

## Book Review—*The Lure of Literacy: A Critical Reception of the Compulsory Composition Debate*, by Michael Harker

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When Deborah Brandt accepted her Exemplar Award at the 2017 Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), I was reminded of why I continue to ground my work in literacy theory. In her speech, Brandt describes how literacy sponsors, including her father and his fellow journalists, her mentors in graduate school, and the students she would go on to mentor, shaped her conception of literacy, which she saw not in terms of some universal essence but rather in the social and material practices surrounding her. One takeaway from Brandt's talk is that because conceptions of (and myths about) literacy undergird understandings of what writing and literacy are and should be, identifying and naming conceptions of literacy is imperative.

Brandt's work on sponsorship, as well as the insights of New Literacy Studies (NLS) theorists Brian V. Street and James Paul Gee, have been foundational to the field of composition. However, some literacy theorists have pointed to NLS's marginalization in recent debates about the content of the first-year course (FYC). For example, in a session titled "Naming What WE Know" at CCCC 2017, speakers Jason Alexander, Eli Goldblatt, Angela Haas, Paula Mathieu, and Jacqueline Rhodes argued that the collection by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle for whom the session was named had narrowed the focus of composition from literacy (which also encompasses reading, community and non-school based literacies, and other ways of knowing) to a more narrowly academic "writing studies."

Michael Harker's impressive new book bridges this gap between literacy and composition studies by synthesizing the views of literacy theorists like Street, Harvey J. Graff, Mike Rose, Ruth Finnegan, and David Barton to create a framework for interpreting proposals for composition's abolition and reform. Harker's central argument is that "ambiguous and hasty characterizations of literacy" that assume "exaggerated expectations of literacy's powers" are endemic to proposals *both* to abolish composition and to reform it (16, 23). To put it another way, both the abolitionists and the reformists rely on literacy myths that construct literacy as more powerful than it is.

Harker supports his surprising revelation of the similarities between abolitionists and reformists by "enlarging the historical context of" the abolition debate, which often oversimplifies abolitionists' views (4). His examination begins with two proposals to abolish composition from early in the twentieth century: Thomas Lounsbury's 1911 "Compulsory Composition in the Colleges" and Oscar James Campbell's 1939 "The Failure of Freshman English." Although most examinations of these treatises have dismissed them as "merely elitist," Harker argues instead that they are "asking too much of literacy" (17, 13). Specifically, Harker shows how both Lounsbury's proposal and those disagreeing with it fall victim to "an abiding belief in the power of literacy to bring about profound cognitive and spiritual transformations" (22-23). Campbell's proposal, meanwhile, demonstrates what Finnegan calls the "Great Divide" conception of literacy, which positions those who possess

literacy in a position of dominance over those who do not (28). According to Harker, Campbell views students as “primitive creatures” who can escape mediocrity and provincialism only by acquainting themselves with “the books of ages” (28). As this last statement reveals, Campbell and Lounsbury’s views still come off as elitist, but Harker’s more textured account, which examines statements left out by other scholars, situates them within myths of literacy that continue to this day.

In Chapter 2, Harker moves to arguments for composition’s abolition by E.A. Thurber (in 1915), Frederick Manchester (1917 and 1948), and Paulus Lange (1938), which have been ignored in other scholarship. Overall, these positions are characterized both by a “vague sense of crisis” (the literacy crisis being another myth which holds that “the past was better or the future will be”) (57; Rose qtd. in Harker 31). These proposals also blame the shortcomings of first-year students on something else other than the required composition course. As Harker puts it, “each propose a solution . . . that . . . shifts the consequences of confiding in literacy away from composition – the course that seems the most invested in the myth itself” (61). The fact that the ones bearing the brunt of these solutions in the historical proposals are recognizable as such to us today, including high school teachers, the rest of the university (other than composition), and the students themselves, demonstrates the relevance of Harker’s project (61).

In his third chapter, Harker turns to the reformists—a key move for establishing the surprising continuity of literacy views between them and abolitionists. Using passages from essays by reformists Alice V. Brower (1942) and Warner G. Rice (1940), he shows how both preserve a view of literacy that translates “into an easily teachable and efficient pedagogy” (65). In essence, Brower and Rice’s arguments, like the abolitionists’, depend on what Street calls the autonomous model of literacy, which conceptualizes it as an individual, neutral skill that can be easily picked up and applied against a variety of contexts. Readers may find, as I did, that the excerpts from Brower appeared to resonate with different literacy value systems than in previous chapters. As an example of progressive era education, Brower’s views seemed characteristic of what Peter M. Goggin and C.H. Knoblauch call “literacy for personal growth,” a view that sees literacy as expressing “the power of the individual imagination” (Knoblauch 78). Yet Brower too partakes in the literacy myth, referring to literacy as a “mystic power” that will “transform the chaos of today into a livable world for tomorrow!” (qtd. in Harker 71). Again, Harker deftly shows a rhetoric that exaggerates literacy’s potential.

Harker’s turn to Crowley’s *Composition in the University* in Chapter 4 marks a shift in his methodology, which up to this point has been to use the NLS framework to examine statements for composition’s abolition and reform in order to uncover evidence of unrealistic expectations for literacy. In what was my favorite chapter of the book, Harker announces that he doesn’t intend to investigate Crowley’s book, which has often functioned as the quintessential statement on abolition, for evidence of the literacy myth because Crowley’s work recognizes “that popular conceptions of the powers of literacy and the pedagogical capabilities of composition are exaggerated” (87). In other words, Crowley, unlike the other abolitionists, comes to her position fully aware of literacy myths. Harker looks instead at how other scholars have cited Crowley to show that even though *Composition in the University* has been cited “424 times between 1999 and 2014,” the rhetorical effect of these citations has often been to silence her (88). In other words, these works “construct her position

as a master narrative within the abolition debate,” shutting down the potential for examining how literacy myths have informed other abolitionists’ accounts (102).

*The Lure of Literacy* acts as a corrective to what Harker sees as composition’s movement away from literacy, warning compositionists not to make literacy something they “engage with [only] anecdotally” (118). To that end, the fifth and final chapter offers Harker’s own proposal, which is to recreate FYC as “First-Year Literacy Studies” (117). This movement is similar to Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s refiguring of the first-year course to make writing studies the content, as Harker acknowledges. However, Harker’s proposed curriculum is more intent on making literacy myths the subject of students’ inquiry, creating opportunities for them to explore their own literacy experiences in the context of current and historical assumptions about literacy. Although the five “student lessons” Harker offers are sketched out broadly, I could imagine myself incorporating them into my own curriculum. In particular, Harker’s anecdote about the Time Warner literacy campaign offers a lesson in how literacy sponsors can forward their own interests more than those they supposedly work to liberate.

Nevertheless, I also wonder about the feasibility of replacing FYC with FYLS. Given that composition has increasingly been rebranding itself as “writing studies” and identifying itself as a mature discipline in its own right, compositionists who are less familiar with the rich scholarship from literacy studies may view “literacy” as either too broad or too basic a label for FYC. As Brenda Glascott argues, the term “literacy” is absent from the composition/rhetoric “dyad”; whereas composition serves as rhetoric’s “degraded other,” literacy has been so degraded as to be erased (21). Of course, it is this particular tension that Harker’s book picks at, and I hope his proposal leads to more integration of literacy studies into the curricula not only for composition but for writing and English majors as well.

Ultimately, readers of *LiCS* will find a strong argument for how understandings of literacy are fundamental to the work that compositionists do, making this book useful not only to those doing similar work but also to be shared with colleagues who have less familiarity with literacy studies. *The Lure of Literacy* presents a model of how theories of literacy can be applied to the debates that beset compositionists again and again, offering a way out of their unproductive cycles.

## Works Cited

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