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Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture

In 1986 Lester Faigley analyzed three competing theories of the writing process: the expressive, the cognitive, and the social. Although calling for a synthesis, Faigley was clearly endorsing the social view. He identified four strands of research which contributed to the social perspective he was advocating: post-structuralist theories of language, sociology of science, ethnographies of literacy and language, and Marxism. Two o these four—ethnography and Marxism—contributed texts about literacy that were instrumental in helping composition studies make what has bee called the social turn (Trimbur, "Taking"; Bizzell, *Academic* 202). Indeed the move in composition studies away from the individualistic and cognitive perspectives of the seventies and early eighties toward the social theories and political consciousness that prevail today was encouraged, pushed along, impelled by competing narratives of literacy. These days, literacy—the term and concept—connects composition, with its emphasis on students and classrooms, to the social, political, economic, historical, and cultural.

In thinking about the relations of literacy and composition, I have found helpful Jean-Francois Lyotard's notions of the grand narratives of modernism and the little narratives of postmodernism. Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition* that in the modern age knowledge is justified, or legitimated, through narrative. The legitimacy of an idea, a work, or a proposal depends, in other words, on its contribution to one of two grand narratives. As Lyotard puts it, "The mode of legitimation...which reintroduces narrative as the validity of knowledge, can thus take two routes, depending on whether it represents the subject of the narrative as cognitive

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or practical, as a hero of knowledge or a hero of liberty" (31). Subjected to the skepticism of the postmodern age, these "totalizing" metanarratives, according to Lyotard, have been deconstructed and replaced by a proliferation of little narratives. It is my contention that various narratives of literacy have influenced and continue to shape the images we in composition studies have of who we are, what we do, and how we do it. Using Lyotard as a terministic screen to examine these narratives brings to light a number of issues: the conflicted politics of composition studies over the last two or three decades, the relationship of theory and ideology, the ethical questions of research, the problematics of separating the spiritual from academic study.

Background: Two Literacy Arguments

In the 1980s there were two different controversies over literacy. One concerned E. D. Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy. This argument, which reached its climax in the late eighties, arose out of Hirsch's claim that a body of common cultural "facts" would solve the problems of American education, which he saw as failing both minority students and the body politic. Critics charged Hirsch and liked-minded folk, such as William Bennett and Allan Bloom, with conservatism, elitism, insensitivity to regional, social, racial, and ethnic differences, naiveté in uncritically accepting standardized test scores, and nostalgia for a golden age that never was. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy,* the articles and comments in MLA's *Profession 88,* Patricia Bizzell's "Arguing About Literacy," and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* document this controversy.

The other literacy debate focused on the literacy-orality theory espoused by Eric Havelock and Walter Ong among others, a view of literacy also known as the great leap or great divide theory and the autonomous model. This view of literacy I have come to see as a version of the grand narrative Lyotard calls the narrative of "speculation," that is, the one that is "more philosophical," the one that has to do with cognition (31). This narrative legitimates knowledge by explaining our universal "primordial origins," according to Mark Mullen (548), and thus offering a path to progress: If we understand the origins of, say, literacy, then we will know how literacy changes the thinking of human beings and will understand how individuals progress and how cultures advance.

Predating Hirsch's literacy work, literacy-orality theory has roots, proponents, and critics in a number of fields: anthropology, sociolinguistics, education, history, as well as classics—Havelock's disciplinary home—and English studies—Ong had been president of MLA. While I give attention in this essay to the great divide or great leap narrative and the work that

deconstructed it, I do not want to give the impression that the two literacy arguments were unrelated. The connection between the two controversies is explained in Bizzell's "Arguing about Literacy" article: even though, as Bizzell puts its, "the concept of 'cultural literacy' has emerged as a corrective to 'Great Divide' literacy theories" (144), both views, she argues, protect the status quo while at the same time claiming to show how the intellectual capabilities of students can be augmented.

Literacy and Orality

In great leap or great divide narratives, literacy is not merely encoding and decoding sound in and from inscribed symbols or even, to use Ann Berthoff's definition, "the realized capacity to construct and construe in graphic form representations of our recognitions" (142). In great leap accounts, literacy becomes a theoretical construct in binary opposition with orality; on each side of the dichotomy or single continuum are contrasting modes of speech, composition, behavior, and thought (see Ong, *Orality* 37–57). In their strong versions, literacy-orality theories assert that simply reading and writing with a Greek-derived alphabet—that is, an alphabet with both consonants and vowels—actually causes fundamental advances—great developmental leaps—in human cognition. These cognitive leaps then bring about alterations not only in the consciousness of individuals but also in cultures. In this view, literacy is an individual mental act which only later brings about certain social and cultural conditions. Literacy thus marks the great divide between advanced, complex cultures and traditional ones. In *Literacy in Theory and Practice,* Brian Street refers to this perspective as the autonomous model because it depicts literacy as standing alone, acontextual, a thing that exists independent of culture.

The Great Leap Narrative

The earliest proponents of the great leap grand narrative were both keen rhetoricians and master storytellers. The best rendition of the story is Havelock's 1963 *Preface to Plato.* In preliterate Greece, the story goes, the knowledge and values necessary for the survival of the culture were transmitted through poetry. The content was tradition, the language formulaic. Weaving together familiar stories and formulas, the poet constructed the poem itself in a public oral performance wherein both bard and audience entered into an almost trance-like, or "mimetic," state. At about the time of Plato, literacy had become sufficiently internalized that the mental energy previously needed for the memorization of the poetic formulas was released. This newly released mental energy allowed for the questioning

and analyzing of the stories, thus breaking the mimetic spell. This narrative explains, then, the origin of Plato's dialectic as well as his reasons for banishing the poets from his Republic. In strong versions of the great leap narrative, literacy is seen as the origin of independent, analytical thought, and in weaker versions as a causal factor.

In "The Consequences of Literacy," also from 1963, Jack Goody and Ian Watt take up the tale, asserting that Aristotle and the next generation of Greek thinkers used these literate modes of thought to develop systematized abstract thinking, such as the syllogism, the categories, and the taxonomies in various fields. Later, according to Ong in several articles and books, the technology of print made literacy accessible to a greater number of people, thus releasing more mental energy for abstract thinking in many new fields. Western culture underwent a recapitulation and an extension of the great leap. The climax occurred, David Olson says in "From Utterance to Text," when British thinkers like John Locke began to use the essay to explore abstract problems and to create new theoretical knowledge; in this so-called essayist literacy, meaning is found in the text, not in the relationship of writer to audience, or in the context. Offering a single theory which accounts for everything, this version of Lyotard's narrative of speculation, as Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield might explain it, "sees the human race as ascending towards the greatest possible understanding of itself, the purest possible self-consciousness of its inner value and potential" (137–38).

Farrell's Proposal

The Havelock-Ong depiction of orality and literacy has been used profitably by such historians of rhetoric as Richard Enos, Jan Swearingen, and Kathleen Welch, but in composition it proved more controversial. In the seventies and early eighties the great leap narrative of literacy was taken up, sometimes with enthusiasm, because research in composition was dominated by inner-directed, cognitive theories of writing. These views, as Bizzell points out in "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty," posited the cause of poor writing by students in the faulty minds of the students themselves rather than in inequitable social conditions. The depiction of orality was thought by some, including Ong himself ("Literacy"), to be useful in describing the thought patterns and the language, particularly the written language, of first-year students, basic writers, and minority students in American colleges and universities.

The most controversial, though by no means the only, pedagogical proposal based on the Havelock-Ong narrative of literacy was Thomas J. Farrell's 1983 *CCC* article "IQ and Standard English." Here Farrell argues that writing teachers should require African American students to learn "the

full deployment" of the verb *to be,* which Farrell sees as a literate, not oral linguistic form. Citing Ong's assertions that oral languages reflect an agonistic, participatory mind-set (see Ong, *Orality* 43–46), Farrell asserts that oral languages have only action verbs; only literate languages develop the copulative verb necessary for stating propositions (475). Regarding inner-city African American culture as "a residual form of what Walter J. Ong calls a primary oral culture" (473), Farrell argues that if African American students learned the standard forms of *to be,* they could then think propositionally, thereby raising their scores on standardized IQ tests.

The immediate reaction among many in the composition community was outrage. In 1984 *CCC* printed four responses (Greenberg, Hartwell, Himley, and Stratton). Karen Greenberg pulled no punches, linking Farrell's notions with other "racist" theories of language deprivation (460); R. E. Stratton called the article "offensive" (469); Patrick Hartwell said he was "soundly ticked off" (461). Greenberg and Hartwell criticized Farrell's understanding of be-deletion in African American dialects (see also Walters [185] on copula absence in other languages). Swearingen organized a panel for the 1986 CCCC including both Farrell and his critics and then edited those papers for a special issue of *Pre/Text.* In a 1988 article Rose charged several cognitive theories including the literacy-orality binary with reductionism, arguing that the theories he examined take attention away from "the immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes" ("Narrowing" 295). Concern over Farrell's proposal is the subtext of many of the papers included in the MLA *Right to Literacy* collection. Throughout all this criticism ran the conviction that Farrell's plan and the thinking it was based on would prove both educationally and psychologically damaging for students.

The Ethnographic Narratives

Much of the criticism leveled at Farrell and at Ong and Havelock during this time drew on anthropological and sociolinguistic research into language and literacy, among which were a number of ethnographic studies that cast doubt on the Havelock-Ong narrative by telling different stories of literacy. These competing narratives showed that literacy does not work the same way in all cultures or that the specific cognitive properties or linguistic structures claimed as consequences of literacy do in fact exist in oral cultures. Some of this research, briefly summarized in my paper in the *Pre/Text* special issue, can be found in collections edited by William Frawley and by Deborah Tannen. Key work across the range of literacy studies, from theorists of the great divide to its critics, comprises an anthology by Eugene Kintgen, Barry Kroll, and Mike Rose.

One study often cited in arguments against great leap theories is Shirley Brice Heath's decade-long ethnography of literacy and language in the Piedmont Carolinas. In "Protean Shapes," Heath shows that spoken language in an African-American community, which according to Ong's model could be classified as "residually oral," can have far more complex syntax than literate language with the same message, speaker, and audience. Heath's stories of literacy in three different communities argue that it is more useful to regard orality and literacy not as a single continuum, but rather as two continua, two traditions, that meet, intersect, and cross in specific human situations (112). Heath's Carolina study remains the single most comprehensive project on literacy carried out in United States, and her book *Ways with Words*, despite later criticism, is a standard item on Ph.D. reading lists in rhetoric and composition.

Cross-cultural work, such as Keith Basso's analysis of an Apache word game and Niyi Akinnaso's explanation of Yoruba cowry shell divination ritual, refutes other specific great leap claims. Perhaps the most important cross-cultural study was the research of Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole among the Vai people of northern Africa. From comparisons of three distinctly different groups of literates sharing the same culture, Scribner and Cole conclude that mental abilities typically associated with literacy are better understood not as consequences of literacy, but rather as qualities imparted by Western schooling. Scribner and Cole's *The Psychology of Literacy*, like Heath's work, has become standard reading in composition studies.

Shaking the Foundations

Besides using evidence from ethnographic studies of literacy to question the validity of the binary oppositions of the great leap, some scholars have sought other ways to undermine its foundations. For example, in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* Street points to flaws in both research and logic in Goody's argument to assert that literacy is never autonomous, never separate, never innocent or neutral, but always embedded in and embodying the practices, beliefs, and values of a culture, always therefore ideological. In *Social Literacies* Street criticizes Ong's work on methodological, empirical, and theoretical grounds. Despite his recognition of the role imagination plays in the human sciences, Street issues warnings about the dangers of Ong's "if I were a horse" method to researchers tempted to make pronouncements about the minds of people not available for questioning (155). John Halverson closely examines the primary classical texts to conclude that Havelock's reading of Homer, the basis of great divide depictions of primary oral cultures, is inaccurate: "Havelock's portrait of Homer as the didactic, encyclopedic custodian of tradition lacks verification from the Homeric poems" (156).

Taking another tack, sociolinguist Keith Walters urges readers to look at the political work of the great leap narrative; its claim that alphabetic literacy causes its users to think more logically than people in cultures without alphabetic literacy or without a writing system is, Walters says, "an idea that many Westerners find appealing, no doubt because it 'explains' what they perceive to be the superiority of Western culture" (175).

The Literacy for Liberation Narrative

In addition to these moves, those who sought to refute the totalizing and conservative Havelock-Ong account of literacy turned as well to Marxist critiques of education. Chief among these was the theoretical writing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, especially his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Using his own experience in teaching adult literacy, Freire argues persuasively that literacy can be a tool for liberating people from political and economic oppression. Other Marxist analyses, underscored by historical studies (see Graff; Resnick and Resnick), demonstrated the gate-keeping role literacy has played under industrialized capitalism (see Douglas). Marxist theory reinforced the message of ethnographic work like Heath's "What No Bedtime Story Means": that schooling in the United States as well as in the Third World is a class-based enterprise, serving the status quo and making few allowances for students whose home experiences with language and literacy deviated from middle-class "ways with words." Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* stripped many people of their last vestiges of naive and romantic belief in literacy as an open door to the middle class. In the society around us we could see that restricting access to literacy is an effective way to deprive particular groups of power.

Such studies and observations persuaded many in composition that what counts as literacy in a given time and place is determined by social, economic, and political factors rather than by some prior definition. The Marxist perspective on literacy thus served as a valuable corrective to the blind devotion of American scholarship to the individual and its traditional myopia toward power as factor in human institutions. To see reading and writing as social practice mediated and regulated by institutions instead of as a free-standing, individual mental operation supplied composition with a different lens to use in looking at our students, their texts, and our own work. The idea that writing and writing instruction were deeply connected with power became, with Berlin's histories, a mainstream idea.

Despite all these benefits, Marxist work on literacy also looks like a version of the other grand narrative Lyotard identifies in *The Postmodern Condition,* the one he associates with the practical, with liberty, the one he calls "more political" (31). Fuery and Mansfield describe this grand narrative as

"assess[ing] things according to how much they contribute to the eventual production of a society that is equal, just, and free" (137). In the Freire version of the emancipation narrative, a middle- or upper-class academic goes with his or her privileged graduate students, all of them ready to "'die', in order to be reborn through and with the oppressed" (Freire 127), into the villages or barrios where they find that "the people" want to learn to read and write. The academics study the people and their environment to collect the culturally significant "generative words" that are used not only to teach reading and writing but also to impart political awareness. Since Portuguese is a language whose words are comprised mainly of consonant-vowel combinations (with few consonant clusters), these generative words can be separated into syllables which also have separate meanings. As the adult students participate in the "culture circle," examining the slides the teachers present and responding to problems the teachers pose, they easily discover the cultural and political meaning of the generative words. Because the words resonate with meaning (as opposed to, say, "see Dick run"), adult students quickly learn the alphabet and the phonemic values of the letters. At the same time—seemingly automatically or inevitably—they develop what Freire calls *conscientização*, usually translated as critical consciousness and defined by Freire as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (19, note 1). Within three weeks, an adult is reading. This method has been used successfully in a number of Third World countries—so well in fact that Brazil's 1964 military junta exiled Freire for sixteen years.

Because those drawn to teaching are almost always motivated by a desire to help others, the Freire literacy narrative strikes a chord with people in composition, a discipline centered on pedagogy. This story was and is especially appealing to those of us who began teaching English in the sixties and seventies because to this cohort its leftist critique rings true and because, when we first read it, it seemed to offer a model for our idealistic goal of changing the structures of an unjust society. It is a particularly compelling vision for those whose careers began in open admissions programs or other War on Poverty projects, not an unusual background among people in composition studies. Freire quickly became an icon, like Mina Shaughnessy.

The problem with grand narratives is the unfortunate human tendency to overgeneralize from them: The Freire narrative has been used to support a discourse that sometimes seems to assume that all our students are oppressed. Of course some are. Some college students live daily with poverty and fear, and some, maybe even most in particular settings, suffer from racism and other prejudices. Community colleges and technical colleges are, certainly, on the frontlines of social and economic injustice, and far too

many public schools are behind the lines. It would take either an incredible optimist or a complete ignoramus to deny the inequities in American society and in American education. But by the world's standards, most of the students who enroll in the classes we teach—especially in private colleges and large state universities—are not oppressed. They are not Freire's Third World adult illiterates, and our job is not now, if it ever was, to recruit for a leftist revolution. Rather, our task is to help students learn to read and write critically so that they can carry out the tasks of their lives with some control in an increasingly complex culture in which levels of literacy "accumulate" quickly (Brandt, "Accumulating"); this includes giving them the machinery by which to critique the world around them. But to speak of our students as either victims of oppression or the children of oppressors is too easy a characterization of the complicated social, political, and economic situation of the United States at century's end. It is a killer dichotomy unproductive in teaching actual American students, who come in varieties of ethnicity, race, religion, region, sexual preference, and socioeconomic background no binary can account for.

The point is that we must all be careful of literacy narratives that make us feel good, not just those narratives that explain away social injustice by calling some people oral and others literate, but also those that cast some of us in the role of "hero[es] of liberty" (Lyotard 31). Freire has shown that a "banking" pedagogy can support oppressive structures elsewhere in society and that literacy and literacy learning can be liberatory in some situations. But we have learned from experience that neither Freire's methods nor his critique will automatically bring critical consciousness to North America.

The Other Freire Narrative

Perhaps we have misunderstood the Freire narrative. We thought he was saying that teaching a language's literacy code by means of certain generative words would create critical consciousness and thus invite social critique, which would in turn allow us to reshape society. The most clearly written and relentlessly honest account I know of the search for social change through education is the introductory essay in Bizzell's *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. In this intellectual autobiography, Bizzell tells of her struggle to use education to create a more just and democratic society. She tells how she had thought that

> learning academic discourse [could] change the thinking of basic writers in much the same way that literacy, according to Paulo Freire, changes Brazilian peasants. Freire believes that human beings can "detach themselves from the world"; that when they "enter into" social reality from this detached

> perspective, the "true interrelations" they will "discover" will embody injustices which the people will then be able to diagnose and correct. At this point they will have embarked on the process Freire calls "critical consciousness." (19)

What Bizzell comes to understand and what she shares with us in this powerful essay is that critical consciousness is not the result of a method, whether Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed or academic discourse, the term she uses for the essayist literacy described by Olson as the end point of the great leap narrative. Critical consciousness, which includes action toward social justice, does not reside in the intellectual distancing that a method allows; it comes instead from another source, as I learned at CCCC in 1988 from Ann Berthoff.

As Professor Berthoff (in her own inimitable way) asked a question in discussion after a panel, she remarked that Freire's pedagogy results as much from his Catholicism as from his Marxism. At once Freire made sense to me in a new (and, at the same time, very old) way. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is marked not just by Marxist terminology but by the language of Christianity as well: rebirth, conversion, communion. Freire seems as interested in the spiritual salvation of the elites as he is in the political and economic salvation of the oppressed. What is missing in most North American accounts of Freire's method is the intense *I-thou* relation he calls for between teacher and student. Freire is never afraid, for example, to use the word *love* in his educational philosophy, to argue that education is an act of love, and therefore of courage.

In looking back over her struggle with Freire's philosophy, Bizzell says that she has come to see that "within Brazilian Roman Catholic society, Freire is readily recognized as a kind of 'liberation-theology' Catholic, pursuing left-wing political goals out of an ultimate concern for the souls of his students" (21). Few American academics are familiar with both traditions. Cornel West is an exception, as he demonstrates when he writes in *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* that "the Marxist tradition is indispensable, yet inadequate" and "the moral vision and ethical norms I accept are derived from the prophetic Christian tradition" (133).

What Freire offers North America is not a method of teaching literacy we can carry from the Third World to the First, but an attitude of profound love for the human beings we teach. Being treated as if one is worthy, as if one's life is important, as if what one has to say is significant and deserving attention, as if one is—yes—a fellow child of God, allows some people, even the most silenced, to "come to voice," to use bell hooks' term, and, in so doing, to see the world and themselves differently. Freire taps into that striving, in his students, in his teachers, and in his readers, for something beyond ourselves, offering a spiritual perspective on the teaching of literacy: Not a grand narrative where we get to be heroes of an economic revolution but a

grander narrative that calls us to be laborers in the vineyard, a narrative that is problematic indeed in a culture that values the separation of public and spiritual life.

The Little Narratives

Beyond Ong's narrative of cognition or Freire's narrative of liberation, we find a number of recent studies that may, if we continue with Lyotard's terms, be referred to as the little narratives of literacy (31, 60). These are more or less postmodern studies of reading and writing. Employing a variety of research methods, coming from several academic traditions, and, not unexpectedly, ranging in quality, the little narratives help us "gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive [and literate] species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species" (Lyotard 26).

Just as Michael Holzman has pointed out the "post-Freirean" local focus of several adult literacy programs, so too the little narratives almost all examine literacy in particular local settings. While the little narratives of literacy offer valuable insights about various specific literate practices and while they may theorize on the these practices, they seldom make theoretical statements that claim to be valid for literate persons in general or literate cultures in general. These studies assume, rather, that literacy is multiple, contextual, and ideological. In addition, those taking a cultural studies approach distrust narratives in which one group becomes powerful because of the adoption of a presumably neutral technology. Using ethnographic methods, offering "thick descriptions," and exhibiting familiarity with Marxist and feminist critiques of language and culture, these analyses sometimes show the complexity of the relationship of orality and literacy, or spoken and written language, in actual practice. Taken as a whole, the little narratives argue as well that the relationship between literacy and oppression or freedom is rarely as simple as we have thought.

Interestingly, many of the little narratives—but not all—are written by women, and many of their subjects—but not all—are women. One of the earliest was Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance,* an examination of middle-class women's reading of romance novels. Allowing her subjects to speak for themselves, Radway captures the contradiction between the ideological content of the romance books and the ideological function of the women taking the time to read away from their roles as caregivers. Linda Brodkey's "On the Subject of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters,'" Jennifer Horsman's *Something in My Mind Besides the Everyday,* and Anne Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition" open windows into the literacy—and lives—of poor and working class women, often revealing the gap between these women and the middle-class teachers and social workers who try to help them.

Deborah Brandt's recent interviews with a number of adults of varying ages and backgrounds tease out the ambiguities and poignancies of acquiring and using literacy in America in the 20th century ("Accumulating"). Though Brandt shows how literacy has allowed for social mobility or contributed to the construction of identity, her work also takes into account the losses that have been, and are still, part of the price of literacy. Similarly, Kim Donehower's research focuses on often contradictory experiences of literacy acquisition in a mountain community in western North Carolina. Gere's *Intimate Practices*, a work of meticulous scholarship, shows how the reading and writing in women's clubs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries helped create community and identity for these women, while at the same time connecting them to the wider political and cultural issues of their times and providing them a means for speaking for the interests of their ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

Another group of studies, perhaps speaking to the spiritual issue raised by Freire, examines the relations of literacy and religion or spirituality: for example, Beverly Moss's study of literacy in three African American churches in Chicago; Andrea Fishman's work on reading and writing in an Amish community; Cushla Kapitzke's analysis of the literate practices of a Seventh-Day Adventist congregation in Australia; my own examination of literacy among women in Al-Anon ("Composing"). While these researches support the assertion of historical studies like those by the Resnicks and Goody (Introduction) that religion and literacy are inextricably intertwined in many societies, they point as well at the variety this relationship can take.

As the little narratives proliferate, the grand narratives seem to lose their power. The little narratives offer other images of what it means to be or to become literate in this culture and its various subcultures. They show people reading and writing for specific purposes: for entertainment, for personal growth, for identity formation, for community, for privacy, as well as for problem solving, for receiving and transmitting information, for economic advancement, or for political empowerment of oneself or of one's group. Varying in their overt politicization, the little narratives show that the modernist promise of literacy—economic security, upward mobility, political freedom, intellectual achievement, middle-class values, personal fulfillment—is inequitably fulfilled. But they also show that some people use literacy to make their lives more meaningful, no matter what their economic and political circumstances are.

Cultural Connections

Despite contemporary disillusion with the grand narratives of modernism, both the Havelock-Ong and the Freire narratives have contributed valuable

perspectives to composition studies. Even those who take issue with the great leap narrative, as I do, realize that the Havelock-Ong narrative helped us look at the relations between literacy and culture, a relationship ignored when talk about literacy is in terms of words per minute or grade level. Further, when used with awareness of their limitations, the concepts of orality and literacy, which made the great leap narrative attractive in the first place, can function as a valuable heuristic, as we see in two recent essays. While both Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi's "Media Integration in the Third World: An Ongian Look at Iran" and Jimmie Killingsworth's "Product and Process, Literacy and Orality" use language from the Havelock-Ong theory, neither does so in ways that separate people into groups based on mental abilities. In Sreberny-Mohammadi's and Killingsworth's hands, literacy-orality theory becomes part of the toolbox of concepts for analyzing speech and writing, rather than a means of labeling individuals and groups or explaining everything.

From the arguments in the 1980s about the great leap theory, a number of benefits have ensued. First, it became clear that context means more than the room the student is in when she composes a school assignment. Second, anthropological studies demonstrated that literacy is both multiple and multicultural, that it varies not only from culture to culture but within cultures as well. We learned that literacy isn't one thing, and we have learned that it is more accurate to speak of literacies than of literacy. Third, foregrounding ethnographic research, the great divide debate offered composition studies another model for research besides the ed psych pre-test, post-test, or think-aloud case study approaches.

The Marxist critiques of education by Freire and others also emphasized the relations between literacy and culture by teasing out specific connections between reading and writing or their lack, on the one hand, and social, political, and economic forces, on the other. These studies demonstrate that literacy, including instruction in writing, is woven into a society's structures of power. But perhaps most important, with his literacy narrative Freire has left composition studies two crucial articles of faith concerning pedagogy: First, there is a difference between imparting knowledge (the banking concept) and sharing it (authentic dialogue). And, second, we teach out of relationship.

The little narratives of literacy connect composition to culture, further, by moving research in composition away from a narrow focus on writing only in the classroom to writing as part of everyday life, into what Gere has called the extracurriculum of composition. It is worth noting, as well, that several of the researchers who write the little narratives of literacy claim composition and rhetoric as their area of specialization (some are products of graduate programs in comp and rhetoric) and CCCC and *CCC*

as major venues through which they share their work. This body of research responds to the questions a post-process composition studies should be concerned with: Why and how do people in our culture read and write when they are not compelled to by the state? What are the functions and forms of these various literacies? What do these practices mean to the participants? to composition studies? to the wider culture? How do those meanings vary from this group to that? The partial answers provided by the little narratives offer a richer perspective than we once had on the writing our students may do outside our classrooms or the writing they may be called to do. The little narratives underscore the fact that we are teaching actual not abstract students to write, not just for the next professor but for life in the culture.

In addition, because the little narratives take for granted the diversity of literacy, they often focus on the confluence of literacy with race, class, and gender. Like other postmodern work in composition as well as other disciplines, the little narratives are marked by a tension between Foucauldian determinism and human agency, showing the power of institutions to control people by controlling their literacy and the power of individuals and groups to use literacy to act either in concert with or in opposition to this power. As the little narratives make clear, literacy can oppress or resist or liberate, and the best of these studies present the simultaneity of these ideological contradictions. Taken together, these researches, as Fuery and Mansfield say of postmodernism, "remain...implacably opposed to fixed and universal principles of meaning and value" but at the same time "promote diversity and improvement on a local, or molecular, scale" (136). In other words, the little narratives present many truths about literacy, not one Truth about it, and while they may show how to correct one injustice, they do not argue that this correction can eliminate all injustice or even a similar injustice elsewhere.

Implications

Looking at the narratives of literacy makes several issues obvious. The first is the conflicted politics of composition. One grand narrative expresses a conservative view of literacy, based on elitist notions of reading and writing and protecting the status quo. The other is leftist, ranging from mildly reformative to radically revolutionary. Skeptical of grand claims, the postmodern little narratives question both positions. Another issue that the competing narratives of literacy bring to the fore is the relations of theory and ideology. That is, the totalizing metanarratives make it clear that theories are not neutral statements merely describing phenomena, but actually promote (self-)interested world views. The studies that were used against

the great leap narrative began to give us, in addition, an awareness of our own ethnocentric, class-based assumptions about literacy. The little narratives continue this process, as I realized when a graduate student reporting on Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines' *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families* remarked, "I had no idea I could learn anything about literacy from these people."

Hence the concern of many postmodern researchers with the ethics of their research and writing, a third issue that emerges from a survey of the narratives of literacy. Examples of the self-conscious research and writing practices of such scholars can be found in Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch's *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Writers of little narratives typically foreground their own positionality, stating explicitly their own assumptions and biases. In addition, they often allow the voices of their subjects to be heard, more or less effectively, along with their own. The challenge is to let subjects be subjects and not turn them into objects, a charge leveled at cultural critics whose commentaries sometimes come across as condescending and disrespectful. This challenge is particularly relevant when the participants in our studies are people whose values do not coincide with those of academic researchers. An example, and indeed another issue that the literacy narratives reveal, is the problematics of analyzing and reporting on the literate and discursive practices of religious and spiritual groups.

At end of his 1986 article Faigley called for the social view of writing to pay attention to the new technologies of communication and to develop historical awareness; lessons from the literacy narratives contribute to these areas. Journals like *Computers and Composition* and books like Tharon Howard's *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities* now examine the relations between spoken and written language which are emerging in the hybrid forms of electronic literacy. This exploration is enriched by an awareness of the literacy research, as Cynthia Selfe and Susan Hilligoss have demonstrated in their collection *Literacy and Computers.* Both the great leap criticism and the newer little narratives can serve as a corrective to the enthusiasm which sometimes causes people to argue that the supposedly neutral computer technologies will make us smarter or make us free. In addition, recent historical studies like Gere's *Intimate Practices* and Janet Cornelius' *"When I Can Read My Title Clear"*—which examine rich traditions of literacy among clubwomen at the turn of the century and African Americans during slavery—remind us to be cautious with statements about the historical relations of literacy (and orality), on the one hand, and race, class, or gender, on the other. Such works inform us that the dominant tradition is not the only one, that counter-traditions run along side, that history is usually more complex than it is presented.

In 1996, a decade after Faigley's call for a social perspective, Brandt institutionalized the connection of composition, literacy, and culture by saying, in the *Encyclopedia of Composition and Rhetoric,* that literacy is a term that now "illuminates the ways that individual acts of writing are connected to larger cultural, historical, and social and political systems" ("Literacy" 392). The little narratives of literacy can help us examine these connections, for they show, as John Trimbur has put it, "how individuals and groups engage in self-formation not as an autonomous activity but as a practice of everyday life" ("Composition" 130–31).

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