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Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies[1]

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Abstract:

Based on a critical historical, institutional, and comparative approach, this article discusses the origins of Literacy Studies and their implications for the current debate on the subject. Addressing the meanings that literacy acquires during different time periods, especially the beliefs with which it is associated since at least the Renaissance, the paper addresses false dichotomies and institutional locations referred to by different disciplines and the beliefs and actions related to them. Associated with notions of progress, civilization and social control, literacy is in permanent crisis, which contributes to calls for interdisciplinary studies. Putting into question such terms as written culture and the place of academic disciplines, the article calls for new questions to the advancement of the area.

Keywords:

Literacy studies; interdisciplinarity; literacy myth; literacy; reading; writing.

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Em busca do letramento: as origens sociais e intelectuais dos estudos sobre letramento

Harvey J. Graff

Resumo:

Com base em uma abordagem histórica, institucional e comparativa, discute-se neste artigo a origem dos estudos sobre letramento e suas consequências para o atual debate sobre o tema. Analisam-se os significados que o letramento adquire em cada época, destacando-se as crenças que nele são postas desde, pelo menos, a Renascença, e trabalham-se as cisões, as falsas dicotomias e os lugares institucionais em relação às disciplinas que dele se ocupam e às ações-práticas a ele relacionadas. Associado a noções de progresso, civilização e controle social, o letramento está em constante crise, o que contribui para fazer avançar estudos interdisciplinares. Questionando termos como cultura escrita e o lugar das disciplinas acadêmicas, o texto convoca a fazer novas perguntas para o avanço da área.

Palavras-chaves:

Estudos sobre letramento; interdisciplinaridade; mito do letramento; alfabetização; leitura; escrita.

En busca del alfabetismo: los orígenes sociales e intelectuales de los estudios sobre el alfabetismo

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Resumen:

Basado en un enfoque histórico, institucional y comparativo, el artículo aborda los orígenes de los estudios sobre el alfabetismo y sus implicaciones para el debate actual sobre el tema. Dirigiéndose a los significados que el alfabetismo adquiere cada temporada, especialmente las creencias que se ponen en él desde, al menos, el Renacimiento, se discuten falsas dicotomías y lugares institucionales en relación con las disciplinas y las propias creencias y acciones-práticas relacionados con él. Asociado con las nociones de progreso, civilización y control social, el alfabetismo está en crisis constante, lo que contribuye a avanzaren los estudios interdisciplinarios. Cuestionando términos como cultura escrita y el lugar de las disciplinas académicas, el texto nos llama a hacer nuevas preguntas para el progreso de conocimiento.

Palabras-clave:

Estudios sobre el alfabetismo; interdisciplinariedad; mito del alfabetismo; alfabetización; lectura; scritura.

Literacy ranks among the most pressing issues of the modern and contemporary eras. Although hardly a broadly recognized area of study, literacy study certainly identifies itself as interdisciplinary and historical. In the popular imaginary, literacy is a *sine qua non* of culture and progress, for individuals, societies, nations. It exists in dizzying varieties (there are 100s of proclaimed literacies). However, literacy also seems to resist the universal transmission.

As an academic, and a public interest, literacy studies proclaims its novelty (newness). But it is not: it is rooted fundamentally in its own disciplinary and multidisciplinary past. It campaigns relentlessly for recognition, identification, institutional location, and funding. It also has striking applied and commercial elements. It is tied, at least in part, to quests for national economic and cultural superiority. And, it promotes its commitment to making a better world.

At the same time, literacy studies neglects disciplinary and interdisciplinary relationships on which it is built and to which it seeks to contribute — and their conflicts and divides. This derives from and simultaneously results in neglect of its own history. Major divisions, and with them, missed opportunities, often persist powerfully. These include problems of parts and wholes, and definitions, discourse, and relationships. Literacy studies in particular is unusually divided by dichotomies beginning with literacy/illiteracy, literacy/orality, reading/writing, or alphabetical/other representations. Promotion and exaggeration, resulting in what I have defined as a literacy myth (a well-known conception), are rampant.

My new project, Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies, explores these issues from an original critical, historical, and comparative perspective. Informed by and following from my series of studies on the history of literacy and my latest book, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century – a history* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). The project asks how the study and understanding on literacy and literacies have been developed. However, it also inquires more broadly into what we might call the social and historical understanding of the production and organization of the knowledge.

Literacy studies is best understood with more attention to a longer chronological span of intellectual and socio-cultural development. It demands a broader and more dynamic focus on where and how literacy

manifests itself, among a wide array of disciplines and institutional locations. (e.g. subfields in disciplines or interdisciplines that deal with literacy include reading, writing, child and human development, cognitive studies, formal and sociolinguistic studies, comparative and development studies, and communication and media studies including popular culture studies.)

"External" factors and of - social, cultural, political, economic - developments, such as wartime needs, consequences of the global cross-cultural contacts and colonialism, cycles of "discoveries" of new social problems, combine, generally contradictorily, with currents of changes within and between disciplines. Sometimes they stimulate changing views. In the context of the universities and their organization of the knowledge, those shifts may lead to criticism, different assertions, and sometimes institutional articulations both within and outside the "boundaries" of the departments or divisions that take the name of interdisciplinarity.

Written culture is no different. The histories of writing, printing, and now electronic media and communication all show this. But we seldom appreciate or assimilate this understanding.

A more complete and useful approach to literacy studies begins "no later than the 1920s and 1930s". It looks back carefully to the period spanning the mid-eighteenth century and the early twentieth century. Ideally, it embraces a longer (if briefer) glance back to the Renaissance and the classical antiquity. It locates in the historical context the dynamic building blocks for our expectations, understandings (including theories and policies), institutions, and expectations that culminate in modern literacy (ies) and their complications, and literacy studies, the principal disciplines and where and when they cross.

The modern arrangements and judgments, typically institutionalized in distinct fields of study, grew from the foundational currents of Enlightenment emphases on the human malleability, perfectionism, learning capabilities, environmentalism, and institutionalism. They were partly reinterpreted by the deeply divided recognition of Romanticism in relation to the power and significance of the "other", the alien or primitive within ourselves and in "strangers", both within the modernizing West and in "newly discovered" regions. Questions about language and order lay at the core of both.

The beginnings and foundations of literacy studies also lay in the encounter between "civilizations" and "Wild Child[ren]" (*enfants savage*),

noble or savage; and South Sea islanders who confronted explorers. Missionaries (whose work in creating alphabets and written languages initially to "translate" the Bible in aid of their proselytizing is fundamentally a part of the literacy studies and linguistics) were inseparable; and also conquerors, colonizers, and colonists. They all deployed early (and later) modern notions of Western literacy and its expected influences in their efforts at expansion, "conquest", and domesticating and elevating the primitive and different. Herein lay often missed points of contact between psychology and anthropology.

Those at home – the poor, "minorities", immigrants, and others - could be more threatening than those could further afield. In anthropology and in the arts, the primitive and the oral were grounds for celebration at times, comprising wholly the positive associations of literacy and the negative associations of illiteracy. Strong currents from the Enlightenment and Romanticism intertwined, sometimes contradicting but sometimes supporting the expectations about the progress and modern development — and their connections with literacy (written culture). Herein lay, in part, the origins of the modern social science.

From earlier eras, including the Renaissance and classical antiquity, came, haltingly at first, the conviction that the writing, and the reading of it, were, at least in some significant circumstances, superior to other means of communication, especially the oral. On the one hand, this was a functional development, but, on the other, the personal and eventually the collective cognitive change might follow, some persons of influence thought. So commenced the early literacy studies, its theories and institutions.

The first general uses of reading and writing derived from the needs of religion, government, and commerce. Slowly there followed a faith in the powers of formal instruction in places called schools, initially for the relatively few, primarily boys (but with informal tutelage for others including girls). Some agendas stressed the socialization for citizenship and its correlates. Other agendas emphasized the literacy in terms of useful or necessary practices or abilities.

Over time, places for instruction were expanded to include much more and to focus especially on the young. This was an epochal conjuncture, with a powerful influence on future generations. In these formulations, literacy stood at the center of training that embraced social attitudes and control, and civic morality, along with at least the

rudimentary intellectual practice, and training in skills for productive contributions to economy, polity, and society. The tools began with simplified alphabets that helped to link signs and sounds to words and sentences, and expanded to include paper, pens, and various means of reproducing and circulating texts that were first handwritten and later printed. The superiority of technology and the inferiority of the "unlettered" stood as certainties, framing constructions of literacy. The history of literacy, right and wrong, came to occupy the center (though often implicitly) of the rise of civilization and progress in the West.

These elements became inseparable as they joined capitalism's relentless efforts to remake the world — and the word, written, printed, and reproduced — in the image of the marketplace and its institutions (with other images and sounds). Inseparable was the quest to remake the young, in particular, for the strange new world. They mark, and also serve as representations of, literacy in the traditions that emerged to study and understand literacy from the Renaissance (or earlier) forward.

Not surprisingly, the development and institutionalization of disciplines in the nineteenth – and twentieth-century – Western university incorporated the understandings of literacy to which they were the heirs, especially but not only in the social sciences — anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology, economics, politics — and humanities — classics, history, literature, philosophy. Early relationships resisted efforts at change. The resulting disciplinary fragmentation not only contributed to the efforts to build the interdisciplinary literacy studies, but also to limit them. They underwrite the many contradictions — what I call *the literacy myth*, for some — in the place of literacy in Western cultures, and the lives of many persons yesterday and today.

Possibilities and limits on opportunities for novel understanding stem from the interplay within and across what I call *disciplinary clusters* (The humanities, arts, social sciences, and basic sciences constitute major disciplinary clusters). No less important is the sometimes very dynamic interplay — critical and complementary — between disciplines. Of this, the key disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology provide powerful examples. Among them, orality and oral literature, everyday and privileged writing practices, the ubiquity of "reading" across multiple media, and the search for cognitive and non-cognitive "implications" of literacy are telling. So too is the active presence of literacy as values, ideology, and cultural, economics, and political capital. Destabilizing

times can become opportunities to advance or move back the disciplinary approaches, and moments for interdisciplinary movements — and, importantly, literacy and literacies.

For literacy studies, across the past two centuries at least, one of the most powerful forces has been the fear, and often the certainty, that literacy is declining (or not rising), and that with it, families, morality, social order, progress, and socio-economic development are also declining. This accompanied one of the most momentous transformations in the history of literacy and its study: from a "pre-modern" order in which literacy was feared and (partly) restricted, to a more modern order in which illiteracy (or literacy gained and practiced outside of formal institutional controls) is feared.

When taken comparatively, and further heightened by international conflict or competition, social disorder and division, international migration of "aliens", declining fertility and rising mortality, failure of "human capital" to grow, and similar circumstances, the literacy levels all become flashpoints for study and action to reverse the dreaded tide. Schools and the popular culture attract attention that has in turn the potential to propel disciplinary action and conflict, and, sometimes, interdisciplinary efforts.

The apparently endless "crisis" of literacy from between the middle and the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century is inseparable from Cold War anxieties, global economic restructuring and collateral social and cultural change, communicative and media transformation, and both new and persisting inequalities. Seemingly unprecedented "social problems" become calls for and stimulants of interdisciplinary "solutions". The literacy campaigns stir passions in the underdeveloped and developed worlds. Literacy's role as either or both cause or consequence is very tricky to unravel, a complication in literacy studies' development.

For literacy studies, these complications often impinge on one or another of the "great divides" prominent among approaches that see literacy — almost by its very "nature" — as universal, unmediated, and transformative in its impact. Often cited are the readings or writings as the *technology of the intellect*, the power of the Greek alphabet, the impact of print, cognitive shifts from writing or reading, and the like. Constructing this tradition of study and understanding — comparatively - was relatively uncomplicated. In recent decades, however, others have emphasized

increasingly the socio-cultural influences and contextual effects from literacy as acquisition, practice, and use. Among the elements stressed are psychological theories, schools and other environments, families and communities, cultures of practice, and practice and use of reading and writing among old and new media. This powerfully influences the thinking about written culture.

After the second half of the twentieth century, in conjunction with other disciplines and interdisciplines, literacy studies has taken social, contextual, cognitive, linguistic, and historical "turns", among others. With these turns came the adoption of significant French theorists, the "godfathers", from Levy-Bruhl and Levi-Strauss to Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour. These developments at times interact with and deepen conflicts among disciplines and promote interest in interdisciplinary resolution.

Literacy studies' paths are revealing. Recent years witnessed an emphasis on the everyday and on the practical, including the concept of practice itself. This has led to an effort at overturning the dominance of grand theories that stressed the universal importance of the written over the oral, the printed over the written, the literate over the unlettered and untutored — consequences and implications of literacy. The practice and the context, explored in a variety of circumstances and traditions, partially supplanted presumptions of the unmediated powers and advantages of literacy. Partly, the emergence of recent literacy studies stem from perceptions of the inadequacy of earlier conceptualizations and presumptions, and from the search for new methods and sources in which are bases for major revisions, and for reactions to them.

Literacy studies continue to struggle with the foundational dichotomies — the making of myths — between oral and literate, writing and printing, print and electronic, and literacy as transformative. They continue to guide and divide opinion and orient studies. Consequently, the long-standing neglect of rich researches on orality and oral literature is almost both a mark of the limits of many interdisciplinary endeavors and a mark of the power of disciplines. The proponents of the New Literacy Studies have not reclaimed Albert Lord or Milman Parry or Lev Vygotsky, among others. The persistence and importance of orality is regularly rediscovered across disciplines, as are the newly fashionable *multiple literacies*. Neither is new. Nor are the collective foundations of reading, writing, and written culture. The heterogeneity of constructions of the

cognitive domain also plagues literacy studies, another instructive matter of connections.

How does this apply to the theme of *written culture*?

The question I raise for this paper is: why do conceptions and studies of written culture need historical, comparative and critical literacy studies? Why do they ignore historical literacy studies at their peril?

Consider as one cluster of signs the definitions of literacy/writing in Portuguese. As Ana Maria de Oliveira Galvão reported to me more than two years ago [letter of March 20, 2013]:

> In Brazil, we have, at least, four translations for the word literacy: "alfabetização" (the original and old world to mean the learning to read and to write) (for example, the title of your book *Labyrinths of literacy* was translated as *Labirintos da alfabetização)*[2]*;* "alfabetismo" (a paper that was published in an educational journal - *The literacy myth* - received the name of *O mito do alfabetismo*)[3]; "letramento" (for example the essay wrote by Jack Goody and Ian Watt - *The consequences of literacy* - was translated as *As consequências do letramento*)[4]; and "cultura escrita" (written culture) (for example, the Walter Ong's book - *Orality and literacy* - received the title *Oralidade e cultura escrita*, that is, *Orality and written culture*)[5]. To complicate a little more, in Portugal, they translated literacy as literacia. The Spanish, who we read a lot, as Castillo Gomez and Vinão Frago, tend to use the expression "cultura escrita". In the majority of cases in Brazil, when we talk about written culture we put more emphasis in the social, cultural, historical aspects than when we use "alfabetização" or "letramento", both used mainly by people that are interested in how to teach children to read and write nowadays.

What then is *written/culture*?

The concept of written culture rests on myths, and misconceptions, that there is distinctive cultural formation that may be characterized as

[2] Graff (1995).
[3] Graff (1990).
[4] Goody and Watt (2006).
[5] Ong (1998).

written culture. It rests on notions of its other, its opposite formation of another, usually inferior of non-written, oral or lesser culture.

These are akin, indeed part and parcel of what I have called the literacy myth. They limit scholarship and do a disservice to humanity past and present…

They are ahistorical and static. The recognition that media have changed, that the forms of "texts" are diverse, that "cultures" are plural and are at best first steps.

Consider the idea of a myth (or myths) of written culture The new *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* defines *literacy myth* as:

> Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, in which the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on the practitioners a predilection toward social order, a strong moral sense, and a metaphorical "state of grace". Such presumptions have a venerable historical lineage and have been expressed, in different forms, from antiquity through the Renaissance and the Reformation, and again throughout the era of the Enlightenment, during which literacy was linked to progress, order, transformation, and control. Associated with these beliefs is the conviction that the benefits ascribed to literacy cannot be attained in other ways, nor can they be attributed to other factors, whether economic, political, cultural, or individual. Rather, literacy stands alone as the independent and critical variable. Taken together, these attitudes constitute [what Graff has called] "the Literacy Myth". [Many researchers and commentators have adopted this usage.] (Graff; Duffy, 2007, p. 41).

Almost all conceptions of written culture rest on inherited and limited notions of both writing and culture; and an uncritical coupling that exaggerates their power. They are hegemonic and deeply embedded in theories, ideologies, policies, institutions, expectations. They are inseparable from the structures of power and authority — inequalities in the past and present.

We academics, who are deeply committed to their preservation, must become, at least in part, their critics. However, this demands a far wider and deeper conception of criticism — historical and comparative — than our usual efforts to stress inequalities (on the one hand) and diversity (on the other). Nor, despite many efforts, can we relegate them to the past. I call for more… We can, however, learn from the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970) about these myths, some alternatives, and also the limits of the "liberation" theologies of literacy. Freire (1970) knew that literacy or the writing themselves were *not* liberating; he also knew that pedagogy would *not* erase oppression.

Consider, toward a new beginning…

1) deconstructing the written culture with respect to a dynamic and dialectical perspective of the literacy studies. What do we mean by reference to written culture in critical, historical, comparative, and interactive contexts?

2) reconceptualizing and redefining the written culture — is this in itself a redundancy? When do we not equate writing and culture? In so doing: What is left out? Why does it matter? In what directions does this realization take us?

3) reconstructing the written culture: can we reconceptualize both *writing* and *culture*, following Freire (1970), metaphorically at least, in 'reading the word and reading the world'? Can we reconstruct both *writing* as modes of expression and communication, composition and performance across media, and the means of their access; and *culture* as different formations with a different basis and operation? How does this relate to our new awareness of *new media*, in which many of them are not so very new? And what about the meaning of *multimedia* and *multi-modal*? When will we begin to explore relationships rather than opposition and dichotomies?

This means seeing "written culture":

- as historical and contradictory;
- as dynamic and developmental;

- as founded in reading and writing broadly construed;
- as constituted and conducted as oral and written;
- as collective and individual;
- as variable and based in both continuities and changes;
- as constituted by contradictions and resistance, and conflicting structure of authority.

Similarly: we must give greater, closer, and more critical attention to

- modes and environments for learning;
- languages and communication;
- age/generation; class, ethnicity, origins; gender; geography; resources and locations;
- circumstances, contexts, and modes of production;
- "texts";
- modes of composition and production;
- means and modes of access;
- modes and levels and forms of making meaning;
- expressions of meaning and communication;
- modes of transmission;
- processes of preservation.

All in relationship to each other and in concrete historical, social, cultural, political economic space.

Otherwise, we continue repeating and reinforcing myths of the past; myths of the present; and turning them into myths of the future. As in most notions of the written culture or *civilization*.

Why does it matters? I ask this question to each one of us, with the intention of pondering and answering together *and* for ourselves. Here I quote, as I did on other occasions, the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung (1976):

> What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: not so very much. The world is largely structured in such a way that it is capable of

> absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, and constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively – the world would change.

Among the many issues that follow with respect to written culture:

One critical problem inordinately important that we may discuss (in the context of this paper, and elsewhere) is that about "dichotomies — divides, oppositions". I point to the need to articulate them in historical and comparative contexts. I refer, for example, to these issues, and I ask you to consider examples from your "own" research:

- great divides including primitive & civilized; static & progressive. All
- constructions of literacy are ideological. Both autonomous and ideological approaches are ideological and potentially powerful;
- literacy/illiteracy;
- literacy/orality;
- alphabetical/other representations, symbols, and signs;
- writing and printing;
- print and electronic;
- multiple literacies (negotiation, translation);
- purposes and uses of reading & writing;
- literacy as transformative.

Crossing these dichotomies are these threads of connection:

- Reading and writing (across media and modes of comprehension and expression)
- Making meaning
- Communicating understanding;
- Orality and Literacy — composition, performance, reception;
- Collective and individual;
- Theory, ideology, expectations vs learning, practice, uses.

This perspective — theoretically, historically, comparatively, and critically based — but not a theory per se — emphasizes the importance of:

- Containing both constraining and facilitating contexts;
- Acquisition;
- Practice;
- Uses;
- Value [sic];
- Response.

Perhaps most importantly — and least appreciated — are the absolutely crucial connections among myths — historical and contemporary — and expectations, and the ways that they are embedded in and come to undergird attitudes, policies, institutions, and judgments. To deal with this set of world-shaping conjunctures, we must cast our nets very widely. Here we need to study in new ways of written culture in its widest living circumstances and relationships, lived and written, experienced and recorded.

It is so easy to study writing and "printing", but so hard to study reading and writing as practiced, especially in their formative and fundamental relationships for conceptions, ideologies, policies, institutions, and expectations.

Striving for recognition, the literacy studies occupy ambiguous ground, both disciplinarily and inter-disciplinarily. Partly this is a question of location. But it is also a question of status. The "rise" of literacy studies, part of its emergence and development, contributes to its presence in many academic departments and disciplines. This holds for education, social sciences, and humanities, but also (to a lesser extent) for sciences, medicine, public health, law, and business. This pattern is problematic in some critical respects. In the pantheon of disciplines, the centers of interest in literacy studies usually do not rank highly. In addition, the study of literacy, for good reasons, often seen as basic or elementary does not boost its standing. By the reputation, it is often viewed as inseparable from schools or colleges of education.

The proclaimed interdisciplinary literacy studies at times become promotional labels: new, relevant, sexy — in academic terms — and

appealing for applied and practical reasons to citizens, governments, and corporations, from *how to* to the publishing of texts and other aids. Perceptions of crises or at least serious problems with popular literacy abilities are add to this mix. Such promotion, which is less problematic in professional schools, aims to benefit programs and their home departments, colleges, or universities. It also can provoke negative reactions.

Of course literacy studies is often an active presence in departments that are home to the disciplines most often identified as predominant contributors to the New Literacy Studies, or more generally, literacy studies. These are the social sciences of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology. At one time or another, each of these disciplines has claimed the status of a science, applied if not always "pure" or "basic". Psychology, followed by linguistics, exhibits the greatest ambitions, with strong interests in reading, writing, development, and cognition. All three stress contemporary and sometimes comparative relevance, usually reserving the strongest claims for the perspectives, methods, and theories of their own discipline, even when also proclaiming their interdisciplinarity. Practitioners in these fields often occupy central places in interdisciplinary literacy centers, programs, or concentrations in Education.

What I propose is an applied intellectual, cultural, and institutional history, taking literacy studies back to its pre-disciplinary and disciplinary foundations: identifying and probing its roots. Relationships are sought, and with them, necessary clarifications and revisions, new beginnings and steps toward a different future for the literacy studies and fundamental literacies. It would be an experiment in the social history of knowledge.

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