

## Literacy and Consequences: A Response to Kate Vieira

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Kate Vieira resurrects what she calls the “bold” and “unpopular” question that was at the center of the controversial work of anthropologists Jack Goody and Ian Watt: What are the consequences of literacy? It’s a worthy, if difficult, question, and Vieira argues that Composition Studies “is an ideal disciplinary space from which to approach it.” As she notes, “Goody and Watt’s ‘autonomous’ theory of literacy has been rebutted. And a scholarly field of inquiry has developed in its place.” That scholarly field—what we often refer to as “literacy studies”—is a vibrant area of inquiry that, as Vieira acknowledges, has “produced careful studies of literacy’s varied relationships to social contexts and to power.” Yet for all that work, and for all its insight into the complexities of literacy, we seem to shy away from genuine engagement with the question Vieira wants answered. Why?

Vieira suggests that because the unit of analysis in Composition Studies is not culture but *writing*, Composition Studies might be able to explore the question of the consequences of literacy “without dividing the world into oral and literate, without having to take on debates that are not of our moment, and without sacrificing the crucial insights of New Literacy Studies.” Perhaps. But it might also be that we in Composition Studies face the same obstacles in addressing this question that scholars in other disciplines face. Primary among those obstacles is the very centrality of literacy itself in how we live and work together. In western culture, literacy is a given and, more to the point, generally assumed to be a good—often unequivocally so. Given what some have called western culture’s obsession with literacy (see Sartwell), it can be daunting to explore questions that have the potential to expose literacy itself as a problem whose costs can sometimes be as great as its benefits. We know that literacy can be a tool for oppression as thoroughly as it can liberate, and scholars like Harvey Graff have documented the complex and sometimes paradoxical social, economic, cultural, and even ideological impact of literacy. A few scholars have even tried to describe what might be lost when western-style literacy is taken to be the norm. Lisa Delpit, for example, paints a picture of a subtle but powerful kind of disconnection from land and community that western-style literacy instruction can foster in Native Alaskan children. For me, Delpit’s account is illuminating but deeply unsettling, and it’s no wonder that few of us seem eager to embrace the proposition that some consequences of literacy might be so undesirable, so “troubling,” as Vieira puts it. Vieira makes a very good case that we should.

Vieira’s own research shows how “[l]iteracy can sometimes empower, but often it oppresses, disenfranchises, regulates.” She goes on to argue that “if nation states, with armies and laws, agree that papers have the power to regulate movement, then they do. Texts are as strong as the strongest make them.” We already know this, of course, but research like Vieira’s, which she calls “radically social,” not only illuminates the social consequences of literacy practices but also exposes our own

complicity in those practices: “Sure,” she writes, “there are subversions and forgeries and creative misuses of literacy. But there is also mass compliance exacted through fear and through habit.” It’s easy to point to literacy practices that rest on fear, but it’s harder to see those that continue through habit—and harder still to acknowledge our own complicity in perpetuating such habit.

It may well be that current theory already enables us to understand the consequences of literacy in ways that Brian Street and others have argued, but Vieira isn’t simply offering a new twist on theory; rather, she offers a challenge to us: be willing to go where your inquiry takes you; be willing to confront questions whose answers might call into question your theories, your understanding of literacy, even, perhaps, the foundations of your field. It is an uncomfortable challenge, and it certainly touched a nerve for me. In my own efforts to understand literacy over the course of my career, I have wrestled with the ideas of Goody and Watt as well as Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and others associated with the so-called strong-text theory of literacy. My naïve but genuine belief in the power of literacy as an uncomplicated good initially drew me to their work, which seemed to give voice to what I thought I knew: that literacy changes us, and for the better.

I vividly remember sitting in one of my very first graduate seminars (nearly thirty years ago now!) listening uneasily to an older and more sophisticated student as he strenuously rejected Ong’s main thesis in his article “Literacy and Orality in Our Times,” which we had been assigned to read. The student’s charge that Ong’s analysis was not only ethnocentric but also very nearly racist made little sense to me at the time, but it profoundly shook up my comfortable belief in the power of writing to shape thinking in the (good) ways that Ong suggested. It took a while for me to understand and appreciate the critiques of strong-text theories, yet something about those theories continued to prod me, much as Vieira continues to find the questions posed by Goody and Watt “compelling.”

Vieira is primarily interested in examining the material consequences of literacy in the lives of undocumented migrants. Such an examination, she argues, “shifts the focus from *identity* to *identification*.” For many, writing becomes associated not centrally with expression or culture, but with a national tracking system that can lead to deportation, the separation of families, sometimes death. Texts, in this context, are strong.” I think she’s right, and her argument reminds me of my own struggle to reconcile these oppressive uses of literacy with my sense of its capacity to empower. My intellectual journey took me from those early encounters with Ong’s efforts to understand the cognitive consequences of writing to Paulo Freire’s provocative analysis of the transformative possibilities of literacy and his idea that literacy is essential to becoming “fully human.” “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world,” Freire famously wrote (88). The path to becoming fully human, then, is developing a critical consciousness through his now well-known “problem-posing” literacy pedagogy. In material terms, Freire taught disenfranchised peasants to read and write so that they could overcome political and economic oppression. In this formulation, the main consequence of literacy is liberation.

Of course, Freire’s famous critique of “the banking concept of education” demonstrates that he well understood the uses of literacy as a tool for oppression. He was acutely aware of the sometimes ambiguous material consequences of literacy, in part because his analysis (which was influenced by Marxist materialism) went beyond the ideological to the ontological. Like so many readers attracted to Freire’s theories as a way to understand the political and ideological dimensions of literacy, I ini-

tially overlooked the ontological analysis that is central to his theoretical framework. Freire understood “men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (84). And in naming the world we also bring ourselves into existence. Literacy, in this sense, is fundamental to *being*.

Lately, prompted by the need to reconcile my embrace of Freire’s transformative vision with my growing uneasiness about the role that western literacy seems to play in the ongoing destruction of our planet (Yagelski), I have come to see that in addition to its social consequences, literacy—more specifically, *writing*—also has *ontological* consequences. Indeed, the social consequences of literacy might well arise from its ontological implications. For writing is wrapped up in how we understand ourselves as beings in the world, and the act of writing has the potential to shape our sense of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. But understanding writing ontologically requires looking beyond the text to the experience of creating a text, a project that literacy studies has not taken up but one that is consistent with much work in Composition Studies, including the so-called post-process theories of Thomas Kent.

So while Vieira appropriately exposes the sometimes disturbing power of text, I also want to encourage us to explore the consequences of the *act* of writing on the writer—and, by extension, on the world we share. This shift in focus from the writer’s writing to the writer *writing* can illuminate the fact that the consequences of *writing* are not the same as the consequences of the *uses* of writing. To my mind, the transformative possibilities of literacy, such as those Freire envisioned, can be more fully realized if we look beyond the text to the *experience* of writing itself.

I support Vieira’s call for us to look unflinchingly at the social consequences of literacy. At the same time, I hope we will focus not only on the text but also on the act of writing itself. I hope we will fix our scholarly gaze on the *writer writing* and examine the ways in which our literate practices are implicated in our very sense of being in the world.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My classmate, who, as I recall, had spent time teaching in remote villages in Belize, rejected Ong’s analysis of “the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures, of primary oral noetics—how the mind works when it cannot rely directly or indirectly on writing and on the thought patterns that writing alone can initiate” (46). My classmate’s own experience with so-called “oral cultures,” he argued, suggested that there was no distinction between the “thought patterns” of people from such cultures and people from literate western cultures. Years later when I first read Scribner and Cole’s *The Psychology of Literacy*, I thought of that earlier classroom discussion and understood better what my classmate was arguing.

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