24 *The Ethnography of Literacy*

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Literacy would appear to be one of the few elements of education that everyone agrees to be a necessity of modernity. The capacity to read and write is causally associated with earning a living, achieving expanded horizons of personal enlightenment and enjoyment, maintaining a stable and democratic society, and, historically, with the rise of civilization itself. "Underdeveloped" countries have had reading and writing touted to them as the means of a quantum leap into the future. And in the United States (especially since the 1960s) illiteracy has been singled out as a root cause of poverty.

Yet literacy as an ideal seems to be suffering a crisis. The wealthy nations of the world are now encountering rather massive failures in reading and writing among students at all levels; and it appears that despite universal schooling, a continuing percentage of the population of these nations has difficulties with these skills. In addition, there have developed "critics" of literacy, some of whom have questioned the feasibility of universal literacy as assumed in the West;[1] others now even raise questions about its ultimate relation to civilization.[2]

And behind all of this there are profound shifts appearing in the world's reading habits: in the United States, for example, the reading (and publishing) of novels is in decline, while the reading of plays and poetry is at almost zero level. Instead, the amorphous area usually called non-fiction is on the ascendancy (though readers of an earlier generation might have difficulty in seeing the differences between the new techniques of non-fiction and fiction). The fact that many, perhaps most, English classes in the United States are geared toward fiction, drama, and poetry makes this development all the more poignant.

Since professionals in the field of reading and writing instruction feel that there now exist sound, workable methods of teaching literacy, the responsibility for failure is assigned variously to poor teaching, overcrowded

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classes, family background (and the "culture of poverty"), the competition with the new media, or even to the directions of contemporary society itself.

But the stunning fact is that we do not fully know what literacy is. The assumption that it is simply a matter of the skills of reading and writing does not even begin to approach the fundamental problem: What are reading and writing for? Is the nature of the ability to read and write something on which there is in fact near agreement? Can these skills be satisfactorily tested? Do writing and reading always accompany each other as learned skills? Should they? Even on questions of *functional* literacy, can we agree on what the necessary minimal functions are for everyday life? It is entirely possible that teachers are able to teach reading and writing as abstract skills, but do not know what reading and writing are for in the lives and futures of their students.

I propose that we step back from the question of instruction, back to an even more basic "basic," the *social meaning of literacy:* that is, the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts for their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities. In doing this, I am following a recent trend in language studies, one which recognizes that it is not enough to know what a language looks like and to be able to describe and measure it, but one must also know what it means to its users and how it is used by them.

Literacy has typically been viewed as a yes-and-no matter, easily determined: either one reads and writes or one doesn't. And put in such terms, the goal of education is to produce a society of people who are equally competent at these skills. But the fact that no society has yet reached this state should give us pause. Historically, we know that most societies have produced specialists who have handled many of the necessities of literacy: the priest-scribe relationship, for instance, is widely remarked upon in studies of the development of civilization. In contemporary complex societies we are well aware of the negative correlation of skills in literacy with lower socioeconomic standing. But a closer look suggests that even among those of privileged background, these abilities are complexly patterned, and not at all equally distributed—the range of what is or can be "read" or "written" among, say, doctors, lawyers, and teachers is often surprising. And even among those of other socioeconomic classes there is a great variety of such skills, such as can be found spread among active church members, avid followers of sports, and committed members of political parties. Consider the case of ethnic or immigrant neighborhoods, where such a distribution of abilities has a considerable historical background—that is, where certain individuals have served (and continue to serve) as interpreters of the law, citizens' benefits and rights, and the like, as well as readers and writers of letters and public documents. The distribution of these skills in bilingual and immigrant neighborhoods and communities is a complex and unexplored area. And even though the range and the number of these communities is simply not known at present, their clustering in urban areas gives the matter some urgency.

Beyond the question of who participates to what degree in reading and writing, there are even more vexing issues. Clearly, there are problems in defining the activities of reading and writing themselves. To take a simple case: what a school may define as reading may not take account of what students read in various contexts other than the classroom. A boy, otherwise labeled as retarded and unable to read assigned texts, may have considerable skill at reading and interpreting baseball record books. Or a student who shows little interest or aptitude for reading may read *Jaws* in study hall. The definitions of reading and writing, then, must include *social context* and *function* (use) as well as the reader and the text of what is being read and written.

The nexus at which reader, or writer, context, function, and text join is sometimes glossed as reading *motivation.* Reading and writing skills may indeed vary according to motivation, with varying degrees of skill following differing degrees of motivation. But all of these elements form a complex whole which should not be reduced to a simple diagnosis. A reader's motivation may also vary according to context, function, and text. And even motivation itself is varied: one may be moved to read by nostalgia, ambition, boredom, fear, etc.

Throughout, what one might expect to discover is that absolutes are few in questions of literacy, and that the roles of individuals and their places within social groups are preeminent in determining both what is read and written and what is necessary to reading and writing.

It should not be surprising to see differences in literacy between members of different ethnic groups, age groups, sexes, socioeconomic classes, etc.[3] Indeed, one might hypothesize the existence of *literacy-cycles,* or individual variations in abilities and activities that are conditioned by one's stage and position in life. What I would expect to discover, then, is not a single level of literacy, on a single continuum from reader to non-reader, but a variety of *configurations* of literacy, a *plurality of literacies.*

Even the everyday judgments of non-educators of what is or is not literate ability or activity is highly variable. Where for some, ability to spell is the primary marker, to others, choice of reading matter is foremost—the "classics" versus gothic novels, the *New York Times* versus tabloids, etc. To still others, success on standardized tests is everything. And such commonsense judgments, whether reasonable or not, help to shape the ultimate social definition of literacy.

Some words, then, about a few of these five elements of literacy—text, context, function, participants, and motivation.

Texts: What Is It That People Read and Write?

These are the primary questions, and on the surface they appear easily answered. Reading, for instance, would seem to be ascertainable by means of library circulation figures, publishers' sales figures, and questionnaires. But statistics are of limited use for a variety of reasons: first, because they have not been gathered for these purposes and thus give us only the grossest of information about texts (and none whatsoever about use). There is no

agreement among publishers on what is a book, for instance. (Nor is there any among readers: magazines are often called "books" in much of the English-speaking world.) What is literature? No agreement. Distinctions between genres and categories such as *functional literature* versus *artistic literature* are of little use. Beyond the subjective judgments involved, it takes little imagination to think up artistic uses of functional literature or functional uses of artistic writing. (Can sports writing be artistic? Functional? Both?) And even seemingly well-established classes such as fiction versus nonfiction are the basis of a very lively debate among scholars today.[4]

Circulation and sales figures tell us nothing about the informal circulation of literature, and at least among the working classes, borrowing and loaning of reading matter is common. One need only think of reading done in doctors' offices, the reading of newspapers and magazines found on public transportation, at work, etc., to sense the possibilities.

Consider also some of the reading matter that is not normally included under the category "literature": handbills, signs, graffiti, sheet music, junk mail, cereal boxes, captions on television, gambling slips and racing tip sheets, juke-box labels, and pornography. (In some small towns, "Adult" bookstores are the only bookstores, and sometimes have holdings that rival, in number at least, the local library.) Victor-Levy Beaulieu, in *Manual de la petite littérature du Quebec* (1974), provides an anthology of the kind of literature which is produced and read within a rural parish in French Canada: it includes printed sermons, temperance tracts, stories of the lives of local saints and martyrs, parish monographs, and life stories used as models for improvement.

In addition, there is the question of the relation of the form of the text to other aspects of reading or writing. Consider the need for short, broken passages (such as those found in mysteries and *Reader's Digest* condensations) for brief commuter trips, as opposed to longer passages for longer trips (*War and Peace* for an ocean voyage, say) or the time needed to register "raw" meaning as well as rhymes, puns, and irony in public signs in shopping centers and along roads. (The eclipse of Burma Shave signs by increased speed limits is a case in point.)[5]

Nor, incidentally, does traditional concern with literacy take account of the influence of the character of typography on readers. One small but important example is the current debate over the widespread use of Helvetic type (as used by Amtrak, Arco, Mobil, and numerous other business and governmental sign and logo uses). The issue turns on whether the type's nature (presumably depersonalized, authoritative, and straightforward) brings unfair and misleading pressure to bear on its readers, as it appears to be the face of the largest and most powerful forces in America.

Function and Context: Why and Under What Circumstances Is Reading and Writing Done?

Available statistics tell us nothing about the variety of functions that reading and writing can serve. To consider only the use of books, in addition to pro-

viding information and pleasure—they are bought as decorations, as status symbols, gifts, investments, and for other reasons yet to be discovered.

Similarly, virtually nothing is known about the social contexts of reading and writing and how these contexts affect these skills. A quick beginning inventory of reading contexts would include bedside reading, coffee-break and lunch-time reading, vacation reading, reading to children, Sunday reading (perhaps the day of most intense literary activity in the United States and Europe), reading during illness, educational reading (both in institutions and informally), crisis reading (psychological, physical, spiritual), sexual reading, reading to memorize, commuter reading, reading to prevent interaction with others, etc. (In theory, at least, there is a form of reading specific to every room: books are sold for kitchens, coffeetables, desks, bedrooms [*The Bedside X*] or bathrooms. On the latter, see Alexander Kira, *The Bathroom* [New York: Bantam, 1977], pp. 197–201, 287. There are also books designed for types of housing, as in English "country house" books, etc.)

Conventional thinking about reading and writing far too often uses a much-out-dated model of literacy inherited from nineteenth-century upper-class Europe. That "book culture" assumed many conventions which we can no longer assume: a small, well-educated elite; considerable spatial and temporal privacy (usually provided by large houses and the protection of wife and servants); a firm belief in the mimetic power and ultimate truthfulness of language; and possibly a belief in immortality and transcendence as mediated by books—that is, a sense that book life was somehow greater than real life.

We might here also postulate the possibility of a difference between public and private literacy, between what one reads and writes at work, at school, and elsewhere. Susan U. Philips[6] has shown that at least in the case of one Native American group, there are substantial differences between these two domains, such that they may have direct and serious implications for education for literacy. For example, if children are not read to at home, and the school *assumes* that activity as part of its foundations for reading instruction, then such students are likely to encounter difficulties in learning to read. The important point to note here is not so much whether reading stories to children is or is not a proper or effective tool for preparing children to read, but that gaps between the two domains have serious consequences. And changes in home practices, even with the best intentions, are not easily accomplished and not necessarily desirable.

To cite yet another example: signs are written to be read but they are also located in certain locales and have specific designs and shapes. Thus the ability to read a public sign may take considerably more or less than the ability to read a book. For example, a sign on a building that marks a grocery store is on a building that looks like a grocery store and is located where a grocery store is likely to be. So the ability to read a sign (by definition a public event) involves at least a *different* set of skills than private reading.[7]

Something might also be said about differing *styles* of reading and writing. For example, beyond silent reading and reading aloud, there are speed

reading (with all that it implies); active, engaged, critical reading versus that which is detached and noncommital; or the kind of reading Marcel Proust[8] was interested in: a comprehension of the text's contents, with the intention of setting off a variety of personal associations partly derived from the page and partly from the context within which it is read. Or to consider a more extreme example, Balinese Hindu priests orally read a text which, in addition to having certain standard word meanings, also has prescribed vocalizations of the words, body gestures to accompany them, and visual images to be kept in mind during the reading.[9]

I have kept most of the specifics of this discussion to reading, but the same questions can be applied to writing. We know very little about the range of uses to which writing is put, or rather, we know only just enough to put assumptions in doubt.

Educators often assume that reading and writing form a single standard set of skills to be acquired and used as a whole by individuals who acquire them in a progression of steps which cannot be varied or avoided in learning. But even preliminary thought on the problem indicates that these skills are distributed across a variety of people. For example, it is generally assumed that an author is the single master of his or her product, and that what was originally written emerges without interference as a book. But there are surely few authors who know all of the conventions and practices of editors and very few editors who know all of the practices of typesetters, book designers, and printers. The publication process, instead, often assumes the form of a kind of interpretation or translation of an author's original text.

The assumption of a single standard of writing is belied by even the writing habits that every one of us has. Most of us, when writing notes for ourselves, assume special conventions of spelling and even syntax and vocabulary that we would not use if we were writing for others. (Curiously, these private conventions seem to have a social character, in that we are usually able to interpret another's notes by analogy with our own procedures.)

Some variations in writing standards are even conditioned by our elaborate system of status communications. In most businesses, for example, it is a mark of success *not* to be directly responsible for one's own communications in written form—secretaries are employed to turn oral statements into acceptable written ones. (In this, the United States resembles other non-Western cultures of the world, some of which measure the importance of messages and their senders by the number of intermediaries involved in their transmission.)

Still another example of multiple standards in writing is offered by advertising, logos, and store signs, where "non-standard" spellings often communicate quite specific meanings: "quik," "rite," "nite," and the like indicate inexpensiveness or relative quality, and "kreem" and "tru-" ersatz products.

It is not only the assumption of a single standard that we must question, but also the assumption of a single, proper learning progression, such that one can only "violate" the rules when one has mastered them. Students quite

properly often question this when learning the "rules" while at the same time reading works of literature which disregard them. Recently, some younger black poets (especially those published by the Broadside Press of Detroit) using unorthodox spellings and typography have been dismissed as simply semiliterate by critics not familiar with the special conventions developed to deal with black dialects and aesthetics.

Again, the point to be stressed overall is that assumptions are made in educational institutions about the literacy needs of individual students which seem not to be borne out by the students' day-to-day lives. And it is this relationship between school and the outside world that I think must be observed, studied, and highlighted.

One method of studying literacy—ethnography—represents a considerable break with most past research on the subject. I would contend that ethnographic methods, in fact, are the only means for finding out what literacy really is and what can be validly measured.

Questionnaires and social survey instruments on reading and writing habits do not escape the problems raised here in the study of literacy, and in fact they may compound them. An instrument sensitive enough to gather all of the needed information would have to contain all of the varieties of texts, contexts, and functions we are interested in to guide informants in properly answering them. In addition, written forms would not do if for only the simple reason that they assume a certain standard of literacy in order to be completed, and it is this very standard that we wish to investigate.

More to the point, any study which attempts to cut across American society—its socioeconomic classes, age groups, ethnic groups, and the like—along the lines of a skill which characterizes one social group more than others and which has been assumed to be closely associated with success and achievement, must be tempered by a considerable relativism and by the suspension of premature judgments. There is in this sort of study a need to keep literacy within the logic of the everyday lives of people; to avoid cutting these skills off from the conditions which affect them in direct and indirect ways; to shun needless abstractions and reductionist models; in short, to stay as close as possible to real cases, individual examples, in order to gain the strength of evidence that comes with being able to examine specific cases in great depth and complexity.

Another factor which makes ethnography most relevant here is that we are currently inheritors—if unwilling inheritors—of another nineteenth-century perspective, one of distrust of mass society and culture, if not simply of the "masses" themselves. Specifically, this is the notion that "mass education," "mass literacy," etc., necessarily involves a cheapening or a debasing of culture, language, and literature.[10] And though we have in this country escaped many of the elitist consequences of this position, we nonetheless suffer from its general implications. We must come to terms with the lives of people without patronizing them or falling into what can become a sociology of pathos. We need to look at reading and writing as activities having conse-

quences in (and being affected by) family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and a complex of other factors.[11] Unlike those who often attempt to understand a class of people by a content analysis of the literature written for them by outsiders, we must take account of the readers' activities in transvaluing and reinterpreting such material.[12]

Nor can we make the easy assumption that certain media are responsible for a reduction of use of another medium. We must first be sure of the social context, function, etc., of the competing media before we assume we understand their presumed appeal. As an example, we know little more than that television sets are switched on a great deal of the time in this country; but do we know how they are socially used? We must consider the possibilities of more than simple entertainment. For example, considering only context and participants, radio listening—now a solitary activity—would seem to be competing with books more than television, still largely a group activity.

Work in the ethnography of communication has been aided immensely in recent years by the considerable accomplishments of sociolinguistics. Students of this subject have contended that in addition to close descriptions of language codes themselves we need descriptions of rules of code usage, combined with a description of the social contexts within which the various uses are activated and found appropriate. Dell Hymes has provided a framework for such studies, by isolating types of communication acts and by analyzing them in terms of components which comprise each act, in the light of preliminary cross-cultural evidence and contrasts.[13] Such components include the participants in the act (as well as their status, role, class, etc.), the form of the message, its code, its channel of communication, its topic, its goal, its social and physical setting, and its social function. In fact, this entire preliminary discussion of questions of literacy derives from this perspective. It has put us in a position to pursue the following kinds of questions,[14] some of which were raised above.

How is the ability to read and write distributed in a community?

What is the relationship between the abilities to read and write?

How do these abilities vary with factors such as age, sex, socioeconomic class, and the like?

With what kinds of activities are reading and writing associated, and in what types of settings do these activities take place?

What kinds of information are considered appropriate for transmission through written channels, and how, if at all, does this information differ from that which is passed through alternative channels such as speech?

Who sends written messages to whom, when, and for what reasons?

Is the ability to read and write a prerequisite for achieving certain social statuses, and, if so, how are these statuses elevated by other members of the community?

How do individuals acquire written codes and the ability to decode them—from whom, at what age, and under what circumstances, and for what reasons?

What are the accepted methods of instruction and of learning both in and out of school?

What kind of cognitive functions are involved?

In summary, what positions do reading and writing hold in the entire communicative economy and what is the range of their social and cultural meanings?

Again, many of these questions may appear to have obvious answers, and some perhaps do, but until explored systematically, we must consider every element problematic. This must especially be the case in a large, multiparted, stratified society such as ours, a society continually reshaping itself through migration, immigration, and the transformation of human resources.

Among the specific methods one would use for directly observing literacy in operation within a limited setting are (1) field observations of literacy analogous to those used by linguistics: i.e., observations of writing and reading activities in natural settings (subways, schools, libraries, offices, parks, liquor stores, etc.) and elicitation of these activities; (2) obtaining "reading" and "writing autobiographies"—that is, tape-recorded personal statements on the use and meaning of specific activities and genres of reading and writing to individuals at various points in their lives; ascertaining writing activities in the form of letters to friends, for business purposes and the like, invitations, condolences, local sales and advertising activities, church readings, etc.; a reconnaissance of reading materials available within public view—signs, warnings, notices, etc.; and content analysis of reading materials ostensibly aimed at communities such as the one studied—e.g., "men's" and "women's" magazines, newspapers, and the like—combined with readers' reactions and interpretations.

Throughout, the focus should be on the school and its relation to the community's needs and wishes, on the school's knowledge of these needs and wishes, and on the community's resources. It is possible that this may involve bilingual or multidialectal speakers, and this puts a special burden on the study: we will need to pay special attention to reading and writing in several languages (akin to the "code-switching" of multilingual speakers) and to the consequences to readers of not having available writing in their own languages or dialects. It may become necessary to separate reading and writing as such study progresses for a variety of reasons, but at the moment this separation would not be warranted, as it would prejudge the relationship between the two, something we simply are not able to do at this time. The end product, in addition to answering many of the questions posed here, should be an inventory of at least one American sub-community's literacy needs and resources, and should provide both the model for making other similar surveys elsewhere (perhaps more quickly) and for generalizing from this one.

Taylor, C., and C. Dorsey-Gaines. 1988. *Growing up literate: Learning from inner city families.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

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NOTES

1. Cf. the many writings of Ivan Illich or Marshall McLuhan.

2. Cf. Lévi-Strauss' suggestion that far from being the mainspring of civilization—i.e., the invention that allowed the rise of city states, science, etc.—the initial function of literacy was state control of the masses, taxation, military conscription, slavery, etc. (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiquez,* London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, pp. 298–300.)

3. William Labov's work on this point is exemplary. See especially his "The Relation of Reading Failure to Peergroup Status" in his *Language in the Inner City,* Phila.: University of Pennsylvania, 1972, 241–254.

4. Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution.* Paris and New York: UNESCO, 1966; and *The Sociology of Literature.* Painesville, Ohio: Lake Erie College Studies, 1965, *passim.*

5. Frank Rowsome, Jr., *The Verse by the Side of the Road.* N.Y.: E. P. Dutton, 1966. Other work on signs has been done by followers of Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960.

6. Susan U. Philips, "Literacy as a Mode of Communication on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation," in *Foundations of Language Development: A Multidisciplinary Approach,* Vol. 2, Eric H. Lenneberg and Elizabeth Lenneberg, Eds. N.Y.: Academic Press and Paris; UNESCO, 1975, pp. 367–382.

7. *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City.* Program accompanying an exhibition at the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., February 26–September 30, 1976.

8. Marcel Proust, *On Reading.* N.Y.: Macmillan, 1971.

9. Hooykaas, *Surya-Sevana, the Way to God of a Balinese Siva Priest.* Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche U. M., 1966. For this and the above example I am indebted to James Boon, "Further Operations of Culture in Anthropology," in *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences.* Louis Schneider and Charles Bonjean, Eds. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 1–32.

10. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society.* London: Penguin, 1958.

11. A model of this sort is Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1957. (Unfortunately, there is less on the "uses" of literacy *per se* than one would wish.)

12. For a sampling of work on writings for the working classes in Britain, see P. J. Keating. *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man.* London: Penguin, 1963.

13. See, for example, Hymes' "The Ethnography of Speaking," in *Anthropology and Human Behavior,* Thomas Gladwin and William Sturtevant, Eds., Washington, D.C.: The Anthropological Linguistic Theory," *American Anthropologist,* 66, No. 3, 1964, part 2, pp. 6–56. "The Ethnography of Communication," *American Anthropologist,* 66, No. 6, 1964, part 2, pp. 1–34; "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics.* J. J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, Eds. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972, pp. 35–71. My debt to Hymes in this paper should be obvious.

14. This list is adapted from Keith Basso, "The Ethnography of Writing," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking.* Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, Eds. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 425–432. Basso was in turn adapting his questions from the Hymes references in footnote No. 13.

25. The New Literacy Studies

Brian Street

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