

## The Legacies of Literacy Studies

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Claims about literacies, and their lack, surround us, multiplying like metaphorical insects.<sup>1</sup> Different observers see either an abundance of literacies forming foundations for flowing multimodalities, or a crisis rooted in the presumed absence or inadequacy of appropriate literacies threatening the foundations of our civilization and polity.

In typical formulations, literacy studies embrace two more-or-less opposing positions: that of “many literacies” *and* that of dangerously low levels of literacy, their causes and their consequences. When conceptualized complexly—not the most common practice—their contradictory relationships form part of our subject of inquiry and part of the challenge for explication and explanation.

The difficulties and the potentialities attendant on literacy gave rise to a field of literacy studies during the last one-third of the twentieth century. Sociolinguist David Barton relates, “The meaning of the word literacy is to be found not just by examining dictionary entries. It has become a unifying term across a range of disciplines for changing views of reading and writing; there has been such a growth of study in the area that is now referred to as Literacy Studies or the New Literacy Studies” (23).

In the second half of the twentieth century, literacy studies developed as an *interdisciplinary* field of study. In conjunction with other disciplines and interdisciplines, literacy studies have taken social, contextual, cognitive, linguistic, and historical, among other “turns.” With the turns came the adoption of signifying French theorist “godfathers” from Levy-Bruhl and Levi-Strauss to Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour. These developments at times interact with and deepen conflicts among disciplines and promote interest in interdisciplinary resolution. Implicitly and explicitly, they also illustrate the dangers of failing to grasp this history.

Literacy studies’ paths are revealing. Recent years witness an emphasis on the everyday and the practical, including the concept of practice itself. This led to an effort at overturning the dominance of grand theories that stressed the universal importance of the written over the oral, the printed over the written, the literate over the unlettered and untutored. Practice and context, explored in a variety of contexts and traditions, replaced presumptions of the unmediated powers and advantages of literacy. In part, literacy studies’ emerging interdisciplinarity stemmed from perceptions of the inadequacy of earlier conceptualizations and presumptions, the search for new methods and sources on which to base a major revision, and reactions to it.

English studies is an important location for literacy studies (if hardly the only one). English has long claimed a special relationship with reading and writing via tutelage and practice, but more formally through subdisciplines like Rhetoric and Composition. During the last decade, RhetComp programs began to rename and sometimes reframe themselves as RCL—“L” for literacy. This act represents what I call “the lure of literacy” for currency and relevance, and enrollments and funding.

Literacy studies continue to struggle with foundational dichotomies—the making of myths—between oral and literate, writing and print, print and electronic, and literacy as transformative—that continue to guide and divide opinion and orient studies. The longstanding neglect of rich research on orality and oral literature, for example. The proponents of the New Literacy Studies have not reclaimed Lord or Parry or Vygotsky. The persistence and importance of orality is regularly rediscovered, as is the sociality of much reading and writing. The heterogeneity of constructions of the cognitive domain also plagues literacy studies, another instructive matter of connections.

Striving for recognition, literacy studies occupy ambiguous ground both disciplinarily and interdisciplinarily. In part, this is a question of location. But it is also a question of status. The “rise” of literacy studies, part of its generally successful emergence and development, contributes to its presence in a number of academic departments and disciplines: education, the social sciences, and the humanities, and to a lesser extent the sciences, medicine, public health, the law, and business. That literacy, for good reasons, is often seen as basic or elementary does not boost its academic standing. “Literacy” and “Literacy Studies” at times become promotional labels: new, relevant, sexy—in academic terms—and appealing for applied and practical reasons to citizens, governments, corporations. A sometimes unstable mix of currency, practicality, and applied “science” prompts ambivalent (or negative) responses.

Much of recent literacy studies wades in dangerous waters where ideological and interpretive sharks swim. Among the critical tensions that attest to the limits of Literacy Studies is the imbalance between the embrace of complexity and contradiction, and the great hope that in the end, the achievement of a more equal distribution of a productive mass literacy will trump social, economic, and political inequality, in other words, an abiding faith in the literacy myth. The cards of race, ethnicity, and sometimes gender play here, although it is by no means clear which factors are causes and which are consequences.

Now, there is nothing wrong with this, other than failing to embrace a consistent critical stance on the ideologies, rhetoric and discourse, cultures, and especially the political economics of literacy as conceptualized in different contexts, distributed, and experienced.

In part these complications follow from the pervasive power of the literacy myth in American culture and politics. Persuasive presumptions also limit the power of interdisciplinary concepts, methods, and understanding, or confusing political and economic ideology with the contradictory realities of structural inequalities. As a result, we lack adequate critical treatments of the contradictory place literacy holds in popular, school, familial, and public cultures. Similarly, and, more seriously, we lack an adequate political economy of literacy. Thus the non- or extra-production/consumption values and uses of literacy are less appreciated (except in studies of subgroups like adolescents or hip hop, itself a problematic circumstance). Unlike its presumed value in a “knowledge economy,” many everyday needs and uses of literacy are undervalued, not even measured metaphorically. The literacy needs of a “knowledge economy,” we easily forget, do not bring employment and rewards to all those in search of fair work and pay, *regardless* of their ability to read and write across different media and different languages. In the United States today, we may suffer simultaneously and incommensurably from literacy deficits and literacy surpluses.

Among the other consequences is the reification of dichotomies. For example, Deborah Brandt's conviction that "mass writing" has been neglected in literacy studies, despite its rising value compared to "mass reading," in a knowledge economy uncouples the two where their relationships may be more important. At this point, multiple or multimodal literacies call for attention, but not in dichotomous relationship with "traditional" or "alphabetic" literacy. "Writing revolutions" take their place in a line that looks back to reading, print, manuscript, and alphabetic revolutions.

The notion of a knowledge economy, for example, begs the question of its dichotomized other, as do production and consumption of literacy and issues of multiple media and multiple languages of communication. After several decades of sharp criticism of the autonomous, independent powers of literacy, both familiar and new hierarchies have returned. Questions of the contextualization of literacy are reopening. The roster of literacy studies' commissions and omissions is lengthy. We cannot forget, moreover, that many of the issues on which this cluster of approaches can run aground are the most important and most difficult questions demanding our attention.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also my *Literacy Myths* and "Literacy Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies." These comments are adapted from my contribution to the session on Legacies, Gateways, and the Future of Literacy Studies, CCCC, St. Louis, March, 2012.

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