Literacy

Brett Elizabeth Blake
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& Robert W. Blake

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CHAPTER ONE

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Introduction

Rationales, Definitions, and New Directions

literacy
The contemporary meaning is simply the ability to read and write. There are at least three levels of literacy: (1) basic literacy; (2) required literacy, and (3) a literacy ranking required for any given social context.

When the word **literacy** *is invoked, strong emotions are often evidenced. People the world over seem to care, sometimes passionately, about people's access to literacy. But literacy is a word with many different definitions and meanings. Indeed, scholars and specialists have failed to agree on what counts as literacy or on its implications. . . . [L]iteracy is quite often associated with the most positive aspects of civilization—such as the graphical image often used in literacy work of a lightbulb turning on with the acquisition of literacy in a person. Yet, literacy encompasses a wide variety of attitudes, beliefs, and power relations between individuals and groups of individuals. The language and scripts of literacy have often been part of human conflicts—intellectual as well as military, social, and cultural change across literate human history. Whether in the efforts of one religious tradition to dominate another or in revolutionary times for one political group to use literacy to break the mold with a past regime, literacy has at times been used or invoked as a way to divide, separate, and rule from a position of power. Literate traditions have also brought diverse ethnic groups together in common pursuits for mutual benefit. Thus, like all human endeavors, literacy often mirrors what is best (and worst) in human history.*

(Wagner, 1999, 1)

The goal of worldwide literacy is probably the most important struggle we face today. We know that people who cannot read and write may be intelligent and worthy persons, but if they are not literate in our

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present-day, highly technological, increasingly globalized society, they are at a dismaying disadvantage.

How do we approach the overwhelmingly complex dilemma of worldwide literacy? If we are to improve literacy—even in our country, which enjoys a fairly high literacy rate among citizens—we need to address these questions. What precisely is literacy? If it is fundamentally reading and only secondarily writing, how do we measure the knowledge and skills needed to perform these activities once we have identified and described them? And how do we address contemporary difficulties when we attempt to teach children and adults to read and write? Should we use the precise terms **literate** and **illiterate** to label people, or should we use words placed on a scale, from least important to most crucial, to designate stages of literacy? Is there a single **autonomous literacy**—appropriate for all, such as "standard English" in our country—or are there many different but valuable literacies? And should we provide widespread, but short-range, low-cost "quantity" literacy programs, which from the evidence, we know are minimally successful, or should we concentrate our efforts on long-range, informed, strenuous, and expensive programs, which, on the other hand, have lasting, positive effects?

literate
The contemporary meaning of literate relates to the basic ability to read and write at a functional level rather than at a highly developed level.

illiterate
A term is reserved for those totally lacking in the ability to read and write and for persons with no or little education.

autonomous literacy
The notion of a single benchmark of literacy, unrelated to any social context, such as standard English.

In a highly developed country with a compulsory universal education tradition, we find it hard to understand countries with no education programs, especially for women. In Marar-I-Sharif, Afghanistan, for instance, we learn that literacy classes for adult women—whose illiteracy rate is estimated to be 85 percent—are forming faster than the government can register them. In the classes presently held in mud-brick neighborhood houses with makeshift blackboards, adult women, sitting on dirt floors, recite the Afghan alphabet as many students nurse babies and others shepherd active toddlers. (Gall, 2002, 1)

"Blind" is the word some of the illiterate women use to describe themselves. Said Torpikay, a thirty-year-old Afghan woman and a student in one of the classes, says, "Without knowledge I am blind. I do not

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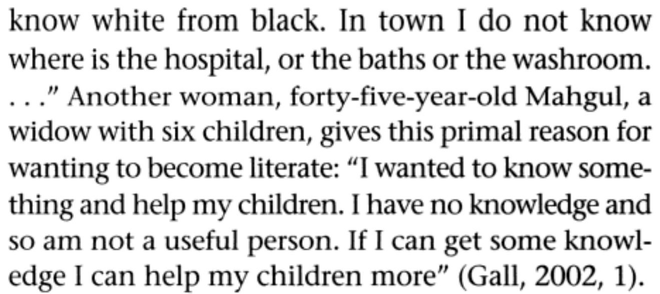

know white from black. In town I do not know where is the hospital, or the baths or the washroom. . . ." Another woman, forty-five-year-old Mahgul, a widow with six children, gives this primal reason for wanting to become literate: "I wanted to know something and help my children. I have no knowledge and so am not a useful person. If I can get some knowledge I can help my children more" (Gall, 2002, 1).

These women understand quite well the consequences of not being able to read and write. Not only do they feel powerless to help their children, but they also can't make out street names or tell the difference between government money and worthless, locally printed bills. Young, illiterate women without husbands or families can't find work, and many report they can't read letters from loved ones who have fled to the mountains or out of the country after years of armed conflict.

In September of 2002, literacy programs administrated by the aid organization, UN–Habitat, already had 172 registered adult classes and reported that new classes were forming faster than the government could accommodate them. The classes for the very few women in Afghanistan who have had some education and may go on to higher learning—in areas where the harshly restrictive influences of the Taliban no longer have a grip—are slim. In former Taliban-ruled areas, girls under eight years of age had been forbidden to attend school. In the Northern Alliance territory in 2001, a mere eight young women were allowed to enroll for the first time in the university with around 300 male students.

At the Gulbahar Orthopedic Center, a male reporter—under the watchful eye of the Center's deputy director—interviews a thirty-year-old midwife, Mazari. She is the first woman in her family to attend a university and now travels from a small town to study at the university in Kabul. What is her urge to become educated? "I wanted to help my people. I wanted to help women," she said.

In the anti-Taliban Alliance territory, girls are allowed to go to all-girl high schools, and a few

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lucky young women may attend the university but are permitted to study only a small number of select disciplines, such as medicine, law, and engineering. Said Mazari, "We have freedom. We can shop. We can go to schools. We can teach girls" (Rohde, 2001, B6).

Another woman, a twenty-five-year-old illiterate cleaning woman in the hospital, however, has few such opportunities. Her husband, killed fighting the Taliban, left her with three children to support on a $35-a-month salary. She dreams of becoming a physician, a wish unlikely to come true since she cannot read or write and local customs prevent her from remarrying.

If such stories about illiteracy in Afghanistan sound unbelievably harsh, we have only to turn to India to find conditions disgracefully much the same. One woman, twenty-nine-year-old Kasturi Devi, stands as an example of how literacy programs are changing the face of rural districts in that largest of democracies with a population of over a billion people (Schemetzer, 2000, 14A).

Devi remembers the milestone in her life when she could actually read the sign in her dilapidated bus, announcing "Dholpur," the name of her district capital. When this epiphany occurred, she pushed back the veil covering her head and literally and symbolically revealed her face to the world. On that day, she says she became confident enough to address people as her equal.

In Devi's village, Barehmora, with a population of some 1,000 souls, it is estimated that one third of the inhabitants are literate, but of those only 15 percent are women. Just a few miles away in other villages, we are told, the literacy rate may be zero.

What are the results of becoming literate for the women in these small, rural Indian villages? These are some of the changes in their lives, and in the lives of their families: The women now give the same food to girls as well as to boys, who were previously pampered because they were male. They can now read labels on food cans. They can no longer be cheated

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by grocers. They now handle finances so their husbands can't stay out, get drunk, and squander the family money. They can decide to have families of no more than two or three children. They can do simple arithmetic, once a male prerogative. They can find jobs or start their own businesses. They are no longer "thumb-stampers," the term for illiterates who use a thumbprint for legal documents because they cannot even sign their names.

The Non-Formal Education Program, partly funded by the World Bank, the European Union, and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, is responsible for setting up some 25,000 village schools, which are often housed in mud-brick dwellings with dirt floors (Schemetzer, 2000, 14A).

Even some Indian men are impressed by the advances made by these modestly literate Indian women. One enlightened farmer from Shalekapura, thirty-six-year-old Ram Dhan, remarks as he watches his four daughters attend a class: "I'm not stupid," exemplifying the adage that "I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid." "My girls are educated. They will be valuable wives because they can find a job and earn money for their husbands. I'm sure their husbands will not ask for a dowry [the cost of which frequently bankrupts Indian families]. Perhaps they will pay me."

Not only is there a movement to teach illiterate adult women to read and write in India, but there is also a revolution occurring in elementary school literacy education at the same time in that country (Waldman, 2003, A1, A5). Parents are turning away from the shameful government public schools and enrolling their children in private schools.

Poor, lower-class, illiterate parents who desperately wish their children to become literate are paying cripplingly heavy sums to send their children to newly opened private schools—called "public" schools in the British tradition—particularly if the language of instruction is English. Ram Babu Rai, who as a farmer earns about 1,000 rupees a month ($22), sends one of his three sons to a private school, the

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1999, 2). Although virtually no one believes there should be less literacy, there is widespread disagreement about the meaning of "increased literacy." Notwithstanding the various positions, there appears to be little disagreement about the fact that primary education is one of the chief educational goals of all nations. Even so, nonformal education (NFE) for children and methods for ensuring adult literacy vary a great deal from nation to nation.

The ideal of universal literacy has been articulated by governmental agencies throughout the world. In 1990, at the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA; UNESCO, 1990), there was general agreement that there should be "literacy for all," as stated in a 1990 declaration (Wagner, 1999, 2). In spite of this consensus, there has, however, been extended debate among countries about how this universal literacy for all individuals is to be achieved.

Literacy Is Good for Economic Well-Being. About the relation of literacy to economic progress, there is little disagreement. Very few countries are unaware that in order to become prosperous, the people of that country must become literate and skilled. The direct cost of illiteracy to the Unites States, for example, has been estimated to be approximately $40 billion a year (Wagner, 1999, 2).

Literacy Is Good for Society. Literacy has important social consequences, especially for women. The majority of illiterate or minimally literate adults, as we have previously discussed, tend to be females, particularly in developing countries, with a surprising amount of correlation established by empirical studies between a lack of literacy and infant mortality and even of the fertility of mothers (Wagner, 1999, 3). We are only now beginning to understand how a mother's lack of education affects her children in many harmful ways. The social consequences of a deficient education or the absence of

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literacy schooling appear much more damaging for women than for men.

Literacy Is Good for Political Stability. There has been a long tradition of using language to unify the people of a country. One of the earliest examples was the campaign in Sweden in the 1500s to promote literacy for all citizens, the primary goal being to spread a state religion through Bible study. Although the most important aim was to enable citizens to read Scripture and thus achieve religious solidarity, a secondary aim was to employ literacy as a means of creating a unified nation. More modern examples include movements in Canada, where French-speaking people wish to make French the official language in the province of Quebec; the literacy work in China, Cuba, and the former USSR; as well as the efforts toward literacy in Europe, parts of Asia, and in Africa. In the United States, speakers of Spanish insist that signs in Spanish appear alongside those in English, and the same Spanish speakers are outraged by efforts to have English named the official language of the nation.

The reasons given for establishing a language as the official one of a country include the goals of achieving national solidarity, of lowering social welfare costs, and of providing greater economic productivity. In spite of these claims, most often by those who already speak the target language, there are expected outcries by those who speak a minority language, such as Spanish in the United States. Millions of people deeply resent the imposition of a foreign language—in this case English—and the loss of their native language, representing for them an entire culture.

Literacy Is Good for the Community. There are strong pressures at the grassroots level—from churches, mosques, and other groups at the private, voluntary level—to provide literacy programs, mostly for adults. Such small-scale programs are targeted

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at particular groups within the community: out-of-school adolescents, young mothers, the elderly, and the homeless. The government usually has no involvement in these community programs, in which most of the instruction is delivered by volunteer teachers and tutors.

The reason given for such modest programs is that local literacy promotes moral and social cohesion, thus providing a sense of community. We usually find these local programs in industrialized countries, in which the common governmental position is that illiteracy is so marginal that the government need not pay much attention nor provide generous financial support.

Literacy Is Good for Economic Development of Countries. Since the establishment of agencies sponsored by the United Nations after World War II, there have been growing pressures on developing nations to improve their literacy programs. These external pressures are of two kinds.

First, lending agencies such as the World Bank tend to offer loans only if certain types of educational initiatives are promoted and literacy targets are met. At the same time, other UN agencies such as the **United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** and the **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** have supplied considerable financial support for literacy programs in primary schools and for nonformal adult education programs (Wagner, 1999, 4).

UNESCO
The acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

UNICEF
The acronym for the United Nations Children's Fund, formerly the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.

Second, certain countries wishing to be perceived as "progressive"—termed the "public appearance" notion—have promoted their efforts at literacy as a way of gaining international and national legitimacy in terms of social progress. Some developing countries, such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Cuba, have advertised their literacy programs in order to gain international recognition as "progressive" countries. Sweden currently publicizes its literacy efforts in terms of social welfare and educational benefits (Wagner, 1999, 4).

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How We Define Literacy

If we search for a single definition upon which most of us can agree, we will be disappointed. It would be useful if standard definitions were set, which would then serve as the basis for policy decisions. There are, however, no precise, neutral definitions for literacy that we all can accept without debate and that will help us in the search for practical means for ensuring universal literacy.

The simplest and most straightforward definition of literacy—and, at the same time, the one that prompts the most discussion—is that "Literacy is the ability to read and write" (Goody, 1999, 29).

Unfortunately, the term 'illiteracy' is commonly associated with poverty and ignorance, for people who are supposedly of below average intelligence or who are "underprivileged." Although large numbers of people who cannot read or write and who live in poverty may be disadvantaged and may indeed be illiterate, we need to emphasize that these individuals are not somehow less intelligent or less worthy as human beings than those who are able to read and write.

As the classicist Eric Havelock argues, the terms "non-literate" or "preliterate" are more acceptable than the disparaging label "illiterate" (Havelock, 1976). He refutes the prevalent myth that non-literate people are barbaric, crude, or primitive, arguing there is irrefutable evidence that from 1100–700 B.C., the ancient Greek culture was made up of totally non-literate, completely oral people who accomplished the most amazing literary, social, cultural, and political feats. They invented the Greek city-state—the *polis*—with all of its essential features in place by the tenth century B.C. During this time non-literate Greeks created a technology for forging iron, thus moving out of the Bronze Age, learned how to navigate ships throughout the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and developed sophisticated modes of commerce. Most significantly, these completely non-literate Greeks fostered the poetic art of the great "singer of tales," Homer, who, most agree, is respon-

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sible for creating the enduring oral folk epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.*

In the Greek High Classical Period—the time of Pericles, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, and after they had acquired literacy through the invention of alphabetic writing—the Greeks still did not speak of "illiterates" or of "non-literates." In fact, at this time, literacy was not held in high regard; **orality**, not literacy, was the preeminent mode of language. Literacy and cultivation, as considered by most literate people, were not synonymous. The Greeks used the terms "musical," "nonmusical," "educated," and "uneducated," and it wasn't until the fourth century B.C. that the Greeks referred to the *grammatikos* as a "man who could read." "In modern Western society," writes Havelock, "'illiterate' is used to identify that proportion of the population which, because they cannot read or write are presumed to be devoid of intelligence, or else underprivileged. It is therefore pejorative, signifying those who have been left behind in the battle for life, mainly because they are not bright enough" (1976, 3).

orality
The habit of relying entirely on oral communication, rather than on the written word.

Although the term "illiterate" is often used today in a disparaging way, it should be noted that while nonliterate people are still worthwhile despite their lack of literacy, such a term has some merit. If they cannot read, write, and perform basic mathematical functions—we won't even address the matter of "computer literacy" here—nonliterate people may indeed be disadvantaged in our present-day, highly technological society, as well as in the growing number of developing countries in this era of globalization.

Literacy: Many Definitions

The most basic terms "literate" and "illiterate" derive from the Latin *litteratus,* which for Cicero—the Roman statesman, orator, and philosopher who introduced Greek philosophy to Rome—meant a "learned person." In the Middle Ages, a *litteratus* was simply a person who could read Latin. The abil-

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or the ability to "do" something. This is in opposition to "declarative knowledge"—having knowledge "about" something. Such a distinction is analogous to being able to write an essay in opposition to being able to repeat definitions related to expository writing, like the terms "thesis" and "supporting details"—knowing about writing. In the late 1950s, UNESCO proposed that the concept of literacy be divided into two levels: a minimal level, in which an individual demonstrates the ability to read and write a simple prose message, and a functional level, in which a person achieves a level of literacy high enough to function in a social setting.

Age and Functional Literacy

A crucial element in an adequate definition of functional literacy is one's performance in society. When we think about this feature, it is necessary to relate functional literacy to the ages of individuals. If functional literacy means success in various situations, individuals cannot be held accountable until they are able to practice these skills, at least until they near adulthood.

When we examine the practices of a number of social agencies in reporting functional literacy, we learn that young children are not held responsible for literacy skills. The U.S. Census Bureau, for instance, when it dealt with literacy statutes from 1870 through 1930, reported the results for children only two years of age or older, while from 1959 to 1969, the statistics were reported only for individuals fourteen and older (Venezky, 1990, 5). In addition, the Division of Adult Basic Education of the U.S. Office of Education included in its data statistics only for individuals sixteen years and older. And finally, the UNESCO Expert Committee on Standardization of Educational Statistics recommended that reports on literacy should deal with persons of the minimum age of fifteen years or older. If we think about the matter of age as related to literacy—and the term "literacy" meaning the ability to read and write—it is

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ridiculous to designate a five-year-old who could not read and write as "illiterate."

So how do we arrive at an age—as arbitrary as the designated limit may be—when individuals may be identified as being able to use literacy skills to function in society, at work, for home management, and for voting intelligently? Teenagers in most of the United States cannot receive work permits until they reach the age of sixteen, and they cannot vote until they are eighteen. When we use age as a criterion for identifying levels of literacy, we fail to take into account the exceptions to an age-level limit; the idea of an "age range" at which a person may use literacy skills makes more sense. What is more significant than a person's arbitrary age is his or her ability to use literacy in the following ways: to drive responsibly, to be successful in the workplace, to be conscious of local, regional, national, and global politics and economics, to take part in social and recreational activities, and to make decisions about what educational paths to follow. "It seems reasonable to continue to use literacy as a referent for adult or near-adult abilities and to avoid such compounds as "functional adult literacy" and "functional child literacy" (Venezky, 1990, 6). We are, therefore, on firm ground when we use the term "functional literacy"to mean an acceptable grasp of the skills of reading and writing for functioning in society as a young adult.

Literacy Skills

If we accept the phrase "functional literacy" to refer to a minimal level of literacy and view "literacy" as an overall term for a set of higher literacy skills, what are the necessary skills in these categories? One scheme for defining these skills can be found in research done by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Adult Work Skills and Knowledge Assessment, done in 1973–1974, and from the Adult Performance Level Functional Literacy Test, also developed in the 1970s: literacy skills for occupational, civic, community, and personal functioning (Venezky, 1990, 7). In other surveys, these

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broad categories of literacy skills are usually included: reading, writing, numeracy, and document processing. Though the skill of reading is present in all surveys, there continues to be widespread disagreement on the levels or types of reading necessary for functional literacy. To assess literacy skills in schools, tests usually include reading exposition and fiction selections with multiple-choice questions that measure vocabulary levels and expository and literary comprehension. Even though the test results are reported for grade levels, most experts maintain grade-level scores tell us little about the literacy of adults and offer little information about the wide range of literacy abilities for school children at various grade levels.

With respect to writing, there is not yet enough empirical evidence about the skills for writing to set criteria levels for writing literacy. "We are, however, far from developmental norms for composition, in spite of expanded research and assessment activities" (Venezky, 1990, 8). Although a great deal of effort has been expended since 1990, we are still far from agreeing on the skills necessary for effective writing ability at different age levels.

Most knowledgeable persons include numeracy in the broad skills of overall literacy, but again, as we might suspect, there is little agreement on what precisely is meant by **numerate literacy**. One reason for establishing numerate literacy is that any skills beyond simple addition and subtraction are too difficult to include in a definition of basic numeracy. As the arguments goes if we include higher skills such as multiplication and division—not to say the competency skills of algebra, trigonometry, and calculus—we leave out a sizable population from the ranks of those who are numerately literate.

numerate literacy
The ability to think and express oneself with numbers, or the skills critical for ordinary meaning in print, such as basic addition, comparison (greater than, less than), dates, and times.

In order to decide what numeracy skills should be included, we must await in-depth analyses of the skills necessary for functioning in a highly technological society. Rather, we might better "confine functional literacy to those numeric operations that are critical for an ordinary meaning of print: basic

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addition and subtraction, comparisons (greater than, less than), dates, times, and perhaps a few others" (Venezky, 1990, 5). Such an array of numeracy skills is indeed minimal for our modern society.

The fourth major category within functional literacy is document knowledge, and as we might anticipate, this group of skills is also difficult to define precisely because of the lack of systematic inquiry into the matter. Document knowledge is generally defined as consisting of "the ability to make sense of documents such as these: tax schedules (which are becoming more and more complex), television schedules, advertisements, and labels on products" (Venezky, 1990, 9). It is not enough, however, to simply list the various types of documents persons must "read" and make sense of. What is critically needed, however, is that we somehow identify the skills used in document processing and describe in detail the psychological demands required of individuals who successfully negotiate various kinds of documents from the simplest to the most complex—like a modern tax form.

In summary, however we describe the broad categories of functional literacy, we are left with an obvious conclusion: the ability to read is the overarching skill of literacy. Although writing, numeracy, and document processing are important elements of functional literacy, each of these skills is highly dependent upon reading ability. If by functional writing we mean making shopping lists, writing down messages, and then making notes on what has been read, then writing becomes a "craft" skill—such as that performed by medieval scribes—that of merely copying words. At the same time, persons who cannot read will obviously perform numerate skills "in their heads" or "on their fingers" and will only be able to react orally to documents read to them. If they cannot read, then, persons who are unable to perform basic math skills or fill out documents are severely disadvantaged in our society. On the one hand, persons who can read at a basic level—and who can use a modern calculator and computer—but

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who possess low-level numeracy skill, may be able to function quite respectably. On the other hand, those persons who are skilled in arithmetic and in working their way through documents—usually with the help of individuals who are able to read at least on a functional level—and who are intelligent, hardworking, and highly motivated will be frustrated with their lack of opportunities to succeed in a society increasingly dependent upon people with advanced literacy skills.

Critical Levels of Literacy

We are aware that literacy abilities for persons in our society may range from those who are unable to read or write to those whose literacy skills go right off any scale used to measure reading and writing. How then to measure minimal literacy? We may take the recommendation made by UNESCO in 1957 to report two levels of literacy: minimal literacy and functional literacy.

With respect to literacy for reading, we now have evidence of the complex of skills necessary for effective reading, particularly of alphabetic script and print systems. On the basis of an analysis of the common core of psychological abilities necessary for reading, we are thus able to identify the crucial abilities essential for reading. We can have children learn and practice these core reading skills, and then assess how well children may perform these skills and as a result have proof of their ability to read. Such skills include recognizing instantaneously the relationship between the sounds of speech and the written symbols used to represent them and then to move from comprehending syllables to single words to groups of words in longer and more complex phrases and clauses. Finally, neophyte readers need to learn such skills as making sense of unfamiliar words by context and by deferring comprehension until a good deal of material has been read.

Over the last several decades, there has been much research, observation, analysis, and speculation dealing with the writing process and the teach-

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they were 100 years ago. Though the complexity of functional reading material may not have changed, the sheer quantity of print has increased. As a result, we all have to read more material and read it faster than we once did.

Another problem with new literacy claims relates literacy to the changing labor demands in our rapidly expanding technological society rather than to concerns about manufacturing positions. Literacy requirements for workers in the future will alter in ways we find difficult to anticipate. In any event, we need to be aware of contemporary employment requirements and resulting alterations in our notions about literacy and to make the necessary adjustments for teaching reading and writing and assessing these literacy skills. "Perhaps we need a literacy index, equivalent to the consumer price index, to register yearly shifts in functional literacy requirements. With or without such codification of change, an adequate definition of literacy must incorporate changing literacy demands in some meaningful way" (Venezky, 1990, 13).

Future Directions in Literacy Study

The future of literacy depends on the ability of researchers, teachers, and policy makers to come to agreement not only on definitions of literacy but also about descriptions of the elements of reading and writing, as well as the standards required for literacy in at least these major areas. What follow are some of the concerns we now have for the future of literacy study throughout the world.

Literacy/ Illiteracy Versus a Scale of Literacy Skills. Before World War II, it was common to make a distinction between those who had some schooling and those who hadn't as a basis for measuring literacy. This was particularly true in developing countries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this situation has changed dramatically. Although there are still millions who have had no

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schooling, even in the poorest countries most of the youngest generations are usually reported as having some formal education. In the light of this situation, it would seem that a more finely tuned method of measuring degrees of literacy than simply "schooled" or "not schooled" is needed.

One remaining difficulty with a more accurate method for measuring literacy is the evidence that many countries continue to report on literacy using the "literate/ illiterate" distinction. As a result, such statistics from these countries are grossly inaccurate and therefore virtually meaningless. "Learning Achievement" instruments would provide much more sophisticated ways of measuring actual literacy. Wagner defines the issue in this way: "The point here is the previous dichotomy is not only inaccurate and of little use today but is also misleading in terms of the types of policies that need to be put into place. Yet it is a dichotomy that is dying a relatively slow death, though it seems likely that this situation will change as we move toward 2000" (Wagner, 1999, 5).

A Single Literacy Versus Many Literacies. One aspect of the debate over a single literacy versus many literacies involves the tendency of some to list "literacies" other than reading and writing, such as computer literacy, geographical literacy, historical literacy, scientific literacy, and even what is called design literacy. Since it is the responsibility of the varied disciplines involved to define their respective "literacies," we believe it is our obligation here to deal with "literacy" only as it relates to reading and writing.

The notion of a single literacy, a set of global skills related to reading and writing, unrelated to any social context, is known as the "autonomous" model of literacy. As sociologist Brian Street defines this literacy, "It is treated as 'autonomous' in the sense that it has its own characteristics, irrespective of time and place in which it occurs and also in the sense

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that it has consequences for society that can be derived from its distinctive and intrinsic character" (1999, 35).

The person most closely associated with the idea of a single, autonomous literacy, Jack Goody, argues that a single literacy was responsible for the shift from preliterate to literate cultures and thus was responsible for the development of modern Western society. Writing, according to this thesis, as the foundation of modern literacy "fosters and 'enforces' the invention of formal logic, the study of history instead of myth, the growth of governmental bureaucracies, the shift from small villages to much larger cities, the beginnings of modern science (because observations and findings can now be published), and even the birth of democratic political processes and institutions . . . we can be detached, critical, reflective only because writing allows us to express ourselves outside the constraints of ordinary every day intercourse" (Goody, quoted in Street, 1999, 35).

Though other scholars have argued against the position that the distinction between oral discourse and literacy is overstated, Goody extends his debate about the autonomous nature of literacy to law, bureaucratic organizations, and even to economic development. With the advent of literacy, he notes, courts relied on the written word rather than on notoriously unreliable oral testimony. Writing also promotes the autonomy of bureaucracies, since writing allows organizations to keep written records in order to develop a body of procedures (e.g., the Constitution of the United States, Constitutional Amendments, and Supreme Court decisions), and to educate those who specialize in creating and maintaining organizations. With respect to the effect of literacy on the development of Third World countries, Goody believes "a certain rate of literacy is often seen as necessary to radical change, partly from the limited standpoint of being able to read the instructions on the seed packet, partly because of the increased autonomy even with regard to the seed packet of the autodidact" (Goody, 1986, 45).

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Other writers have attempted to modify Goody's position. Olson, for one, has softened his own earlier attitude that literacy is indeed autonomous. However, rather than stating that there is a single, autonomous model of literacy for all peoples throughout the world, Olson now argues that literacy, by bringing language into our consciousness, not only aids our memory but on a deeper level changes how we know and thus is culturally determined. "The differences between speech and writing and the complex relations between them make writing a powerful tool of cognition, a tool central to cultural development in the West and elsewhere as well" (Olson, 1999, 132). In effect, literacy changes the way we think, believes Olson, and it "gives us the ability to step into, and on occasion to step out again, from this new world, the world on paper" (Olson, 1994, 18).

The idea of "many literacies" is most prominently advanced by Brian Street, who has labeled this idea "social literacies" (Street, 1995a). For Street, it is obvious that literacy is always practiced in social situations. What is not so apparent is that this truism has important ramifications for accepted definitions of literacy as well as implications for how literacy is then taught and learned. Expanding on the topic of "social literacies," and "literacy practices," some scholars now speak of **multiple literacies**—such as "community literacies," "local literacies," and "individual literacies."

multiple literacies
The notion that there are numerous appropriate and therefore acceptable literacies practiced in any number of social situations, including those used at home and in other environments, as well as a distinctive literacy traditionally employed in schools.

Even within a given culture, so this argument goes, there are numerous literacies, including all examples of reading and writing inside formal educational institutions as well as beyond school walls. Street explains the idea of "literacy practices" in this way: "From this perspective one may ask what are the literacy practices at home of children whose schooled practices are judged problematic or idiomatic. From the school's point of view, those home practices may represent simply inferior attempts at the real thing; from the researcher's point of view these home practices represent as important a part of the repertoire

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as different languages or language varieties" (Street, 1999, 38).

Quantity Literacy Education Versus Quality Literacy Education. This problem is especially troublesome for literacy education, particularly for adult literacy education, relating directly to the definition of the term "literate." When does an "illiterate" person become "literate"? If it is a simple matter to make a person "literate," then campaigns such as "Literacy Volunteers" or literacy teachers' corps should be successful. Volunteers don't need long periods of training, the periods of instruction for students need not be extensive, and therefore highly advertised, popular programs of instruction are quick and cheap ways to make large numbers of individuals literate.

Research reveals, unfortunately, that such programs don't deliver as much as their advocates promise. Volunteers seldom stay long enough to become accomplished teachers, and choices about what language is to be the target language are usually decided on a political basis rather than by careful study of which language—such as French or English in Quebec—would be most desirable for those people living in a particular county, state, or country (Wagner, 1999, 6).

Summary

1 **Illiterate People Are Still Worthy Individuals**. Although people who are not literate are worthwhile and may have achieved magnificent cultures, in the present era of increasing technology and globalization, people who cannot read or write are simply at a disadvantage in life.

2 **Reasons for People to Become Literate**. The major reasons for persons to become literate are individual (personal development and fulfillment), economic, social, and political.

3 **Conflicting Terms for Literacy**. As a sign of the chaotic nature of the study of literacy, definitions

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The *Literacy Primer* is devoted to the most recent topics in literacy studies, such as the meanings of literacy, the invention of alphabetic writing, a history of reading, the consequences of literacy, teaching the two modes of knowing—literary and informational—and literacy for diverse learners. Each chapter includes a glossary of key terms for students new to the field. A list of selected resources and further readings is provided at the end of the volume. The book is written in a refreshingly straightforward style that is inviting to undergraduate students who might otherwise have difficulty learning about the subject.

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