Professing Literacy: A Review Essay

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Why is literacy of such interest to postsecondary teachers of writing? If "literacy," as it might be defined by someone outside the field of English studies, is "the ability to read and write," then why are we interested in it when our own students presumably acquired this ability in the distant past, about the time they learned to tie bows in shoelaces? That we are interested in literacy, I take it, is obvious from the proliferation of books with the word in their titles, of conferences on topics in literacy (the Modern Language Association has now held two), and of review essays such as this one, commissioned by the editors of a journal that purports to deal in issues relevant to "composition theory" and "advanced composition" at the college level.

Defining Literacy

I might answer my opening question by redefining "literacy" from within English studies in such a way as to make it more complex and problematic, and thus to question the presumption that college students have already acquired it. Indeed, in these proliferating discussions of literacy, its simple definition as the ability to read and write is usually rejected at the outset. But in attempting to go beyond the simple definition, scholars begin to diverge. Consider, for example, the variety of essays collected under the title, The Right to Literacy (1990), a title which implies a unitary conception of literacy and a contest only over who possesses the desired object. In this volume, Andrea A. Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin collect twenty-nine papers from the 1988 MLA "Right to Literacy" conference. Most of the essays, therefore, are short; and ranging through them, one gets a sense of the heterogeneous mixture of topics that accrue for English scholars under the heading of "literacy" these days.

Here are some examples of interesting essays, presented in the order in which they happen to occur in this volume. David Bartholomae surveys efforts to shape the choices of texts and interpretive strategies made by secondary, postsecondary, and postcollege readers ("Producing Adult Readers: 1930-50"). Andrea Fishman summarizes her ethnographic work in a community that inculcates a form of literacy she finds significantly different from that expected in school ("Becoming Literate: A Lesson from the
C.H. Knoblauch shows how different definitions of "literacy" convey expectations concerning not only skills but also values ("Literacy and the Politics of Education"). James Moffett recounts his experiences with readers who found literacy dangerous, as he puts it, because they thought that his reading program materials contravened their Christian values ("Censorship and Spiritual Education"). Beth Daniell attacks both Russian literacy researcher Alexander Luria and American scholar Walter Ong, S.J., who uses Luria's work, because they treat literacy as fostering cognitive gains regardless of the learners' social and political contexts ("The Situation of Literacy and Cognition: What We Can Learn from the Uzbek Experiment"). J. Elspeth Stuckey and Kenneth Alston describe a South Carolina program that trains older students to tutor younger students, improving everyone's reading and writing ("Cross-Age Tutoring: The Right to Literacy").

Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin sort these essays into categories that do not help me to see how a unitary definition of literacy might be derived from the various directions of these studies. It is perhaps disingenuous to pretend, however, that no such definition could be framed. Another recent collection of essays on literacy, does, I believe, present a more coherent view of the field of literacy studies, even while acknowledging more diversity in its title: Perspectives on Literacy (1988). Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose distribute twenty-eight essays, several of them previously published "classics," under the following headings: "Theoretical Perspectives," essays that debate whether the acquisition of literacy confers particular cognitive gains; "Historical Perspectives," essays that study ways literacy has been defined and inculcated at various times and places in the West, often in school; "Education Perspectives," essays that treat the issue of whether there is such a thing as a "school literacy" and, if so, what it is; and "Community Perspectives," essays that consider how literacy is defined and inculcated, or denied, in various non-academic sites in the world today. I recommend this volume to JAC readers looking for a good introduction to issues involved in the study of literacy.

What I am moving toward in this discussion, however, is not a comprehensive definition of literacy. Rather, I want to return to two questions: "Why are academics so interested in talking about literacy?" and "What uses are we making of the concept, however flexible its parameters, named literacy?" The titles sampled from the Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin volume suggest that we want to talk about literacy because we want to understand how our work fits into the history of education generally, how the various clients of education have wished to use (or not to use) what we have to offer, and what claims, if any, we can make for the social value of our work. In short, I think we are talking about literacy because we are having a collective identity crisis about being English teachers, and, in particular, we are very unclear as to what good we are doing for the larger society with our efforts.
Literacy and Social Context

Deborah Brandt's *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts* (1990) provides some exemplary answers to these questions. She begins her study by attacking a line of argument that has made talking about literacy very attractive to academics—namely, the view that the acquisition of literacy confers significant cognitive gains. In such arguments, literate thinking is often contrasted with so-called oral or non-literate thinking, and the literates are credited with greatly superior abilities to reason deductively, to evaluate evidence and challenge authority, and to understand and manipulate the language of discussion itself. A variant form of this argument treats school literacy or academic literacy as conferring the gains attributed elsewhere to literacy in general.

Although Brandt gives little attention specifically to the appeal of such lines of argument, surely it is great, at least to academics who want to feel that they are doing good by their teaching, because this view of literacy would seem to sanction the conveyance of literacy as a socially liberatory act. If we teach students to read and write in the ways we consider to be good, then they will be able to think better and thus be better equipped to improve their lot in life, or so the attractive justification runs. Indeed, I have come close to offering this justification myself for the teaching of academic discourse ("College"), a position I am now trying to modify.

Brandt argues, I think correctly, that this defense for teaching literacy rests on the assumption that literacy, or often, school literacy, is radically different from any others of the students' language-using abilities. Moreover, school literacy is different precisely in that it typically requires such dichotomizing, decontextualizing moves, demanding that students distance themselves from their uses of language in school and, by extension, elsewhere as well. Thus, proponents of this line of argument, says Brandt, must urge for students to become separated from other habits of language use to get the benefits of (academic) literacy; and students who do not succeed in school are often diagnosed as being unable or unwilling to make this separation, perhaps because their familiar or preferred habits of language use are especially unliterate or unacademic.

Brandt attacks this "antisocial view" of literacy because she claims that it is contradicted by much socio-cognitive research on how students actually learn to read and write. She argues persuasively that the acquisition of any form of literacy is crucially enabled not by dissociation from social contexts but by immersion in them. When literacy is successfully acquired, it is acquired as a craft, in conversations where the teacher functions as craftmaster and the student as apprentice, where they work on language together, and where the teacher conveys genuine care for the student’s success. Brandt makes creative use of the protocol analysis work of Linda Flower and John R. Hayes to argue that acquiring literacy means learning how to keep particular processes going, knowing what to do next—and such knowledge
can only come from a sense of shared human activity. As Brandt puts it, "Learning to read is learning that you are being written to, and learning to write is learning that your words are being read" (5). Brandt analyzes what writers and readers say about the texts they are processing, and also what short and long texts "say" about themselves, to generate evidence that all these processes rely upon ongoing cues that one is being written to, and being read.

The appeal of this line of argument to college writing teachers might be that it dignifies our endless hours of interactions with students, not as wasted effort donated by our officiousness or exacted by our taskmasters, but as absolutely crucial nurturing of literate abilities in our students. Moreover, lest this nurturing seem too overtly self-serving, Brandt criticizes the tendency, which spreads from the antisocial view of literacy, to let the demands of school literacy dictate what all literacy instruction should be. She decries the common practice in ethnographic work on literacy, for example, to evaluate intimate interactions between parents and children on grounds of how well these verbal exchanges imitate, and so prepare for, school literate habits.

Finally, Brandt favors literacy instruction on the Bay Area Writing Project workshop model, which makes in-school literacy instruction more "homelike," rather than vice versa. Such instruction may indeed help students acquire academic literacy more readily, not least by assuming they are already "insiders" in a class that values all kinds of writing. Brandt criticizes some writing-across-the-curriculum approaches for attempting to teach "insider" lore about academic discourse as a way of facilitating initiation when, in her view, such knowledge can only be acquired from the inside. But more important, workshop-based instruction will stretch the boundaries of what is considered acceptable language use in school, and Brandt argues that such pluralism is necessary: "If 'standard' literacy is to be achieved among all students, then the scope of the 'standard' must broaden" (124).

Brandt concludes in a position that sees teachers as only helping students to realize their own purposes, to develop their own potential, with reading and writing. In this view, the teacher seems to be a Socratic midwife of literacy; but as Brandt's own arguments have shown, literacy must be regarded as a social construct, whatever else it may be, and thus not something that can be presumed to emerge naturally. Thus, this helpful vision of the teacher's role offers the opportunity of professing literacy as a way of maintaining traditional literacy activities (teaching reading and writing) and traditional humanistic justifications for these activities (realizing human potential). In spite of attempts to complexify it, particularly with social and political ramifications, which Brandt by no means avoids, the term "literacy" still sounds stripped down as a reference to what college English teachers do. And in the present morally vexed times, such a stripped-down reference may be exactly what's called for to screen out the social and political considera-
tions we do not feel prepared to deal with. Let us rather think of ourselves, like good doctors, of at least doing no harm.

I would certainly admit that Brandt's arguments have much persuasive force for me; I have taken positions similar to hers ("Literacy" and "Arguing"). Certainly, I share Brandt's sense that the best position is one drawn against E.D. Hirsch's attempt to specify a very narrowly defined sense of what the context of literacy should be. And yet I feel that Brandt's pluralism is a weak alternative to, and hence a weak defense against, Hirsch's canonicity. She says little about how the opening of standards in the academy is to be accomplished; she can refer only in passing to arguments that detail the difficulties of such reforms, such as James Berlin's or Lisa Delpit's (see Brandt 122-24).

**Literacy and Violence**

Perhaps I imbibe some skepticism from the tone of J. Elspeth Stuckey's onslaught on almost all contemporary work on literacy: *The Violence of Literacy* (1991). I found Stuckey's book very hard to read, and I don't think it is just because she is reluctant (on theoretical grounds, no doubt) to appear in her argument in the first person. Her positions on literacy instruction sweep away most of the comforting justifications we would seek by talking about literacy in connection with our college work.

Of all the literacy scholars I have read, Stuckey takes the strongest position against regarding literacy as a unitary thing or event, the same in all times and places, and always effecting the same cognitive advances in whoever acquires or experiences it. She surveys well-known socio-cognitive research on the mental changes supposedly accompanying literacy, such as Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's *The Psychology of Literacy*, and shows how inconclusive this research is. She breaks down the literate/non-literate or oral dichotomy by showing how literate activities occur in settings educators deem to be non-literate, a tactic that also reveals how educators conflate literacy-in-general and academic literacy, reserving their claims of cognitive superiority for the latter (for more testimony on non-academic literacies, see Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines). Stuckey insists on placing literacy in shifting social, cultural, and political contexts, a move that suggests we should speak of literacies, not literacy.

Stuckey is also the firmest, though not the only, literacy scholar to insist that the most salient feature of any literacy context is economic. Thus, to understand literacy in the United States, she must first understand the U.S. economy, how it allocates power, and this is why she begins her book with an attempt to describe an American social class structure based on occupation. Stuckey argues that this study reveals an economically unjust society, one in which economic power is unequally distributed. Moreover, this unjust economy is shifting emphasis from the production of goods to the production of information, and hence, communication abilities are crucial to success in
this economy.

Or rather, as Stuckey would have it, communication abilities—that is, literacy—are always already unequally distributed along the lines of economic privilege or disempowerment. When children come to school, the acceptability of the language-using practices they bring and the likelihood of their achieving acceptable language-using practices have already been decided according to criteria having nothing to do with language (such as race). Literacy schooling, in her eyes, thus becomes an act of violence in which those who are to be dominated, to be exploited economically, are thrust down into their places, while those who are to be in positions of (relative) control are raised up.

In Stuckey's view, it is absurd and cruel to define economic inequality in terms of a "literacy problem." We tend to argue, she says, that people are exploited economically because they do not possess "standard" language-using habits. Thus, we claim that if they acquire these habits, they will cease to be exploited. Then we offer education as the means to acquiring these habits. This argument is exactly backwards, according to Stuckey. People continue to lack "standard" language-using habits and therefore to be deemed non-literate, even if they possess other forms of literacy, because keeping a certain number of people in this exploitable category is an economic necessity. In an information economy, language-using habits provide the most convenient index for who is to be exploited. Stuckey makes this point, for example, at the end of her critique of Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*:

A ten-year observation of chronic disparity and bias [directed against poor children] produces less a call for change in a self-satisfied, mainstream society than a mandate for a despairing people to change their language ways. What is needed is a recognition of the engine of social changes that might alleviate economic demarcation along the fault line of linguistic habits. Like Scribner and Cole's work, therefore, this study preserves the role of language [as cause of exploitation] and encourages speakers to adapt to the status quo. Why, we must ask, do studies of language always result in solutions that are linguistic rather than social or economic? (41)

English teachers, according to Stuckey, must stop offering students the "insult" or "pervasive lie that language makes the difference." We must recognize along with V.K. Volosinov, almost the only theorist for whom Stuckey has virtually unstinted praise, that "language changes or emerges not via attention to language but according to the purposes of people in social relationships with one another" (119, 91). Thus, what needs to be changed in America today is not students' language, but our social relations. We are reluctant to grasp this necessity because, even if we claim to hold liberal or left-oriented political views, we can't shed, says Stuckey, "a deeply imbedded trust in middle class values" such that equality means for us welcoming everybody into our lifestyle and our values, coupled with the naive belief that good will alone could make this possible (113).
Stuckey is reticent about what we should do instead. To be sure, we should champion diversity and fight racism; but it isn’t clear how, or if, we can do these things as English teachers. Stuckey seems to be suggesting at the end of her book that we should indeed stop being English teachers in the present emergency and find ways to effect political change directly: to “promote greater humanity,” not “greater literacy” (124). Yet, according to the biographical sketch on the cover of her book, she continues to be an English teacher, to direct the cross-age tutoring program she and Alston describe in the essay in the Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin collection. Perhaps Stuckey, in the fashion of many good critical pedagogues, does not want to presume to suggest solutions; they will have to be worked out by each of her readers as we struggle with the complexities of our own particular literate contexts.

Stuckey’s argument may seem too nihilistic, but I find myself strongly drawn to it. I feel as if it enacts a powerful critique of the scholarly role I was playing earlier in this essay—ranging over a couple of interesting collections of pieces on literacy, savoring their different approaches, happily identifying Brandt’s book-length study as one that gets it almost right, and all the while wryly commenting on the comfort that various postures about literacy offer to the ensconced. Stuckey calls the bluff of all of us academics who are interested in talking about literacy, who hope somehow by such talk to evoke social and political connections in our work, because she argues so forcefully that we cannot translate these allusions into reality until that unjust reality changes.

It’s as if Stuckey is a voice from what Fredric Jameson has called the “political unconscious,” returning to our collective view what we have tried to repress through a seemingly more neutral discourse on literacy—namely, our implication in an unjust social order. Perhaps we should indeed submit our collective identity crisis to such an aggressive analyst instead of seeking someone more nurturing, for thus we will require ourselves to talk about how we feel and what we are going to do. At any rate, we are likely to encounter more work in English studies that seeks to move in the discourse of literacy. As we read it, and attempt to enact it, we should hear this voice that returns the repressed ringing in our ears.

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