of the time. Thus, the literate/educated person in the nineteenth century United States would have been well-versed in Christian doctrine and morality, particularly of a Protestant variety, and would have held aesthetic values not unlike those we would now associate with “high culture.” The teaching of these values was an explicit part of the literacy curriculum.

Elementary and secondary students of this period read the Bible and literary classics of the time, and they studied Latin and Greek. Originally organized by religious leaders, formal literacy instruction during the first few decades of the nineteenth century relied on the Bible as a primary text. Educators of The First Day Society of Philadelphia, for example, used the Bible for all reading material, and even primers and spellers consisted of short sentences and words taken directly from scripture (Soltow and Stevens 1981, 18). Even as literacy instruction moved to the secular forums of the common schools in the 1830s and 1840s, the Bible remained a primary text. Students progressed through a series of “grades” studying the same material “in greater and greater detail and depth; underlying ‘truths’ were explicated in terms of grammatical rules, rhetorical strategies, moral content, and aesthetic worth” (de Castell and Luke 1986, 93). Educators of the time accepted the premises that students should be exposed only to ideas and texts considered exemplary, and that

through repeated exposure to the values espoused in those texts, students could develop similar moral and aesthetic values.

Not surprisingly, the primary method of instruction was imitation. Writing instruction consisted of “stylistic imitation and repetition, guided by explicit rules,” and reading instruction consisted of oral recitation with an emphasis in both cases on correctness and orthodox presentation (de Castell and Luke 1986, 93–4). In this model, writing consisted of practice in handwriting, grammatical correctness, and authorial emulation; reading was an exercise in mnemonics, pronunciation, and posture. Neither encouraged interpretation or creativity, and consequently both encouraged the acceptance of established values. In this way, classical education disciplined students to accept and reinforce cultural norms.

Assessment practices were congruous. Evaluation was done orally by outside examiners who “embodied, however tacitly, standards of cultural and disciplinary excellence and applied these unstated criteria to laud or correct the performance” (de Castell and Luke 1986, 95). This is the model—discussed in the first chapter—that Horace Mann found unwieldy as enrollments increased. However, it complemented the classical paradigm in that the assessment employed exemplars from the student’s society to measure his ability to follow pre-established norms of thought and behavior.

The pedagogical repetition and imitation of material and the reliance on morally sound texts make sense given the purposes of education in the classical paradigm. Education during this period was not concerned with adding to the knowledge base, nor were students expected to arrive at their teachers’ conclusions on their own. Because the overall purpose of education in this model was acculturation, instruction was designed to acquaint students with accepted beliefs and practices and to reinforce them. Essentially conservative—antiquarian in the Nietzschean sense—this education focused on preserving the best of existing thought rather than re-examining that thought or adding to it.

This educational model preserved not only exemplary thought of the past, but also the social order of the present. By training individuals so that their ideas and goals would match those of the society at-large, classical literacy instruction maintained social order specifically through the salvation of the individual. According to Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, the concerns of educational leaders “were both social and individual; both the salutary effects of Bible reading on individual souls and the preservation of social order were their objectives” (1981, 11). The social order of this paradigm, however, derived from the moral and aesthetic

training of the individual, who would integrate the appropriate responses and tastes through imitation of models, and thus would enact those responses and tastes. The educated individual, then, would contribute to the social order both by setting an appropriate example and by behaving in an orderly fashion.

In this paradigm, it is not at all clear that the ability to read and write would have held any meaning outside the state of being “educated.” That is, reading and writing were a condition of being educated, but only a part of the process and with limited value as independent skills. In fact, “skill” seems an inappropriate term; it is more likely that reading and writing would have been thought of as innate “faculties” or “talents” possessed by the educated rather than “skills” to be learned. Morality, specifically Protestant Christian morality, was the trainable quality, and literacy education during the classical paradigm sought to instill in students the appropriate moral responses; if some were better educated than others, it was only because of the increased access to schooling and high culture that their social station provided. Born of the conviction that there is only one correct way, the same moral code was applicable to all, regardless of their beliefs—witness, for example, the Christian education of colonial-era Native Americans. The intended result of literacy instruction, then, was a society with a clear and coherent set of moral and cultural values. While there were certainly differences in moral responses and aesthetic appreciation among the educated in the classical paradigm, only one set of dominant values constituted a legitimate literate education.

LITERACY IN THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

Around the turn of the century, as scientific ideals and progressive theories gained popularity, the theories and practices of literacy education changed. The progressive movement of the early twentieth century began to atomize education—to see instruction in any given area as a series of progressive skills in the social development of the individual. The technocratic movement took the progressive movement to its logical conclusion, atomizing and sequencing information to the point that the transmission of information surpassed the development of the person as the primary motivation for education. The growth of the individual as a member of society—a classical goal and a goal at the beginning of the progressive paradigm—was replaced by a concern for the transference of knowledge, and metaphors of training and conditioning became prevalent. In progressive and technocratic movements, which I am joining under the heading of the technocratic paradigm, the purpose of education was to

train the individual so that the individual would fit a social niche. The language of progressivism suggests a set of social goals, goals obscured in my combination of these models. But the paradigm I am calling “technocratic” foregrounds the importance of the individual in ways that a classical literacy education had not. It also had a much greater influence on the shape of assessment.

The addition of the ability to read and write to the definition of literacy coincides with the rise of positivism around the turn of the century, and it seems likely that positivism was a primary reason why the later definition was taken up so readily in education. In the positivist world view, every element that science “discovers” fits with those already uncovered like a jigsaw puzzle; once all the pieces have been found, the whole can be understood. Under this logic, it makes perfect sense to dissect any whole into its component parts in order to understand it. When this logic turns toward education, it makes perfect sense to teach students the parts so that they will eventually understand the whole. Thus, technocratic educators and theorists “scientifically dissected literacy into individually teachable units” such as “decoding” and “reading comprehension” (de Castell and Luke 1986, 101). In comparison to the complexity of what it means to be “educated”—the dominant definition in the classical model—the intricacies of reading and writing are more readily separable, teachable, and testable. To be educated is a subjective quality at best, while to be able to read and write has an element of measurability that would appeal to a positivist mindset.

Not surprisingly, the purpose of education changed as the paradigm changed. In the classical paradigm, educational goals included the development of the individual’s sense of morality, the cultivation of appropriate aesthetic refinement, and the training of social responses so that the individual would conform to society’s standards of behavior and knowledge. The progressive movement, associated primarily with John Dewey, “originated as a self-conscious attempt to make schooling socially responsive—oriented toward a social future rather than a cultural past” (de Castell and Luke 1986, 97). The technocratic paradigm translated the social emphasis of progressivism into an interest in the staged improvement of every individual. Consistent with positivist atomization, each individual would be trained to reach at least a certain level of proficiency that would allow him to contribute productively to society. A sound classical education provided for the moral well being of the individual and only by consequence, for that of the society. A sound technocratic education provided for the economic and social productivity of both the individual and society, but emphasized society’s well being.

During the period in which the classical paradigm dominated education, morality had been an explicit part of the curriculum. Students were expected to develop appropriate moral responses through the examples set by the classroom reading material. During the progressive era, literacy instruction aimed at developing skills for life in a social democracy, and the examples provided by the texts shifted from an emphasis on the ideals of high culture to exemplars of life in an industrial nation. Thus, *Dick and Jane* replaced the New Testament.¹⁷ As the technocratic model took over, the white, middle class, secular morality of the progressive paradigm gave way to an industrial morality in which students were trained to see themselves as workers in a thriving capitalist society.

Although morality did not actually disappear from the curriculum, developers of readers like *Dick and Jane* were less overtly concerned with imparting traditional moral values than with providing graduated material so that students could progress toward the goal of literacy. The technocratic era augmented the progressive emphasis by developing grade-level standards, including adopting the notion of “functional literacy”—a concept taken from the United States Army which defined it as “the capability to understand instructions necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks,” or more simply, a “fifth grade reading level” (de Castell and Luke 1986, 100–101). Technocratic education fostered an emphasis on vocational skills, and thus literacy instruction shifted from a reliance on exemplary texts to those deemed socially useful in a world where scientific reasoning was quickly becoming the final arbiter in matters of value. Readers gave way to “systems,” such as SRA, whose cards directed students through a series of sequential language skills. Each student could progress individually on the way to the goal of (functional) literacy (de Castell and Luke 1986, 102).

The terminology of technocratic education was intended to be value-neutral, a seemingly naive position from a contemporary vantage point which finds even the advocacy of “value-neutral” terminology clearly indicative of a particular set of values. Further, the emphasis on the “skills” of reading and writing tends to avoid the complexities of the term “educated,” including the various investments particular institutions and even individuals might have in what constitutes an appropriate “education.” The move toward defining “literacy” as reading and writing ostensibly strips the term “literacy” of these investments in a manner consistent with the drive for objectivity that characterizes the positivist thinking of the time.

The equation of literacy with education, however, never entirely disappeared. “Educated” is a loaded term, invested with the principles and aims

of those doing the defining. In the technocratic paradigm, the values of those defining literacy reflected the objective ideals of positivism. A primary principle of objectivity is that anything that is truly objective must be consistently recognized regardless of context. Thus, literacy in the technocratic paradigm, as in the case of the classical paradigm—although for different reasons—was treated as a universal ideal. That is, literacy functioned as a stable concept against which to measure the abilities of diverse populations. And, as in the classical paradigm, while there were varying degrees of literate ability among people, only one set of values constituted a legitimate education in literacy, in this case objectivist values.

THE CONTEXTUAL PARADIGM

De Castell and Luke argued in 1986 that contemporary literacy instruction operates primarily within a technocratic paradigm. The values at work in the technocratic paradigm, however, cannot account for the contextual emphasis in contemporary literacy instruction. Contextual literacy exhibits an acute awareness of the influence wielded by the circumstances in which literacy instruction takes place. This emphasis on variation attached to location, time, and purpose defies the universal notions of what it means to be literate that are central to the classical and technocratic paradigms. In the classical paradigm, the moral education literacy provided was considered the best morality for all persons. In the technocratic paradigm, the progressive and sequential steps toward improved reading and writing ability were applicable to all students. Contemporary literacy scholars, such as Graff, Brandt, and Heath, reject such universal understandings, arguing instead that the term “literacy” is only meaningful in specific locations, a claim that is entirely illogical according to either of the other two paradigms. Reflective of the social constructionist turn in contemporary composition scholarship in general, contextual literacy represents a clear challenge to the universal ideals of the technocratic and classical models. The thorough integration of context into literacy scholarship signals a shift from these earlier paradigms toward what I am calling the contextual paradigm.

In the contextual paradigm, at the level of theory, definitions, models, and practices of literacy cannot be readily imported from one location to another, as in the classical model, nor does literacy consist of a series of discrete skills that can be transmitted in the process of schooling, as in the technocratic model. Instead, literacy is profoundly situated: literate acts occur only in specific circumstances, and without an understanding of the historical, theoretical and political context, literacy has limited

value. In post-secondary composition instruction, for example, the contemporary focus on context has resulted in a heightened awareness of the ways in which learning Standard American English impinges on students' abilities to maintain their own dialects, too often insidiously alienating them from the community in which they live. This literacy—what we now call “academic literacy”—has currency not only in schooling, but also in realms such as business and politics. Historically, however, academic literacy has been denied to certain groups of people—African-Americans, women, Hispanics, immigrants—in ways that have kept them from power. Contextually aware literacy research helps scholars see that however wide these boundaries seem, they are nonetheless constructed boundaries and certainly not inevitable.

Furthermore, literacy in the contextual paradigm is no longer singular. As the use of *academic* literacy above suggests, there are, instead, multiple literacies: cultural, computer, formal, ideological. These multiple literacies not only better acknowledge the diversity of the reading and writing abilities necessary in various circumstances, but also support the notion that different situations exhibit different values. Computer literacy, for example, carries with it a technical vocabulary and conceptual understanding of how electronic media work that have no substantive relationship to academic literacy, and in fact, may have no connection to formal education whatsoever. Both types of literacy, however, have limited use outside of their own context: computer literacy provides little assistance in reading a novel or analyzing a political speech, and academic literacy does little to solve programming problems or evaluate software.

While contextual literacies such as these signal a paradigmatic break, they do not signal a complete divorce from the earlier notions of what it means to be literate. The work of classical literacy was moral education, education for living well and appropriately according to the standards of the time. Technocratic literacy sought to narrow this idea of education to the more readily transmittable skills of reading and writing. In modern dictionaries, “literacy” carries both the classical meaning—to be educated—and the technocratic meaning—to be able to read and write. More than combining the two definitions, however, contextual literacy questions the meanings of “educated,” “read,” and “write” so that the result is an expanded sense of these terms. Literacy in the contextual paradigm still focuses on reading and writing ability, but understands these terms to have broader meanings, while incorporating some sense of the moral and aesthetic education of the classical paradigm.

At the same time, however, contextual literacy, influenced by social constructionist theory, recognizes the limitations of the location of the literate act and the ways that literacy is necessarily tied to the situation in which it arises. Classical and technocratic literacy acknowledged no such boundaries. Their influence, however, helps make clear the social and moral values implicit in contextual literacy and the ways these values contrast with those of contemporary assessment. To be “educated,” to be able to read and write—that is, to be “literate” in the contextual paradigm—is to know that reading and writing serve purposes that are tied to particular situations, and that those situations are value-laden. To be literate in the contextual paradigm, then, is to be able to read and write in and to those contexts with a heightened awareness of the purposes, powers, and limitations of those contexts.

THE DISJUNCTION BETWEEN LITERACY AND ASSESSMENT

While contemporary literacy scholarship and prevailing assessment scholarship currently operate within paradigms that are more or less at odds with each other, the review of literacy education in this chapter demonstrates that this has not always been the case. Throughout most of the twentieth century, literacy evinced a technocratic paradigm that was reasonably compatible with the objectivist paradigm of assessment. It has only been during the last quarter century that literacy scholarship’s primary value system—drawing on social constructionist notions of contextuality and location—has moved away from the technocratic model, while the primary paradigm of assessment has remained objectivist. This separation has intensified tensions in projects that require participants and organizations to address the concerns of these divergent value systems. The competing paradigms of literacy and assessment scholarship generate tensions not only at the theoretical level, but also at the practical level. Such situations are not infrequent; they occur, for example, whenever teachers are asked to evaluate the literate abilities of students in terms of program-level objectives.

A contemporary understanding of what it means to be literate incorporates both the idea of being educated and the ability to read and write. In general, literacy rates in the United States—when literacy is defined as the ability to encode and decode text—are sufficiently high that beyond the level of elementary education, the two meanings of “literacy” are nearly inseparable: the ability to read and write is what it means to be an educated individual. The public outcry surrounding the various literacy crises, for example, has far less to do with students’ abilities to write lucid

prose than it does with concerns about the information and attitudes they are learning—not to mention the political, social and economic climate of the moment (Trimbur 1991; Graff 1987, 390–93).

Literacy's tangled definition creates a particular problem when it comes to assessment. When literacy is defined narrowly as the ability to read and write, testing is relatively simple. Educators evaluate abilities to encode and decode language in written form, to follow the rules of grammatical prose, to determine the meaning of a text, etc. These are the discrete skills tested in the height of the technocratic paradigm. They can be treated as universals, and as such, they can be evaluated consistently—that is, reliably.

The results of these tests also appear simple. Tests of discrete skills result in numerical values that can be compared at a variety of levels from the individual to the national. The problem with these tests—and the reason for so much of the current dissatisfaction with them—is that the numerical output of these tests is relatively meaningless in the context of contemporary literacy education. Tests that divide those who can sufficiently decode written text from those who cannot—where “sufficient” has been defined by whatever agency has designed the test—focus on a demarcation between the literate and the illiterate and de-emphasize the differences between high school dropouts and published authors, both of whom could be considered literate in any number of contexts.

This focus on gross distinctions between literate and illiterate is a concern of the technocratic model of literacy and shares positivist values with objective testing. With the rise of contextual literacies particularly in the last decade, however, much literacy scholarship has engaged with more socially oriented values reminiscent of the classical paradigm, but with the explicit awareness that literacy is contextually motivated. Consequently, contemporary literacy scholarship is less interested in this dividing line between the literate and the illiterate—the primary concern of the technocratic paradigm—than in the variations among those who can read and write and the material conditions that influence and result from these differences.

These distinctions, however, are harder to delineate than the differences between those who can read a newspaper and those who cannot. When “literate” means “educated” and when ideals of education vary—as they currently do—valid testing is, at best, extraordinarily difficult. In the classical paradigm, testing was not a significant issue. There were fewer students to test, and evaluators were primarily interested in each student's ability to fit into the community. The technocratic paradigm recast

this fit in terms of skills and abilities, and testing shifted accordingly. Contemporary literacy scholars face the legacies of both paradigms: literacy theory and practice focused on what it means to be educated in this society combined with continuing pressures to test according to objectivist principles. The result is often that literacy scholarship—both theory and practice—is dissociated from assessment scholarship—both theory and practice—and from either side of the fence, there are few attempts to reshape assessment to address an altered literacy paradigm.

These two paradigms—the objectivist paradigm of assessment and the contextual paradigm of literacy—generate a tension in English studies that has been too easily cast as an us/them scenario which has historically supported each side's ignorance of the other. The regard in which each paradigm holds the other does not help matters. From a contextual—or, more broadly, social constructionist—standpoint, objectivism is one set of lenses among many, and a particularly limited one at that. From an objectivist standpoint, context is another name for subjectivity, perhaps interesting but too limited to be of much use in explaining how the world works. Given the continued dominance of social constructionist theory—at least in composition studies—the contextual paradigm would seem to hold a strong position, but positivism's scientific legacy and its run through most of the twentieth century as the dominant paradigm give it the edge, particularly in formal schooling situations where testing carries inordinate weight. Moreover, contemporary literacy theory has little influence in public policy, while objectivism has considerable influence with those making bureaucratic and governmental decisions. Valid and reliable tests produce quantifiable results that fit with the expectations of those in power.

This is not to say that assessment has not felt the strain of the tension. As I noted in the first chapter, assessment scholars, such as Pamela Moss, are looking for alternatives—socially and contextually aware assessment methods responsive to contemporary theories of writing instruction. Some scholars on both sides of the fence recognize the tension generated when the values of contextual literacy scholarship compete with those of assessment. But assessment, nonetheless, operates from the superior position in this tension.