

Michael J. Michaud

Literacy in the Lives of Adult Students Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees

In addition to the increase in the number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who will attend college in the coming years, the average age of students attending college will continue to rise, a tendency already clear in many schools. Consequently, no longer can we expect our first-year writing courses to be made up of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students fresh out of high school.

—Beverly J. Moss and Keith Walters, “Rethinking Diversity: Axes of Difference in the Writing Classroom” (451)

People have their own needs and purposes [for literacy] based on their own lives.

—David Barton, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (212)

IN ANY GIVEN WEEKNIGHT THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, ADULT STUDENTS taking courses at Northeast State College (NSC)¹ travel down Alan Drive, past the new air-traffic control tower, the long-term parking lots, and runway six to NSC's Barrington Learning Center, which is housed in the former terminal building of a regional airport. Beneath the boom of jets and amid the rumble of a small army of shuttle busses and maintenance vehicles, they gather their things and climb the marble stairs to the second floor, where NSC leases classroom space, quite literally, on the tarmac of the airport. As the time approaches 6:30, weary from the workday but energized by the possibilities of learning, they make their way to their respective classrooms, settle into their seats, and wait for their courses to begin. They carry bags of fast food and bottles of soda, water, or coffee. They carry backpacks, briefcases, and smart phones. They carry tales from the week past and plans for the week ahead. And they carry myriad and diverse stories of literacy development and use, in and outside of school.

In the field of composition studies, few investigations have been made into the role that literacy plays in the lives of adult students participating in formal programs of post-secondary study at the bachelor's level. Whereas much research exists that examines the liter-

1. To protect the identities of those who participated in the NSC study, I have assigned pseudonyms to all individuals and institutions described in this article.

ate lives and practices of adults enrolled in literacy programs outside colleges and universities such as workplaces (Gowen; Hull) and community literacy settings (McKee and Blair; Rosenberg; Belzer; Branch; Daniell; Merrifield et al.) and a good deal of research engages the experiences of adults enrolled in community colleges (see, for example, Tinberg and Nadeau; Bay; Frederickson), adults pursuing bachelor's degrees in four-year colleges and universities have received little attention. Of those who have investigated the experiences of such students, Sohn seeks to understand the ways in which academic literacy shapes her former students' lives after college and Ivanic explores the intersection of academic literacy and identity among "mature students" participating in higher education in Britain. While the number of adults pursuing bachelor's degrees in formal programs of post-secondary study has risen over the last several decades (Kleiner) and while scholars within composition and literacy studies have sought to better understand the literate development and experiences of traditional-aged undergraduate students (Carroll; Beaufort, *College*; Lunsford, Fishman, and Rogers), there is still more to learn about the role of literacy in the lives of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees in higher education.

In this article, I seek to add to the conversation about adult students in composition and literacy studies by sharing findings from a series of case studies I conducted with a small group of adults pursuing bachelor's degrees at Northeast State College during the early years of the 21st century. Having worked with adults in a range of settings for several years, I wanted to investigate the "extensive histories with literacy" that Kirk Branch reminds us all adults carry with them when they return to school and the role that literacy practices play in such students' lives beyond the classroom (22).

Theoretical Framework

*It is never too late to pursue the career of your dreams
and "go back to school" to get the skills you need to succeed...*

—Urban League of Greater Alabama, "Empowerment Through
Education and Job Skills Training" [web]

In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphors are important because they shape our perceptions and actions. David Barton acknowledges the importance of metaphors for the study of literacy by examining several of the more prevalent ways we think about literacy, including the metaphor of literacy-as-skills, "a view of literacy which is at the root of much educational practice" (11). According to this view, "Skills are treated as things which people own or possess" (or do not) and literacy is treated as "a psychological variable that can be measured and assessed" (11). The literacy-as-skills metaphor breaks reading and writing down into sets of "skills and sub-skills" which are

then “taught in a particular order, each skill building on the previous [one]” (11). This metaphor of literacy-as-skills, Barton suggests, “is very powerful [and often] spills over into the rest of society” (11), as we see in the statement above from the Urban League of Greater Alabama website. In scholarly and popular accounts of adult students returning to post-secondary study, we frequently hear of the need for skills “updates” or “retooling.” “Skills update” has become a powerful means by which we have come to understand why adult students enroll in postsecondary study and what we who teach such students are to do with them.

And yet, adults like those who attend NSC don’t make sense within a “skills” framework. This view, premised as it is on a linear progression of literacy development, is hard to square with the range of literacies adult students carry with them when they come to college. Despite the fact that such students are positioned by the metaphor as those who *do not* “own or possess” requisite literacy “skills,” most adults pursuing bachelor’s degrees read and write sufficiently to function successfully in civic society, fulfill their responsibilities as parents and spouses, and earn a living. What, then, are the literacy skills that such students *do not* possess? And what are we who teach literacy to such students in higher education supposed to impart to them?

As Barton points out, “everyone has a view of literacy” but for many, metaphors of literacy are held unconsciously—structured as they are by the Discourses in which we all participate (see Gee). Importantly, “different metaphors have different implications for how we view illiteracy, what action might be taken to change it and how we characterize the people involved” (12). Barton has argued for an *ecological* view of literacy, a view which evolves out of and expands upon social theories of literacy (Scribner and Cole; Heath; Street; Barton and Ivanic). This view, like earlier theories, takes as its starting point people’s *everyday* uses of literacy (Barton 34). It is built on the belief that literacy is not a discreet cognitive skill or ability that one either has or does not have (literacy-as-skills) but is, instead, always situated within broader social and cultural contexts and relations. To study literacy within this framework is to investigate the role that literacy plays in the lives of individuals within these broader contexts and relations.

For Barton, an ecological approach is “neither innatist or environmentalist,” but is “about the dynamic interaction of the two, how people fit into the environment, how they form it and are formed by it” (49). Such a view serves as an alternative to the literacy-as-skills view that is implicit in so many discussions of adult students and literacy. As Barton argues, . . . in order to develop a full understanding of what literacy means in people’s lives it is necessary to look at how they use literacy as part of the process of making sense of their lives, representing the world to themselves, and working towards achieving what they want, using the resources available to them. (52-53)

In what follows, guided by Barton's ecological approach, I share what I have learned about what literacy means to and how it is used by seven adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees at NSC. In doing so, I hope to persuade those who work with such students to reconsider often implicitly held views which emphasize the literacy "skills" that adult students do not already "own or possess," to more expansive views that acknowledge the complex role that literacy practices already play in the lives of adult students pursuing post-secondary study when they arrive at the classroom door.

Method

Research Site

According to its website, Northeast State College, founded in 1972, is one of four public institutions that comprise the higher education system in the state in which it is located. NSC is an open-access institution that grants both associate's and bachelor's degrees and offers courses and degree programs online and face-to-face at four regional centers and five additional part-time sites. Of the roughly 2,500 undergraduate students actively enrolled in coursework at NSC during fiscal year 2010, roughly three-quarters were female, two-thirds were first-generation college students, eighty percent were transferring credit from other institutions, and eighty percent were over the age of 24 (the average age of NSC students was 36). NSC students tend to pursue professional programs such as business management, criminal justice, information technology, and early childhood education. According to NSC's website, its mission is to "expand access to public higher education to adults of all ages throughout the state."

Research Participants

I used only two criteria when recruiting participants for the NSC study: participants must be over the age of 24,² and enrolled in coursework at NSC on a part- or full-time basis.³ The adult students who volunteered to participate were generally of two kinds—those between the ages of 24-35, who worked part-time and took classes at NSC on a more full-time basis, and those between the ages of 35-60, who worked full-time and took classes at NSC part-time

2. Because most federal studies of student populations classify those age 24 and older as "adult" students, I have done so as well.

3. Despite my attempt to recruit participants of diverse ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, all participants who agreed to join this study were caucasian and only one was a non-native English speaker. This likely reflects a) student demographics at NSC where, at the time of this study, according to the Director of Institutional Research, whites made up 87% of the student body, b) the general demographic picture of the city in which the Barrington center is located, where, at the time of this study, 80.2% of citizens were categorized as "white persons," and/or c) the general demographic picture of state in which NSC is located, where, at the time of this study, 96.1% of citizens were categorized as "white persons."

(usually one per term). These two populations, I found, often brought different experiences of literacy development and use to their coursework and educational pursuits. Table 1, below, contains composite data on all seven NSC study participants.

Table 1: NSC Study Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Race/Native Language	Program of Study/ Years at NCS	Post-Secondary Education & Training	Marital Status	Current Job/Status
Sarah Knox	31	Caucasian/ English	Individualized Studies (undeclared)/3	None prior to NSC	Single	Work Study/part-time
Goran Prka	32	Caucasian/ Croatian	Business Management (B.A. Info Tech.)/4	A.S. (2004)	Single	IT consultant/part-time
Tony Vaccaro	39	Caucasian/ English	Applied Studies (B.A. Education and Training)	A.S. (1999); NREMT Paramedic certification; extensive workplace training	Married/ 3 children at home	Paramedic; Education Manager/unemployed at time of study
John Beech	43	Caucasian/ English	Business Management Management/<1	Post-secondary course- work at regional private university; local extension school; workplace training	Married/ 4 children at home	Information Technology Manager/unemployed at time of study
Patsy McGee	44	Caucasian/ English	Individualized Studies (B.A. English Language Arts)/1.5	None prior to NSC	Single/ 2 children at home, 1 in college	School paraprofessional/ full-time
Lois Smith	45	Caucasian/ English	Individualized Studies (B.A. Elementary Ed.)/3	U.S. Air Force Community College; A.A. (2006)	Single/ 2 children at home	School paraprofessional/ full-time
Jennifer Jarvis	58	Caucasian/ English	Applied Studies (B.A. Allied Health Care Services)	A.S. (1967); extensive workplace training	Married/ 3 grown children	Personal and administrative assistant office manager/part-time

Researcher Stance

At the time when I conducted the NSC study, I was not a member of the faculty at NSC, but I did retain professional contacts with colleagues there, several of whom helped make recruitment opportunities available to me and aided me in gaining access to space for conducting interviews. None of the adults who participated in the NSC study were my students. Having taught at NSC for several years prior to the time when I initiated the study, I did bring a good deal of experience working with adult students to the project and those experiences, combined with the many conversations I had about learning in adulthood with my own mother while she pursued a bachelor's degree later in life, informed my thinking and the study itself.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to learn more about the role of literacy in the lives of NSC study participants, I drew on life research question strategies that have been used by literacy researchers (Barton; Barton and Hamilton; Brandt) to assemble a portrait of the role of literacy—past and present—in NSC study participants' lives. I met with each participant for roughly one hour per meeting as few as five and as many as eight times. During early interviews, I tried to assemble a basic narrative of participants' experiences with school and literacy from childhood through adulthood. As the interviews progressed, we turned from past to present as I asked participants to discuss current literacy activities and share artifacts from three domains: home/community, work, and school. By the time interviews ended, I had amassed roughly 300 pages of transcripts and collected over 100 literacy artifacts, which I then began to code and categorize, looking for patterns among participants' experiences.

During the coding period, drawing on Barton's integrated ecological framework of literacy, I developed four focus areas:

- School and Literacy Histories
- Everyday/Vernacular Literacy Practices
- Workplace Literacies
- Literacy Attitudes/Values

My discussion of participants' experiences with literacy, below, is organized around these areas of inquiry (with findings on attitudes/values woven into the discussion of the other areas). Beth Daniell reminds us that “little narratives of literacy” like this one “seldom make statements that claim to be valid for literate persons in general or literate cultures in general” but can “offer valuable insights into literate behaviors” (4). So it is with the NSC study. It is my hope that these stories of literacy development and practice will provide important insights to composition teachers and scholars who work with diverse populations of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees in postsecondary settings.

Findings

Literacy Histories In and Outside of School

Reflecting on the role that literacy plays over the course of individuals' lifetimes, Barton writes:

Every person has a history [and] every person has a literacy history. This goes back to early childhood and the first encounters with literacy practices in home literacy events; it continues with involvement in community and school practices, and on into adulthood with its varying and changing demands. At any point in time a person's choices are based on the possibilities provided by their past experiences. (48)

“What are the past experiences with literacy that adult students pursuing bachelor’s degrees carry with them when they enroll in college? What do these past experiences make possible—or impossible?”

What are the past experiences with literacy that adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees carry with them when they enroll in college? What do these past experiences make possible—or impossible? As Barton points out, “Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon” (47). As literacy instructors, all too often we see only the present role of literacy in students' lives. Similarly, our view is sometimes restricted to a vision of just one kind of literacy—the kind that is practiced in schools. Methodologically, it is challenging to learn about adult students' literacy histories because, for many such individuals, the past is not so near at hand. Additionally, the fact of the researchers' own investment in the study of literacy may influence the kinds of stories participants are likely to tell. Despite these chal-

lenges, I found that NSC study participants had interesting stories to tell about significant literacy events and practices during their formative years. Below, I report on the role of literacy in NSC study participants' early, and in some cases, later lives—at home, in the community, and in school.

Among NSC study participants, Patsy McGee and Tony Vaccaro conveyed some of

the more frustrated stories with regard to early literacy development. Patsy recalled that when she was growing up, literacy activities were just not a part of family life. “Neither of my parents went to college or even finished high school,” she explained. “I would say that they didn’t even know that literacy existed.” Patsy could not recall being read to as a child, nor could she recall writing letters to friends, family, or pen pals. She summed up her earliest experiences with literacy with the following poignant observation: “We just never put anything up on the refrigerator.” Despite this absence of informal parental literacy instruction, Patsy recalled that she did manage to develop a passion for creative writing as a child and pursued her own self-sponsored literacy practices—both reading and writing. “I was a closet writer,” she explained. “I liked to write stories, downstairs in the cellar or just any old weird place I could find.” This passion for creative expression ended abruptly at age 11 when an older brother was killed in an automobile accident. “When my brother died, my writings were pretty sad,” Patsy recalled. “My mother found my poems and they were pretty dark and they scared her. I realized how afraid she was and that’s when I stopped writing.” Around this same time, Patsy really discovered reading for the first time and began to spend hours tucked away in quiet corners of the house, reading novels—“nothing that would be considered great literature, mostly VC Andrews.” She continued to pursue this self-sponsored reading throughout her adolescence and right up to the present day, where she talked of the hours she spent reading magazines, journals, and newspapers during her lunch period at the school at which she currently worked as a paraprofessional.

Like Patsy McGee, Tony Vaccaro grew up in a home setting where literacy was, if not neglected, not much emphasized. Tony’s parents divorced when he was still young. He lived with his mother and spent a lot of time with his grandparents, who, he says, helped raise him while his mother worked and, later, attended college in the evenings. Tony recalled with fondness weekday afternoons when he served as his grandfather’s newspaper boy, running into town to fetch the paper and a pack of cigarettes. Still, Tony did not recall feeling as though reading and writing were much emphasized during his early years:

My grandfather only had an 8th grade education. It was the accepted thing, you know, if you can’t work with your mind, you gotta work with your muscles. That was the mentality. Everybody wanted you to do well in school, but if you didn’t, you were still going to be able to get by. We grew up in a blue collar family and that was the accepted way of life and you shouldn’t feel down on yourself for this.

It wasn’t just that literacy activities weren’t much emphasized at home, though. As a result of early frustrations with literacy instruction in school, Tony began to avoid activities which required reading and especially writing. “I always associated reading with school and I didn’t really care for school,” Tony recalled, “so I didn’t care much for reading.” As for writ-

ing: “I’d get the phone. Writing was just not my thing.” Summing up his childhood self, Tony explained, “I didn’t spend a whole lot of time indoors. I was an outside kid.”

Other participants in the NSC study remembered early home and family literacy practices with fond feelings and nostalgia. Lois Smith, the middle of nine children, recalled her love of expressive writing and arts and crafts as a child—a love that was self-sponsored but also nurtured by parents and siblings. “[O]f all the kids, mom told me I was the writer,” Lois recalled during our interviews.

I would write letters to friends, family—to grandma, my aunts. I made homemade cards on birthdays and I used to do this little scrolly thing in the four corners of the letters so they knew it was from me. I put these little poems I had written in the cards and I signed them, “Lois, fourth daughter, fifth child.”

Growing up in a large family, Lois was surrounded by literacy practices at home. Early on, she began to keep a journal and experienced, first-hand, how writing can serve as a tool or “outlet,” as she put it, to better understand one’s life. Over the years, as her talent at writing became known within her family and local community, Lois was sometimes “hired” by friends and family to draft reflections and speeches at family events. “I’ve known since I was five years old that I had a gift for story-telling,” Lois Smith explained during one of our interviews. “Not to toot my own horn, but writing is one of the things I do well.”

Like Lois Smith, Sarah Knox, Jennifer Jarvis, and Goran Prka all grew up in contexts of rich literate activity. Sarah Knox traced the self-sponsored literacy activities that she was currently practicing, writing short stories and poems and submitting them to literary magazines, to early home literacy instruction. Knox drew a sharp distinction between home and school literacy, though: “I remember myself as being someone who couldn’t stand doing schoolwork, even in English class,” she explained. “When I wanted to read or write for myself, it was acceptable. But when I was told to do it, I resisted.” Knox started writing for herself when she received her first journal from her mother, at age five. “[Mom] always encouraged us that writing was soothing,” she explained, “through writing, you could get things out that were bothering you.” Along with journal writing, mother and daughters read and discussed classic literature together as well, *Little Women*, *The Secret Garden*, books that her mom knew girls would be interested in. Later, in high school, through the influence of her older sister, Sarah discovered the poet Pablo Neruda and the writing of the Beat Poets and began drafting stories and poems and, with a close friend and fellow literati, making trips to the bookstore to purchase books and CDs. With the help of a network of women—her mother, sister, and friends—Sarah developed a rich relationship with literacy and creative expression during her formative years that carried forward to the present day.

Jennifer Jarvis, the daughter of a nurse and optometrist and the eldest of the NSC

study participants, recalled that when she was growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, her home was filled with literacy materials. “My mother always had a book in her hands. She was a very busy reader,” Jennifer recalled. “We always had things at home like *Reader's Digest*, *Newsweek*, *Ladies Home Journal*. My father read the paper. I would say that reading was very important to them.” Jennifer also developed a rich literacy connection with her cousins, with whom she and her sister traded books whenever they got together on family vacations. Jennifer recalled with fondness the hours the cousins spent engaged in games that often featured literacy—putting on plays based on Nancy Drew mysteries and creating arts and crafts projects with old issues of *Reader's Digest*. When they were apart, the girls wrote letters to keep one another apprised of their lives and anticipate the next family gathering. Literacy events and practices, Jennifer emphasized throughout our interviews, were a significant part of her childhood.

Like Lois Smith, family, and in particular, siblings, played an important role in Goran Prka's early literacy development in his native Croatia. “My sisters played a huge role in my learning,” Goran recalled. “They taught me and when I started school, I already knew how to read and write.” From this early exposure, Goran developed a passion for self-sponsored reading, mostly about American popular culture. Sometime around middle-school, he began reading and watching American westerns. “You could get these books at the local kiosk or the library—they were translated into my language and they were everywhere,” Goran explained. “I read about Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday, Butch Cassidy, and Jessie James [sic]. I had a huge collection in my room and I would trade these books with my friends.” By high school, with the increased reading load in his classes, Goran moved from western novels to sports magazines, particularly *Sports Illustrated*. Despite this passion for reading, Goran confessed that he never cared much for writing and mostly avoided it when he wasn't in school. In his love of popular reading and disinterest in the productive aspects of literacy, Goran Prka shared much in common with John Beech who, despite the fact that he could recall no real negative experiences with literacy growing up, recalled outside-of-school reading experiences that revolved around sports and comic books (“*MAD* magazine! I had drawers-full of them!”) and recalled feeling that writing held little interest, especially given its association with school.

An ecological approach to the study of literacy acknowledges the importance of school literacies, but does confuse schooling and literacy development, the latter of which, Barton points out, takes place in a range of settings in and outside of school and serves many distinct purposes beyond formal learning or earning a grade (15). Participants in the NSC study, I learned, carried a range of different experiences with school and school literacy from the early years of their lives, some of which built upon and expanded on home literacy practices and others of which did not.

Lois Smith, who described herself as an “A/B student who often made the Honor Roll” during her adolescent years, recalled experiences from both elementary and secondary school that encouraged her passion for reading and writing. In the seventh grade, Lois wrote a poem for English class that her teacher liked so much she suggested Lois submit it to the yearbook for publication (which she did, leading to publication). Again in high school, an English teacher noticed Lois' facility with language and encouraged her to submit a poem to the yearbook. During our interviews, Lois recalled fond memories of writing comic strips in her seventh grade English class and reading and studying plays in a high school drama course. Given her competence and confidence with writing, Lois soon found herself playing the role of tutor among her friends: “Sometimes, if someone was having a hard time with a paper, I'd say, 'Well, I'll help you with English if you'll help me with math.' I wasn't great in math. But I could help them with papers—proofreading, tweaking and stuff like that.”

Like Lois Smith, Jennifer Jarvis was able to recall positive memories of school literacy instruction that were sometimes tempered by memories of not-so-positive experiences. Jennifer recalled liking English and science classes best. Having discovered an enthusiasm for and a potential future vocation in dental medicine via an afterschool job, Jennifer was especially motivated in her health and science courses and carries, to this day, an ongoing passion for health and well-being. In English classes, she enjoyed reading stories and poems and did well in spelling bees, but recalled feeling as though writing was, perhaps, not her strong suit. This feeling was put in motion, Jennifer believes, by an English teacher who “told me that I had the worst writing in the world.” Despite feelings of frustration, Jennifer was successful in her schoolwork and upon graduation, immediately enrolled at a local university to pursue an associate's degree in dental hygiene. Today, in her current work at the family construction firm, Jennifer has become a prolific communicator and, she confessed with pride during our interviews, she is the person at the office to whom everyone brings their

writing for editing.

“It was always about them, about doing what they told me to do, and I just couldn't do it,” she explained.”

Unlike Lois and Jennifer, and despite her early passion for self-sponsored reading and writing, there was no simple or easy transition between home and school literacy for Sarah Knox, the youngest participant in the NSC study. The spheres may as well have been “two different worlds”: “I was lazy as could be in school,” Sarah explained. “I was uninspired on a regular basis. I hated it. I was a bad kid.” Older now

and far enough from her younger rebellious self to see those early years a bit more clearly, Sarah explained that the problem was that she was rarely able to connect her own literacy practices with those of the school. "It was always about them, about doing what they told me to do, and I just couldn't do it," she explained. To make matters worse, Sarah attended three different high schools during her teenage years and struggled to fit in at each of them. As her senior year wound down, she learned that she did not have enough credits to graduate on time. "I dropped out on a Monday and took the GED on a Wednesday," she recalled. "I didn't study for it or anything. I just went and took it and I scored in the 98th percentile and that was that. I was finally done with high school." To celebrate her newfound freedom, Sarah moved to the city, got a job at her father's design company, and spent the next decade mastering every workplace she entered, but knowing, all along, that what she really wanted and needed was to finish her education.

Whereas Sarah Knox's story highlights the deep connections that some students make with literacy in the home or family sphere and the corresponding feelings of alienation that can result when they enter school, Tony Vaccaro's story highlights the challenges of acquiring school literacy in the first place. Tony could not recall a time in his life when he did not harbor a suspicion of and negative attitude towards school and school literacies. He described his long run of frustration with the following imagined exchange between his younger self and a teacher:

Teacher: Here, here's the work.

Tony: I don't understand this.

Teacher: Well, what don't you understand?

Tony: I'm not sure.

Teacher: Well, go back and re-read it.

(later)

Teacher: Okay, do you have any questions now?

Tony: No.

Teacher: So you understand it?

Tony: No.

As Tony, who at the time of our interviews had achieved the advanced rank of Paramedic and had become a respected Emergency Medical Services (EMS) educator and Education and Training coordinator at his ambulance company, reflected on this all-too-familiar exchange, he pointed out that "In order to formulate a question, you have to have some knowledge. If you have no knowledge, you can't even ask a question." When I asked Tony when the problems began, he explained:

I think it started in grammar school because they started talking about nouns and

pronouns and adverbs and I didn't understand. And if you don't understand at the beginning, the more they progress, you just kind of sit right there and start floundering. You think, "I can't catch up now, I'm too far behind."

In high school, Tony was finally able to make a connection to school via his growing interest in technology. He enrolled in every computer course he could find, even though computers in school were still relatively new at this point. Soon, through a connection with a computer teacher, he was volunteering to work in the school computer room, "and believe me," Tony explained with a grin, "I didn't volunteer to do much if it had to do with school." The accumulated experience of years spent floundering over-rode Tony's late school success with technical or technological literacies, though; just before graduation, he enlisted in the Marines. "I knew I was going into the military," he explained. "I absolutely hated school."

Patsy McGee and John Beech recalled their years of schooling with feelings of indifference and/or ambivalence. "From fourth grade on, it was just work," Patsy, who spent her last two years of high school attending a regional vocational school, recalled. "I didn't find much pleasure in it. I just did it so that I got the grades. I never saw school reading and writing and the reading and writing I did at home as similar." According to Patsy, college was not something that was much discussed in her home growing up: "I didn't even realize you could go on. I thought education ended as soon as you graduated high school." John Beech always knew he was going on to college, even though school and school literacy practices held little attraction for him. Like Tony Vaccaro, John tended to avoid the activities that he associated with school—mainly writing. But he did develop an affinity for reading and, during his high school years, he plowed through every Stephen King novel he could get his hands on. There were some school books that captured John's attention (Heller's *Catch 22*, Orwell's *1984*), but for the most part, traditional school literacy practices failed to capture his imagination, as he explains: "I didn't particularly hate or dread anything that I can remember. For things I liked, I would go the extra mile. English never did that for me and so I never went the extra mile. In my mind, they never made a good argument for what they were asking us to do."

Like John Beech, Goran Prka always assumed he would attend college after high school—he just never anticipated that he would attend an American college in the United States. The son of an architect and homemaker, Goran enrolled at the University of Belgrade in Serbia to study history directly out of high school. His plans were interrupted, however, by the Bosnian war in the mid-1990s. Fearing for his life, Goran sought refugee status and later fled the country. When he arrived in the U.S., he knew that he wanted to continue to pursue higher education, but now he faced the daunting task of needing to learn a new language first. For two years, he worked during the day, first at a dry-cleaning business and later at a printing company, and took ESL courses in the evenings. When he felt confident enough, he

enrolled in a local community-technical college where he earned an associate's degree in computer programming. Fearing he would not be able to speak English well enough to become a history teacher, Goran decided to pursue a degree in computer programming at NSC, but he faced a number of obstacles, most of which had to do with his evolving orientation towards English and writing in English. When I interviewed him for the NSC study, he had one more course to take to complete his program of study and he had already lined up work for after graduation. He was also running a small business, working as a self-described computer "geek," helping friends and neighbors with their technology problems.

As Barton has argued, for each of us, "Literacy has a history" upon which "the present is built" (35). The seven adult students who participated in the NSC study brought a diverse range of literacy and school literacy histories to bear on their various "presents." Educated at different historical moments, under different regimes of literacy, in different regions of the U.S. and even in different countries, it is difficult to find commonality in their experiences of early home and school literacy development. Their stories underscore the challenges and opportunities of working with adult students in postsecondary classrooms. For while their stories are complex and varied, they are also rich and full of possibility for those wishing to make the study of student literacy an explicit part of the composition.

Everyday Literacies in Home/Community Contexts

As Barton argues, an ecological view of literacy starts from people's "uses of literacy"—from "everyday life and from the everyday activities people are involved in" (34). The adult students who participated in the NSC study engaged in a wide range of everyday literacy practices outside of school. Their days, like those of their professors, were punctuated by literacy events and practices, some of which were thrust upon them simply by the nature of living and participating in a post-industrial or "knowledge" society and some of which they pursued of their own initiative and interest. In what follows, I document some of the everyday literacy practices which NSC study participants engaged in at the time of the study. By no means exhaustive or conclusive, these anecdotes give a sense of the larger picture that everyday literacy may play in the lives of adult students pursuing post-secondary study.

At the time of the NSC study, Lois Smith was ensconced in the project of chronicling her husband's death. In an introductory writing course at NSC, she had begun composing a memoir called "The Grief Storm" and over time the project took on a life of its own as Lois decided to turn the essay into a family history, one to be passed down to her children. Lois's everyday literacy practices also extended to her work as CCD teacher, where she was responsible for reading instructional materials and devising and implementing lesson plans. Via an outreach program for grieving families, Lois communicated regularly through email with

other widows and offered and received guidance and wisdom. Recently, when a local civic group nominated her son for a certificate of excellence, Lois delivered a speech on the challenges of raising a child with learning disabilities. As in her childhood, home and community-based literacy activities took up a good deal of Lois's time. She was still very much "the writer" she was when she was younger.

Sarah Knox's early exposure to expressive and creative writing inspired her to continue to pursue such practices as an adult. During our interviews, Sarah opened her laptop and shared her "digital journal," where she experiments with drafting essays, poems, and short fiction. Via connections she made in a creative writing course at NSC, Sarah formed a writing group to meet and share writing outside of school. Literacy practices played a role in her civic life as well. During the tumultuous years of the Bush administration, Sarah frequently wrote letters to local newspapers and Congressional representatives protesting the war in Iraq and advocating for progressive causes. Like many Americans, Sarah used a range of communications technologies and social media to maintain friendships and professional connections and to learn about and participate in the world.

Technological awareness, interest, competence, and confidence were, I found, important determinants in the kinds of everyday literacy practices NSC study participants pursued in the home and community contexts. The younger participants, like Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, and those whose professional lives engaged technology to a considerable degree, like John Beech, Tony Vaccaro, and Goran Prka, seemed to move in a somewhat different literate universe than the three participants who, for various reasons (i.e., age, socio-economic status, gender, interest), were less engaged with communications technologies. All three of the males who participated in the NSC study were highly involved with digital literacies in the home/community spheres, where their literacy practices often overlapped with workplace practices. In the cases of John Beech, Tony Vaccaro, and Goran Prka, it was sometimes hard to tell where professional or workplace practices left off and self-sponsored non-work, non-school literacy practices began. All read in their fields of professional interest after-hours; all participated in discussion groups, listservs, and social and professional networking sites that saw no time or space boundaries; and all engaged in self-sponsored technological literacy practices frequently. In sum, the younger NSC study participants and those whose professional work directly engaged with technology moved through a sea of digitally-based literacy practices that saw virtually no boundaries of space or time.

In highlighting the role of technology in some NSC study participants' everyday literacy practices, I don't mean to suggest that other participants (Lois Smith, Jennifer Jarvis, and Patsy McGee) did not engage in such practices. At the time of our interviews, Lois Smith and Jennifer Jarvis were both reading blogs that friends in distant places were publishing,

and Lois was participating in an online discussion group for cross-stitchers. Jennifer Jarvis was pursuing her lifelong interest in health and well-being by reading online journals and magazines. Patsy McGee, had, at the time when I interviewed her, taken eight online courses at NSC and was using email to keep in contact with her daughter, who was away at college. Clearly, digital literacies played an important role in these women's lives. They just did not seem to seek out such activities in the same way or with the same enthusiasm as other study participants did. Jennifer Jarvis still preferred to "hold the newspaper in her hands" while reading it and despite her extensive experience with online learning, Patsy McGee confessed that she actually found the computer an annoyance and tried to avoid it when she could. Conversely, Goran Prka, Sarah Smith, and John Beech, despite the enormous amount of time they devoted to digital literacies in the home/community contexts, each indicated that they still found time to sit down with books and spoke passionately about their everyday non-digital reading practices.

An ecological view of literacy encourages us to examine and take seriously the ordinary and everyday literacy practices in which individuals engage outside of school. Beyond the everyday practices of writing grocery lists and reading mail in which we all take part, everyday literacy played an important role in NSC study participants' daily lives. Their stories underscore the extent to which adult students pursue such practices in purposeful ways and derive meaning from them in their day-to-day lives.

Workplace Literacies

Studies of trends in adult education (Kleiner, et al.; Kim et al.; Berker, Horn, and Carroll) have consistently found that most adult students work while pursuing post-secondary education, with one recent study finding that 82% of all adults surveyed worked at least part-time while taking classes (Berker, Horn, and Carroll iii). Six of the seven NSC study participants worked at the time when I interviewed them for this study (and the seventh, John Beech, was actively seeking work) and all of those who worked participated in a wide range of workplace literacy practices. Barton argues that "The workplace is a particularly important site for the study of literacy practices" as it is the place "where many people spend the majority of their waking hours" (66). Additionally, "work constitutes an important part of [individuals'] identities" (66). In what follows, I report on the role that workplace literacy practices played in NSC study participants' lives.

Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, the two youngest NSC study participants, pursued their studies on as close to a full-time basis as possible and tended to think of work as something that would follow graduation (despite the fact that both were working part-time while in school). Whereas Sarah had worked full-time in a range of different capacities since she was

eighteen years old (graphic design, retail, hospitality), at the time when I interviewed her, she was working part-time at NSC as an administrative assistant and just about to move into a new position to assist with outreach and recruitment. In her capacity as an administrative assistant, she described her workplace literacy practices as typical of administrative work (emails, in-office communication, correspondence, documentation etc.). While Sarah's tone suggested her confidence with workplace literacy practices, it was also clear that for her, such writing was secondary to the kinds of creative practices that she pursued with passion outside of work.

Like Sarah Knox, Goran Prka also spent most of his twenties engaged in one kind of work or another and had scaled back his hours to pursue his coursework on a more full-time basis. At the time of our interviews, Goran was working about 10-20 hours a week, writing programming code for a local technology company, and another 8-10 hours a week as a local computer "geek." Aside from the code that he had to write for the technology company, Goran reported that he wrote as little as possible, preferring the telephone for most communication.

Similar to Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, Jennifer Jarvis was also working part-time when I interviewed her for this study. Unlike Sarah and Goran, Jennifer was taking just one course per term at NSC, slowly re-acclimating to college. At 58, Jennifer had found herself at a professional crossroads, trying to figure out what her "third career" was going to look like. For the first half of her professional life, she had pursued her passion for medicine and health by working as a dental hygienist. After twenty years in dentistry, Jennifer hung up her mask, changed industries entirely, and took a position at a commercial sign and stamp shop, working as a sales and marketing associate. After a dozen years, she found herself once again itching for change and for a return to work that engaged her core interests of health and well-being, so she enrolled in her first class at NSC with the hope that she might find a way to re-connect her work with her passions. She also began to work part-time at the family construction business, where workplace literacy played a significant role as she juggled three professional roles: administrative assistant, office manager, and sales associate. When I first asked Jennifer about her current work, she modestly explained that her job was to "enhance [the family] business and add those little touches that make us look more professional." By the time we finished discussing the range of workplace literacy practices in which she engaged—ghostwriting for her husband (the president of the firm), documentation of internal and external processes, document production for project bids—it was clear that in an office full of engineers and construction managers, Jennifer had become a one-woman communication team whose literacy practices literally kept the business running.

At the time of the NSC study, Patsy McGee and Lois Smith, both single-mothers with children at home, were working as paraprofessionals and job coaches in their local school

districts—positions which, they explained, allowed them to balance childcare and work with their coursework at NSC. The writing these women enacted in the workplace, in accordance with state and federal laws, was largely documentary in nature—both kept weekly journals for the students with whom they worked and wrote regular summative reports on their charges' progress. The journals and reports were shared with other case-workers, supervisors, and parents and served both as a form of evidence that the school was complying with state and federal laws and as an important means of communication between various school team members. These practices were the raw data upon which case managers drew in making strategic decisions about student services.

At the time when I interviewed him for this study, Tony Vaccaro was undergoing an interesting and not insignificant shift in demand in literacy practices on the job. For most of his career, Tony had worked as a paramedic, where the only real writing he produced was the patient-care report—a kind of boilerplate that combines standard fill-in-the-blank and check-the-box responses with longer narrative writing. Recently, though, Tony had moved into a new professional role, Education and Training Coordinator, his first administrative job, and with this move, Tony was finding new demands for his literate practice. For example, in order to ensure that all employees shared common knowledge about company policies and EMS procedures, he and a group of Field Training Officers had assembled a twenty-five page Competency Manual. Because ACME Ambulance, where Tony works, is a large ambulance company and sees a high degree of turnover among its staff, Tony also found himself frequently conducting three-day orientation sessions, which required the creation of considerable presentation materials and a 200-page Orientation Manual. Because a big part of his job involved tracking the certification status of ACME's 140+ staff, Tony also spent a good deal of time utilizing a learning management system to communicate and provide access to training and recertification information and materials. In addition to these new practices, Tony was also finding that in a large organization like ACME, there was a continual need for communication with administrators and supervisors and for ongoing documentation of various processes and procedures. "These days, I'm responsible to a lot more people," he explained during our interviews. "When the Director of Operations goes 'Hey, I want to know about this or that person—why isn't he working out?' I say, 'Well, it's this, this, and that.' And he says, 'Do you have any documentation on him? We can't do anything if we don't have documentation.' I don't say it, but I'm thinking 'Oh my gosh, I've got to type up another report!?!'" Midway through his career, Tony Vaccaro, a self-described "outside kid" who had spent a good deal of his life avoiding work that required extensive writing, was finding himself saturated in literacy practices in his new position as Education and Training Coordinator at ACME Ambulance.

For twenty years, John's Beech's career trajectory in the IT field had been upward. When his previous employer, a multi-million dollar technology company, closed their doors, he was serving as the director of information systems and overseeing a staff of a dozen IT professionals. In this capacity, John's workplace literacy practices were extensive and ongoing. He was responsible for the design and maintenance of all corporate networks, connectivity between offices, and maintenance of all servers, desktops, and software. He wrote for those above him (emails, memos, reports) and those across or below (emails, memos, policy statements, deployment guides). He wrote for audiences internal to the company (executives and managers as well as colleagues in IT and other departments) and those external (vendors, job applicants, colleagues in the field). John's most significant literate production was evaluative and analytical as he devised IT strategy to help the firm reach its strategic goals. Of all the NSC study participants, workplace literacy practices played the most prominent and high-status role in the professional work life of John Beech.

Barton reminds us that "In all jobs, people encounter new literacies at work, whether as a firefighter, a social worker, or a factory worker" (208). Such is the case with the adults who participated in the NSC study. The practices in which these individuals engaged "may be valued in different ways" (Barton 66) and for those who work with adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees, it may be important to get a sense of the relative value and investment such students feel towards workplace literacy practices. The value will likely, with some adult students being highly invested in workplace practices and the professional identities these practices have engendered (Tony Vaccaro, John Beech) and others feeling no great loyalty to workplace literacies or identities (Sarah Knox, Goran Prka). Additionally, given the number of hours most adults spend at work, we should not be surprised to find that many have internalized the conventions of the genres they produce on the job and the professional identities these genres sustain. In sum, adult students' participation in workplace communities and engagement with workplace literacy practices may have considerable implications for those who teach such students in composition classrooms (for further elaboration of this point, see Michaud).

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In outlining the implications of an ecological view of literacy, Barton argues that we must rethink the metaphors we employ in discussions of literacy. Discussions of adult students in scholarly circles and the popular media often attribute adults' decisions to enroll in programs of postsecondary study to the need for updating "skills"—including literacy skills. However, a focus on the "skills" that adult students do not possess obscures from view the role that literacy plays in such students' lives beyond the classroom. As we have seen in the case of the

seven adults who participated in the NSC study, adult students carry with them a broad range of literacy histories and a wealth of experience in everyday and workplace literacy practices. These histories and practices are in a state of continual flux as adults encounter and participate in new social contexts that involve and reshape their literate practice and orientations towards literacy. As paraprofessionals, Patsy McGee and Lois Smith must find ways to effectively document their students' development and adapt to changes in local and federal education policy. As Education and Training coordinator, Tony Vaccaro must keep abreast of EMS certification guidelines and work to devise means of assessing providers' performances on the job. As she enters into a new life-stage, Jennifer Jarvis constantly expands her knowledge of health and well-being and adapts her family's routines around food and nutrition to what she learns. Sarah Knox shares articles on politics with friends and organizes political action groups on Facebook to advocate for causes that matter to her and her community. Far from being deficient in literacy "skills," NSC study participants' stories suggest the rich role that literacy practices play in the lives of many adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees at the turn of the twenty-first century.

As students, these individuals would be well-served by literacy instruction that takes as its starting point not those things teachers and institutions perceive such students to be lacking but, instead, the complex and evolving role that literacy already plays in such students' lives. Barton articulates this point succinctly:

Rather than looking at whether people do or do not possess literacy skills, in order to develop a full understanding of what literacy means in people's lives it is necessary to look at how they use literacy as part of the process of making sense of their lives, representing the world to themselves, and working towards achieving what they want, using the resources available to them. (52)

Literacy instruction aimed at adult students pursuing post-secondary study might effectively take as its starting point the questions implied by Barton's words: What literacy practices do adult students already engage in? Why do they matter in their lives? What practices do they hope to acquire? Why? Literacy instruction at the post-secondary level can and should play a role in helping adult students to reflect on these questions and to better understand themselves as literate individuals.

In addition to encouraging those who work with adults to take seriously the role that literacy already plays in the lives of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees, I would emphasize another point that emerges out of Barton's ecological framework and that is especially germane for the many faculty who teach writing to adult student populations, but whose training came within traditional departments of literature or English. Barton argues that there is no hierarchy of literacy practices—some practices are not "better" or "more

advanced" than others. Within an ecological framework, Barton explains,

Literacies do not exist on some scale starting with basic or simple forms and going on to complex or higher forms. So-called simple and complex forms of literacy are in fact different literacies serving different purposes. They do not lead on from one to the other in any obvious way (38).

There are two points to make here. First, despite the fact that college still comes before work for many individuals, academic literacy practices do not precede workplace literacy practices and do not necessarily prepare one for workplace literacy. Many adults who never completed postsecondary study, including NSC study participants, function successfully and productively in workplaces where literacy practices play a considerable role. As we know from much scholarship, academic and workplace literacies are probably more different than they are alike (Beaufort, *Writing in the Real*; Dias et al.). This is not to say that academic literacy is not important or cannot help prepare individuals for the world beyond college, but it is to underscore the point that one need not have mastered academic literacy before one can go on to learn the various forms of workplace literacy.

Second, while difficult to prove empirically, there is sometimes a bias among those who work in English Departments and who teach writing against literacies that are practiced on the job or in the home or community contexts. As Barton points out, a view of literacy that is almost as pervasive as the "skills" view is that of the "literary" view—which is privileged and promulgated by schools and which emphasizes the creative or imaginative elements of literate production. Of course, most individuals do not produce the kind of creative writing that is the focus of the literary view. But as we have seen with participants from the NSC study, many adults do engage in a variety of literacy practices every day, at home and in the community and in the workplace, and they often feel a good deal of investment in these practices. Barton argues that children often feel excluded from academic literacy activities when their "own literacy practices are not valued by the school" (208). The same can be said of adults. When the practices that are most familiar and meaningful to adult students are excluded from the study of literacy in the classroom, school literacy instruction can feel alienating. Honoring everyday and workplace literacies as legitimate forms of practice in and of themselves and as worthy of investigation as Barton and others (Carter; Downs and Wardle; Gleason; Ivancic) have done should go a long way towards giving adult students—some of whom have been away from and others of whom have felt alienated by the kinds of literacy practices emphasized in schools—a language to think about and make sense of the transitions they are experiencing as they move between the various contexts (school, work, home/community) in which they practice literacy.

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Michael Michaud teaches courses in composition and literacy studies at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island. His work on adult students and literacy has appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and is forthcoming in *Writing and Pedagogy*. His research interests include professional communication, writing about writing pedagogies, digital literacies and composition histories.