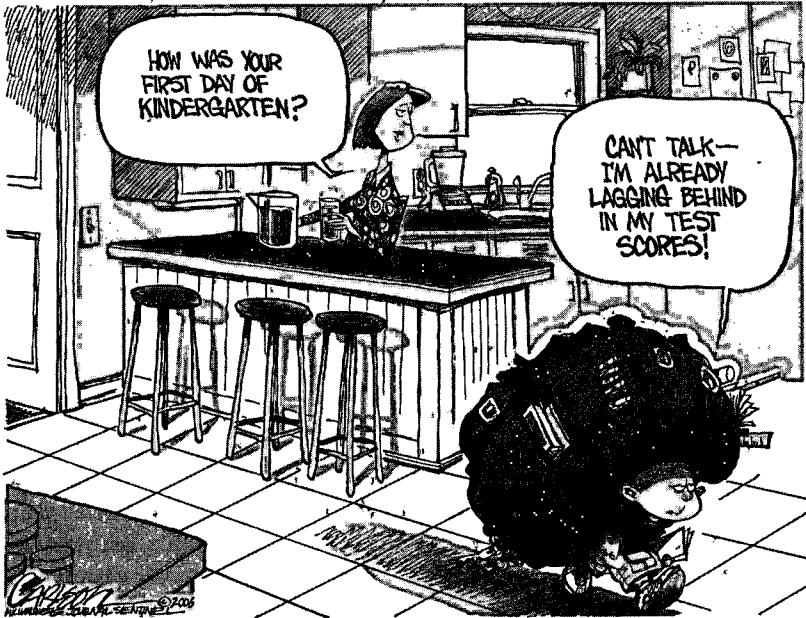


Why not literacies -  
what argument is being made here?

# 1

## Introduction



Journal Sentinel/Stuart Carlson

*"If you teach a child how to read, they will pass a reading test."*

—President George W. Bush

*“Although literacy is a problem of pressing national concern, we have yet to discover or set its boundaries”*

—Scribner and Cole, “Metaphors,” paraphrasing George McGovern in 1978

In 2004, the following story (“Nonhuman Factors”) appeared in the *Dayton Daily News*:

When the Dayton school board asked principals in a November meeting to share their workplace concerns, the room boiled over with frustration. The No. 1 topic—testing.

Boxes had arrived at each of the city’s elementary schools filled with something new. The state of Ohio would now require teachers in kindergarten through second grade to give new diagnostic tests.

These tests are long and complex. For the youngest children, teachers needed more than an hour of one-on-one time with each child to administer it.

Kemp Elementary School Principal Burt Thompson, a 37-year educator and principal for 14 years, had seen enough.

“Teachers had a concern they were not going to be able to meet their goals for instructional time,” he said. “Some teachers got three binders full of test material.”

The federal No Child Left Behind Act has sparked an explosion of new tests. The 2002 law requires states to test all students in grades three through eight each year in reading and math and to develop a high school exam by the 2005–06 school year.

With new tests have come problems. Ohio ultimately was forced to back off its plans to test all students in kindergarten through second grade, agreeing in late November to shelve those tests for a year in the face of a near mutiny by teachers and principals across the state who, like those in Dayton, were fed up.

A study for Congress by the General Accounting Office last year estimated states will need to create more than 433 tests to satisfy what the No Child Left Behind law requires.

*Dayton Daily News* (Ohio), May 23, 2004, Sunday City Edition

BYLINE: Scott Elliott and Mark Fisher

We live in a world (or at least, a country) of high-stakes testing. In the current political climate, testing—its uses, its benefits, its hazards, and its conduct—dominates public conversation about schooling and “achievement.” The news story just excerpted goes on to describe the effects of the new explosion of standardized testing requirements brought about by

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): increased reliance on the few testing companies responsible for creating standardized tests, pressure on teachers to prepare students for tests at the expense of other lessons and curricula, an enormous increase in the numbers of administrative personnel needed to manage the tests, and a high-stakes atmosphere in which errors of test design or accounting have serious consequences for students’ futures. The practice of building educational policy around standardized testing has various stakes and stakeholders: it affects the lives of students, parents, teachers, and communities.

Why begin a book about literacy with a discussion of testing? Most people would agree that tests are a measure of literacy—that they index whether or not a person can read and write across subject areas and in general. But what if, as the news story seems to suggest, tests are “about” literacy in other ways? What if tests, as one example of how views of literacy are enacted in policy, help us to see how definitions of literacy matter in the “real world”?

Considering the various stakeholders involved in high-stakes testing, and, in particular, the No Child Left Behind Act signed in January of 2002, brings us to the important questions about literacy—what it is, what it does, and what its “effects” are—that structure our discussions in chapters to follow:

- What does “literacy” mean—and for whom?
- How do perspectives on literacy change when viewed from different (cultural, social, institutional) locations?
- When (in response to what social and historical forces) do definitions and uses of literacy seem to change?
- Who is affected by which definitions of literacy?

A closer look at the No Child Left Behind Act is instructive for what it stands to teach us about the importance of questions of definition, use, and effect when it comes to thinking about literacy. According to the *Dayton Daily News* piece, the explosion of testing is a direct result of recent changes in national educational policy. The No Child Left Behind Act has a very special definition of literacy behind it: Literacy is a technical skill that can be easily identified, quantified, and measured—and claims for the democratizing potential of NCLB have to be evaluated in

Important questions about literacy

light of this fundamental view of what literacy is and how it works. Proponents of NCLB describe the policy as an investment by the federal government in public education. On its website (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html>), the Department of Education describes the primary features, or “four pillars,” of NCLB as follows:

### 1. Stronger Accountability for Results

Under No Child Left Behind, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Annual state and school district report cards inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run.

### 2. More Freedom for States and Communities

Under No Child Left Behind, states and school districts have unprecedented flexibility in how they use federal education funds. For example, it is possible for most school districts to transfer up to 50 percent of the federal formula grant funds they receive under the Improving Teacher Quality State Grants, Educational Technology, Innovative Programs, and Safe and Drug-Free Schools programs to any one of these programs, or to their Title I program, without separate approval. This allows districts to use funds for their particular needs, such as hiring new teachers, increasing teacher pay, and improving teacher training and professional development.

### 3. Proven Education Methods

No Child Left Behind puts emphasis on determining which educational programs and practices have been proven effective through rigorous scientific research. Federal funding is targeted to support these programs and teaching methods that work to improve student learning and achievement. In reading, for example, No Child Left Behind supports scientifically-based instruction programs in the early grades under the Reading First program and in preschool under the Early Reading First program.

### 4. More Choices for Parents

Parents of children in low-performing schools have new options under No Child Left Behind. In schools that do not meet state standards for

at least two consecutive years, parents may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. The district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. Also, students who attend a persistently dangerous school or are the victim of a violent crime while in their school have the option to attend a safe school within their district.

Even though these central features of the policy, taken together, appear to suggest increased flexibility and freedom for students and parents, the major operating principle of NCLB is *accountability*—the practice of measuring performed knowledge and using these measurements to distribute rewards and punishments to institutions. Through NCLB, money is directed according to results—that is, schools whose students perform well on annual standardized tests are rewarded with money; funds are withheld from those that don’t measure up. The NCLB Executive Summary emphasizes the policy’s commitment to the practice of distributing monetary rewards to schools on the basis of measured performance:

#### INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

The NCLB Act will strengthen Title I accountability by requiring States to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging State standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3–8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and State progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals will, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet State standards. Schools that meet or exceed AYP objectives or close achievement gaps will be eligible for State Academic Achievement Awards.

As the language of “corrective action” suggests, there are clear consequences for schools that don’t meet annual yearly progress targets. If a

school doesn't meet AYP for a third year, it has to pay for tutoring for students (or contract these services) and it must continue to allow students to transfer to other schools. After 4 years, "corrective actions" become more serious—appointing outside advisors, mandating longer school days or years, and dismissing teachers alleged to be responsible for the failure. After 5 years, school staff will be purged, and the school will either become a charter program or will be handed to a private management firm.

When we look closely at the effects of policies like NCLB, it becomes clear how the practice of testing expresses beliefs about what literacy is and how it works. Consider President George W. Bush's remarks in a 2004 National Institutes of Health speech about Reading First, a competitive grant program under NCLB created to help states and districts to implement "scientific, research-based" reading programs for children in elementary school:

**THE PRESIDENT:** You know, people are going to say, well, that sounds good. How do you know it works? And, as you know, I'm a how-do-you-know-it-works kind of guy. Reid mentioned there is a debate. Governors are very familiar with the reading curriculum debate and there are some very strong opinions about what might work, what might not work. I'm the kind of fellow that says, you ought to be able to figure it out pretty clearly.

Why are you so certain that your attitude is the right attitude?

**THE PRESIDENT:** Good. This is based upon science, is what I'm telling you. And if you've got something that works, then it makes sense to spread the news. So that's what we're talking about here: How do we make sure the research that has been done here in Washington is shared around the country?

(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040512-8.html>)

In taking up the matter of how literacy teachers should be properly educated, President Bush emphasizes the need to correct defects in current teacher education programs, remarking that "one of the things we have to address is why teacher colleges aren't teaching reading teachers how to teach in the first place, so you don't need to retrain."

In keeping with the accountability principles of NCLB, President Bush's remarks suggest that literacy is a simple matter, something that anybody "ought to be able to figure . . . out pretty clearly," and that answers to what literacy *is* can be reliably found through science (elsewhere in the speech, in fact, President Bush corrects what he sees as false notions

about literacy, declaring that "reading is more of a science than people think"). If literacy is seen as a stable, easily quantifiable, measurable piece of technical knowledge, then policies and programs will enact these beliefs—and these enactments will have consequences for schools, students, parents, and communities. As the *Dayton Daily News* piece suggests, though sitting down to take a test may seem like a simple act, such an act of literacy is anything but simple. One very important question is this: Who wins and who loses when particular definitions of literacy are enacted?

## What Does Literacy Mean?

It depends on who "we" are, and on what defining literacy in one way or another lets us get done or make happen. The definition of literacy is an especially difficult thing to pin down: what does "an act of literacy" entail, exactly? While it's possible to say, for example, "Jane loved her dog," you can't say "Jane literacied her students." As our friend and colleague Seth Kahn has pointed out, literacy is an abstract noun with no corresponding verb to tell us what range of actions might possibly be associated with it. An act of literacy can entail everything from finding a book to decoding print on the page to instant messaging a friend about a writing project. And yet, while it's common for people to be as evangelical about the importance and benefits of literacy as they are vague about its actual meaning, the examples of educational policies we've introduced here indicate that definitions of literacy do not remain abstractions of exclusive interest to educational philosophers, but instead have very real effects in real-world domains (as in, for example, schools—but also, as we will see, in other places, such as communities and workplaces). Although most people talk very much as if "literacy" has a meaning that is both stable and transparent (e.g., confident assertions like "lack of literacy keeps people from getting jobs" or "video gaming is making kids these days illiterate" or "when it comes to political decision making, the voting public is illiterate"), if you pause for a moment and consider these claims, you'll notice that very different assumptions about what literacy "is" are at work even in these three commonly expressed propositions: that literacy is a quantifiable workplace skill; that literacy refers to practiced engagement with print texts; that literacy has to do with higher-order information processing and reasoning skills. In President Bush's words noted

Why not literacy?

So why are our actions limited?

What does this mean?

Diff. notions about what literacy is

Real-world effects



earlier, we can see the following definitions of literacy at work: literacy teaching and learning is a scientific endeavor (“this is based on science”), is easily quantifiable and measurable as a skill (“you’ve got to measure”), is transparent (“you ought to be able to figure it out”), and is a finite body of knowledge with easily identifiable boundaries (teachers who know “how to teach in the first place” don’t need to “retrain”).

If you type “what is literacy?” into a Google search box, you’ll wind up with something like 2600 hits. (This isn’t as many as you’ll get for “what is love,” to take an example of another notoriously difficult-to-define word—that comes in at 14,900—but it’s still quite a lot.) Yet *literacy* is one of those words, like *love*, that people use commonly and confidently, as if its meaning were transparent and stable. Regardless, there are implicit meanings at work in uses of either of these words (consider, by analogy, the consequences of very different ideas of what *love* means for a married couple, one of whom assumes love means “coexisting in comfortable silence,” while the other thinks it means “intimacy through frequent conversation”). In looking at the educational practices of NCLB testing mandates, we can see how powerful definitions of literacy can be, even when—and perhaps especially when—they are implicit.

The current fascination with standardized testing as realized through the No Child Left Behind Act is a fair illustration of just how deeply definitions of literacy are rooted in historical, political, and cultural contingencies. These definitions not only underwrite public discussions of literacy, but also drive the policies that affect people’s lives: at

### Focus Point

Consider the following posting from a political website covering the election of President George W. Bush to a second term in office:

Sure, you can get all upset about a nation of illiterate redneck cultists electing the anti-christ to a second term, or you can just warm up to the idea of an even better season of “The Daily Show.”

We’re tending towards the latter.

<http://www.evil.com/archives/2004/200411/20041117.htm>

What, in your view, does the author of this posting mean by “illiterate”? What more general definition of literacy does this particular passage imply?

what happens when something alien from human measure humans?

one end of the conversation there is an abstract definition; at the other end, there’s somebody sitting in a room with a Scantron form whose future hangs in the balance. Still, the relationship between the two is neither simple nor direct—it’s not a mere matter of cause and effect (defining literacy *this way* immediately and predictably makes *these things* happen). In her essay entitled “Literacy in Three Metaphors,” psychologist Sylvia Scribner (with whose words we began this section) writes about these matters of definitional difficulty and consequence, identifying three dominant metaphors for literacy: literacy as *adaptation*, as *power*, and as a *state of grace*.

Scribner writes that “each of these three metaphors is rooted in certain assumptions about the social motivations for literacy in this country, the nature of existing literacy practices, and judgments about which practices are critical for individual and social enhancement.” These metaphors are not, she points out, mere language play—rather, they direct practices that ultimately affect people’s lives. “Each,” explains Scribner, “has differing implications for educational policies and goals” (1984, p. 73).

Scribner’s three<sup>2</sup> metaphors for literacy:

- As adaptation
- As power
- As a state of grace

### Literacy as Adaptation

The common view that literacy is necessary for social and economic well-being (even survival) is what Scribner calls *literacy as adaptation*. Scribner points out that thinking about literacy in this way strongly appeals to our common sense—of course people “need” literacy to get by! How else would they decipher signs, documents, policies, products? And yet, how do we know what level or kind or form of literacy is necessary? Some argue that you need only know how to decode basic written information to be literate enough. Others, like literary critic Robert Pattison (1984), insist that you need to be fluent in complex and sophisticated uses of language to be sufficiently literate in modern society. Similarly, when George Bush says, as he did in his speech to the NIH quoted earlier, that “if you cannot read in the 21st century, you don’t have a chance to succeed,” he is suggesting that literacy is a way of adapting to social and economic mechanisms. And once you make the claim that people “need” literacy to get by, then a parade of questions follows: What kind of literacy? For whom? Under what circumstances? To what ends?

### *Literacy as Power*

Another common metaphor Scribner identifies is *literacy as power*. To equate literacy with power is, as with the literacy-adaptation equation, to make a claim for the social benefits of literacy. The difference in this case is that literacy here is perceived to advance community or group interests. Literacy, in other words, is an essential precondition for social change. In this view, writes Scribner, “not to be literate is a state of victimization” (1984, p. 75). Here again the questions proliferate: What is the relationship between literacy and socioeconomics? How much do social inequalities follow from unequal distributions of literacy? Interestingly, *literacy as power* is a metaphor central to both conservative and radical views of education. Marxist educator Paulo Freire, for example, sees in literacy the potential for “critical consciousness” and revolutionary action, while American critic E. D. Hirsch believes that “cultural literacy” can ensure upward social mobility for the educationally underprivileged.

### *Literacy as a State of Grace*

The third metaphor Scribner sees as commonly operative in discussions of literacy is *literacy as a state of grace*, which Scribner uses to describe a view of reading and writing that seeks to “endow the literate person with special virtues” (1984, p. 76)—a perspective that has ancient origins but is nonetheless still powerfully present today. In this view, literacy is not necessarily or directly linked to political or economic processes, but rather names a deep, humanistic understanding or creative knowledge. Though the idea of “state of grace” is religious in connotation, this view of literacy is not linked to religion in any direct sense except that it assumes that a state of spiritual and emotional well-being comes uniquely through intellectual engagement with the written word. If you’re literate, the thinking behind this metaphor goes, then you’re smarter, more civilized, more ethical, more humane.

### *Literacy Then, Literacy Now: Changing Meanings of Literacy*

But where do ideas about the nature of literacy come from? Why do some ways of conceiving literacy seem to be more popular, more powerful, more viable than others? A historical perspective quickly reveals that

definitions of literacy are not fixed or stable: they are, like any other social value, products of historical moments, and particular ways of conceiving and valuing literacy emerge, reemerge and fade, morph and shift over time. But what, really, makes a particular way of defining literacy emerge and take hold? What’s happening in the national and global political scene, and how these politics determine economic states, predicts, and explains what literacy is perceived to “be” at a given time.

According to literacy historian Debrah Brandt, definitions of literacy emerge and change in response to socioeconomic conditions. Brandt has spent decades studying patterns and trends of literacy in American life and culture, doing archival research and collecting oral histories from everyday people to learn about what literacy “does” for people and how these uses change over time. In her essay (2004) about shifting meanings of literacy around the time of World War II, Brandt gives us one example of how definitions of literacy are not arbitrary or stable over time, but rather depend on the historical moment. Brandt explains that the economic changes brought by World War II also brought changes in the reasons for promoting mass literacy in the United States—specifically, that the rationale for literacy shifted from an emphasis on morality (Scribner’s *state of grace*) to an emphasis on production (Scribner’s *adaptation*). During the war, the United States stepped up production of goods to meet wartime needs, giving rise to new ideas about literacy as a necessary condition for productivity. Up until World War II, explains Brandt, literacy was believed to be a cultural good, an essential human (and humanizing) value. But under the pressure of increased wartime production, the speed and efficiency of learning became a pressing issue, and perceptions of a “crisis” in literacy intensified as the demand for production outstripped existing literacy resources. Led by the U.S. Army, the federal government launched “one of the largest programs of adult basic education in human history” (p. 487).

Interestingly, Brandt sees the relationship between literacy and the sociopolitical environment in the mid-20th century and the 21st century as having a great deal in common. She writes: “There is the atmosphere of high anxiety around literacy, rapidly changing standards, an imposition of those standards onto more and more people, a search (largely futile) for reliable testing, a context of quick technological development, a heightened concern for world dominance, and a linking of literacy with national security, productivity, and total quality control” (2004, p. 499). NCLB would seem to be one example of how such concerns are currently expressed in policy.

A link between WWII → NCLB

What Brandt's analysis indicates is that even in 21st-century America, literacy is not "neutral," but rather carries the social values of our time: In Brandt's analysis, "literacy remains a cultural mandate, taught and learned as a general good," despite the increasing emphasis on literacy as the productive engine of the knowledge economy—as evidenced by the messages our public institutions and media consistently send out reinforcing the idea that literacy is not just a productive instrument, but also a cultural value. These messages insist that, in Brandt's words, "Good children read to get ahead in school and in life. Good parents read to children," and that "illiteracy is . . . the road to crime." Brandt suggests, however, that the *terms* of the morality of literacy are different from what they once were: As much as literacy may still count as a moral pursuit, it is no longer assumed (as it once was) to *create* morality. Its real value lies in its relationship to productivity and economic well-being. In the America of the 21st-century, living without literacy makes you morally unfit not because you are socially inappropriate as much as because you're not perceived to be an asset to the economy, because you don't "pull your weight" as a productive participant in the workforce.

As natural and common-sense as current views of literacy seem to us now, they weren't always the prevailing views, and their development can be explained with a look into historical events and processes. Understanding historical contexts of literacy, then, helps us come to two understandings:

- that definitions and perceived uses of literacy are linked to historical moments and change over time; and
- what literacy "is" today is best understood with a broader historical perspective.

Thinking of literacy as an historical development is helpful in understanding the emergence and power of particular definitions of literacy—like the ones we see at work in *No Child Left Behind*.

## Sites of Literacy: How This Book Is Organized

If one thing is very clear about literacy, it is that it is a conceptually sprawling and ever-shifting subject. For this reason, it can be difficult to take in

What Brandt says  
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literacy

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**Socrates: Literacy Ruins  
 Memory, Gets  
 in the Way of Thinking**

Nowadays most people see literacy as a  
 virtue, but Socrates insisted that written  
 texts are not only unresponsive to human  
 needs, but also *dangerous*. Not only can  
 written texts not "answer" for themselves,

**Definition**

Plato was a Greek philosopher  
 who lived in the 4th century  
 BCE. Plato was a student of  
 Socrates, and among his many  
 writings on rhetoric, philoso-  
 phy, and ethics are several  
*dialogues* featuring Socrates as a  
 character. As far as we know,  
 Socrates himself never wrote  
 anything down.



but they are always in danger of falling, helpless, into the hands of those who would misread and misuse them: Once ideas are written down, points out Socrates, "they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves." At Socrates' suggestion that there is another form of communication that is superior to this, Phaedrus offers, "You mean the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which written word is properly no more than an image?" Socrates assures Phaedrus that that is exactly what he means. The philosopher works through spoken language, a medium that must be engaged by human contact to have meaning and address the most vital questions of ethics, truth, and beauty: the philosopher works like a farmer who plants "seeds" (words) that can "help themselves and him who planted them, and are not unfruitful, but have in them a seed which others brought up in different soils render immortal, making the possessors of it happy to the utmost extent of human happiness."

But what about the more modest claim for writing's usefulness—that it can serve as an aid to memory? Even this idea Socrates contests, claiming that writing weakens the mind's faculties because it serves as a weak substitute for memory and divests it of any power. Socrates predicts that writing "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence." Without living memory, contends Socrates, acquired knowledge will have no foundation: students "will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing." Since Socrates believed in a transcendent reality (or a world of ideal "forms") beyond the physical

### Focus Point

Plato's Socrates believed that literacy—specifically, writing—was bad for people: written communication stood to make them unethical and forgetful. Explore this idea through reflections on your own observations and experiences. What examples can you come up with of writing as unethical or dangerous? What is it about *writing* that ensures these qualities?

world, he thought of writing as doubly mediated, twice removed from the origins of Truth. Memory, for Socrates, was an important feature of learning and a necessary instrument for attaining wisdom—and writing, which allows people to document things they might otherwise have committed to memory, interferes with thinking and learning. Socrates worried that this property of writing itself would have consequences for relations between people—who would no longer need to keep shared memories "alive" in dialogue—and therefore, for human knowledge and experience. Writing theorist Louise Wetherbee Phelps writes that Plato and others in the Platonic tradition equated speech with "the real, the concrete, with the flow and change of life itself, with process, event, and a sense of belonging and participation in the culture." In contrast, this tradition characterizes writing as "abstract, static, unresponsive to questioning, and empty of life and passion" (2001, p. 62). In Socrates' view, explains Phelps, writing is a dangerous technology, one that represents "the absence of the vital, dialogic qualities found in face-to-face speech" (62). Written words become disembodied ideas, cut off from their human lifeworlds. Socrates was probably not the first intellectual to worry about what changes in how people communicate were doing to the kids—and he certainly wasn't the last.

## Letters, Thought and Civilization

Nowadays, it's a story with a students, to write, your li civilized—ev popular. cultu

### Reading at Get Literac

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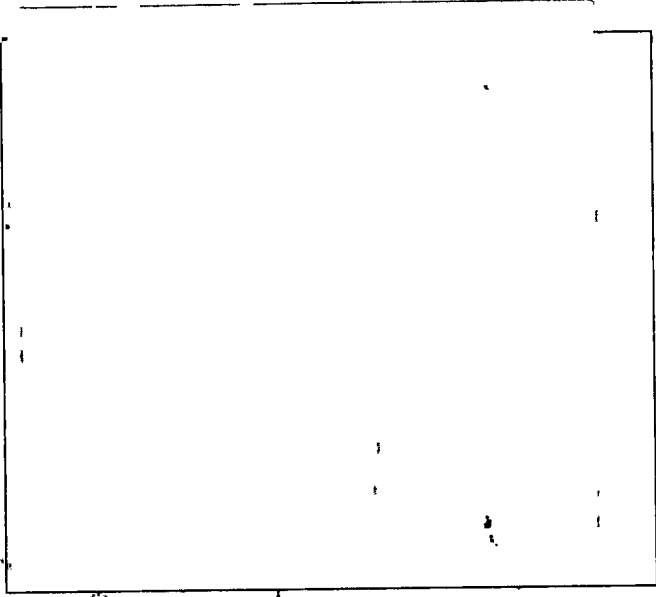
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*The Divisions*

*Evolution of spoken language*



(From Chandler, "Biases of the Ear and Eye," <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/litoral/litoral1.html>)

## Literacy and the "Great Divide"

The Great Divide theorists of literacy, then, hold in common the idea that cognitive changes brought about by the qualities of the written word themselves bring about grand and sweeping changes in the organization and



development of societies. Literacy, from this perspective, has revolutionary potential. With new technologies of human communication come profound and irreversible changes in civilization. Implicit in such a view is the idea that the new modes of thought are not only new but improved, and that social progress follows—that is, people become more rational, more humane, more civilized. Literacy thus becomes a moral issue: if literacy causes human thought and civilization to “advance,” then it becomes an ethical imperative to spread literacy and foster these changes. Names most commonly associated with Great Divide thinking are Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and Ian Watt, Eric Havelock, and David Olson. Goody especially championed these theories because he also sought to challenge earlier historical and anthropological assumptions of the inherent racial superiority of people from European descent. Through their Great Divide theories of literacy, these scholars contended that the development of cultures had more to do with the cognitive shifts brought about by literacy than inherent European superiority.

To get a better idea of how literacy works its magic from this theoretical perspective, let's look at what the famous theologian-philosopher Walter Ong had to say. Ong is perhaps one of the most well-known and widely read scholars of literacy, and his writings have had a huge impact on theoretical debates of the meaning and effects of the written word on social organization. Ong wrote of the revolutionary potential of writing and “literate cultures” to influence human organization and, ultimately, to rewrite human history. At the very foundation of these claims is the idea that, in Ong's words, “writing restructures thought”; “A deeper understanding of pristine or primary orality enables us better to understand the new world of writing, what it truly is, and what functionally literate human beings really are: beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when

#### Definition

Walter J. Ong was a Catholic priest, philosopher, cultural historian, and prolific literacy scholar. He published many works on religious and secular cultural history, but his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) has been most influential to literacy theorists and researchers. In it, Ong posited changes in human consciousness and social organization from the spread of print literacy—though Ong himself warned against reductive readings of his work as indicating deterministic views of literacy.

engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong, 1982, p. 78). That's an ambitious claim, all right—that writing changes the mechanisms of human thought. But how, exactly does this work? What are the assumptions that lie behind this claim? One way writing changes thought is that it liberates the mind from memory, largely by freeing it from the mundane job of storing details of events so that it can devote itself to more complex intellectual operations. Complex lines of reasoning can't be easily stored in memory, said Ong, so that in societies with no writing, intellectual activity has inevitable limits. Ong asks us to imagine a scenario:

Suppose a person in an oral culture would undertake to think through a particular complex problem and would finally manage to articulate a solution which is itself relatively complex, consisting, let us say, of a few hundred words. How does he or she retain for later recall the verbalization so painstakingly elaborated . . . How, in fact, could a lengthy analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication. (1982, p. 30)

In other words, you can't think complex, memorable thoughts all by yourself without writing them down unless you have somebody else to help you test and elaborate them (and here Ong puts his finger on Socrates' preference for speech over writing—speech forces your ideas directly into contact with others). But Ong saw other ways in which writing changed thought as well. He argued that orality is

- **additive rather than subordinative** (speech doesn't specify relationships between narrative events—it operates in the mode of “and . . . and . . . and” rather than indicating cause-and-effect relationships between events);
- **aggregative rather than analytic** (works through conventions and clichés instead of through analysis);
- **redundant or “copious”** (oral communication has to build in lots of redundancy or overlap to keep both speaker or hearer “on track”);
- **conservative or traditionalist** (since it takes so much energy to engage in intellectual inquiry through speech, oral communication

tends to favor the old and established rather than the new and experimental);

- **close to the human lifeworld** (Socrates' idea that speech establishes close relationships because knowledge has to be personally passed on);
- **agonistically toned** (since oral communication is so highly interpersonal, it responds to the intensely conflictual nature of close and dependent human relationships);
- **empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced** (in an oral culture, you have to be closely connected with other people and to think together with them since meaning is controlled by the community—if you want to know what something “means,” for example, you have to ask somebody else);
- **homeostatic** (more or less stuck in the present, since histories are hard to maintain and thinking about the future requires too much abstract speculation); and
- **situational rather than abstract** (closely tied to the immediate and concrete).

Above and beyond these qualities of oral language, wrote Ong, there is the matter of how the *medium* of oral communication—sound—is different from the visual medium of print communication. That is to say, we experience the world differently through hearing and sight, and this matters for how we think about things in relation to other people. For Ong, sound is a sensory mechanism that brings us closer to things, while sight has a distancing property: “sight isolates, sound incorporates.”

Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer . . . Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core sensation and existence . . . By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. (1982, p. 42)

Ong contended that these qualities of the aural medium of oral communication have profound implications for how people in oral cultures locate

**Activity: Experimenting with Oral Versus Written Argument**  
 Plato's Socrates believed that writing interfered with inquiry, prohibiting dialogue and interfering with critical evaluation of ideas. On the other hand, theorists such as David Olsen and Walter Ong argue that writing frees the memory from mundane tasks and documents extended processes of inquiry, allowing for richer intellectual activity. Working with a partner, test Socrates' claims against Ong's. Choose a controversial issue and have a face-to-face conversation in which you attempt to understand all possible “sides” of the issue. Then spend some time on your own exploring multiple perspectives on the same issue in writing. Afterward, report your experiences to the rest of the class: which mode, oral conversation or written exploration, allowed you to get “deeper” into the issue? What was gained and what lost, in each approach? How did literacy enter into each version?

themselves in the tangle of experience, thought, language, and sociability. People whose communicative medium is sound experience acts of language as whole, organic events—as, in Ong's words, “always momentous in psychic life” so that “the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at the center” (1982, pp. 42–43). With literacy, however, people come to see themselves as situated in time and space, rather than as at the center of all events and meaning. It follows, then, that as literacy spreads throughout populations and becomes more prevalent as a means of human interaction, the very structure of culture and society undergoes big changes—specifically, developing complex administrative systems—so that “civilization” becomes possible (as Billie's transformation in *Born Yesterday* seeks to demonstrate).

This idea of literacy as a history-making civilizing force is central to Jack Goody and Ian Watt's famous “Consequences of Literacy” (1968). For anthropologist Goody and historian Watt, language is the essential feature of humanness; print, the enabler of the highest human achievement, rational thought. In their essay, they make exactly this claim: that print communication, once it reaches a critical mass in a society, brings inevitable changes in terms of social organization. Goody and Watt list the same qualities of writing to argue for its capacity to enable knowledge production as Plato lists as evidence of its ability to undermine it: written language stabilizes ideas into text so that they can be extended in time

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and space. For Goody and Watt, the emergence of literate culture in the classical world made intellectual intercourse rooted in logic and rationality possible on a wider scale, such that more complex social organizations and institutions founded on rationality could now emerge.

Ironically, Goody and Watt believe that the appearance of Plato on the scene marked the beginnings of literate culture. Although historians claim Socrates never wrote anything down, Plato immortalized Socrates by writing him into his dialogues. Rhetoric scholar Jasper Neel (1988) points out that, even as Plato derides writing as immoral, frozen, and too mediated to be ethical, what we know of him is given through writing. Plato's dialogues are, after all, written—written and crafted as *writing*. Each of Plato's dialogues has a claim, a beginning, middle, and end; a distinctive voice and style. What Plato represents, argues Neel, is the voice of an emerging literate culture. What makes the argument for oral discourse and dialectic possible is, paradoxically, writing itself.

## Literacy, Literacies, and Schooling: The Case of the Vai

But not all scholars of literacy buy into the stronger claims of the Great Divide theorists. For many, the idea that literacy arrives on the scene, revolutionizes thought, and advances civilization is not only wrongheaded but downright ethnocentric and elitist. **Once you believe that literacy inevitably makes people and cultures better, then you also believe that non-literacy marks nonliterate as intellectually inferior, less humane, and**



**uncivilized.** Indeed, long before the Great Divide theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, this view pervaded popular thought in 19th-century England and America, where people who couldn't read were often associated with problems of sanitation, immorality, and disease. Chandler lists research and scholarship on literacy that she sees as "correctives" to the generalized views of literacy offered by Great Divide theorists: Ruth Finnegan's *Literacy and Orality*, Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner's *The Psychology of Literacy*, and Harvey Graff's *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, among many others.

Perhaps the most widely cited challenge to Great Divide thinking appears in *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981), in which cognitive psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole contest the idea, based on their research with the Vai people in Liberia, that literacy has generalizable cognitive "consequences." Scribner and Cole weren't entirely convinced that alphabetic literacy *per se* could be held responsible for bringing the revolutionary changes in thought and culture Great Divide scholars had claimed for it. Part of the problem with that work, they pointed out, is that if you're doing historical research, you can't see what goes on inside people's heads to *see* how they're thinking differently. Another difficulty is that **it's difficult to assume that causes and effects of work in a particular time in history operate exactly the same way at other times (so, for example, there's no telling that a nonliterate child in a literate society will need to acquire literacy him- or herself in order to attain ways of thinking [abstraction, etc.] associated with literacy).** Finally, the Great Divide theorists operate at the level of speculation, with no real grounded evidence for their claims. Of the kinds of generalizations about literacy made by such scholars as Ong and Goody and Watt, Scribner and Cole wrote that "these are perfectly satisfactory starting points [emphasis theirs] for a theory of the intellectual consequences of reading and writing but they do not warrant the status of conclusions" (Scribner & Cole, 2001, p. 60).

With the assumptions of Great Divide causes and effects in mind, Scribner and Cole traveled to Africa to study uses of written language among the Liberian Vai. What made the Vai especially interesting to Scribner and Cole as research subjects was the unusual fact that they had reading and writing practices that were *not* learned in school—a situation that meant that the researchers wouldn't be inclined to confuse the

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effects of written-language acquisition with the effects of schooling. Another thing that made the Vai an interesting "test case" to Scribner and Cole was that they practiced three distinct forms of literacy depending on their status and life situations:

- reading and writing in the language Mande using an indigenous Vai syllabary
- Qu'ranic literacy using Arabic script
- Western school literacy in English using the Roman alphabet

Scribner and Cole further noted that these forms of literacy were *not* randomly used or distributed—instead, each form had its own distinct set of uses. Native Vai literacy, for example, is deeply rooted in local cultural history, and is used primarily to preserve traditional social roles and relationships. People pass Vai literacy down through generations and through their own social networks outside of schools or formal education. In contrast, the Vai use Arabic literacy learned in Qu'ranic schools and study groups for religious education, and they learn to read and write Arabic mostly through direct instruction and rote learning: "teachers emphasize recitation; they provide little explanation of the meaning of the texts being read, and the children have virtually no knowledge of the meaning of individual words or phrases" (Scribner & Cole, 1989, p. 69). English literacy, the official government literacy, had a religious impetus as well—that is, it was originally introduced into Vai culture by Christian missionaries—but for present-day Muslim Vai, reading and writing in English has mainly secular uses. Those Vai who acquire English literacy learn it exclusively in Western-style schools, and this literacy is used primarily for business transactions and nonlocal communications.

About a third of the Vai are literate in one of these ways—the Vai syllabary, the Arabic script, or the English alphabet. Some have two literacies; a smaller number have three. Each writing system corresponds to a different language, and the settings in which they are learned and used are very different. Scribner and Cole wondered: since the Vai had three very different kinds of literacies—and the three literacies used different writing systems that corresponded to different languages and were learned and used in different settings—did these have the same demonstrable "effects"?

### Different Literacies, Different Cognitive "Consequences"

You can see how the Vai, with their three distinctly different forms of schooling, languages, and scripts, afforded the ideal context within which Scribner and Cole could put the idea that literacy has predictable cognitive consequences to the test. In their psychological research, they found that indeed they did not: different "literacies" could be related to different habits and capabilities. Qu'ranic literacy, for example—because it relied heavily upon ritual memorization and recitation—could be correlated in some cases to increased ability to do rote memory tasks. When Scribner and Cole looked across "effects of literacy" categories such as "communication skills," "memory," and "language analysis"—all categories named as universally subject to the consequences of literacy by Great Divide theorists—they found very different outcomes depending on the nature of the task and the kind of literacy in question. "The consequences of literacy that we identified," explain Scribner and Cole, "are all highly specific and closely tied to actual practices and scripts" (1981, p. 99). In fact, conclude the researchers, the capacities associated with literacy are more easily tied to forms of schooling—the pedagogies used to teach literacy—than to literacy practices themselves.

In learning about Vai ways of using print, Scribner and Cole concluded that the Great Divide theory in its strongest form was incorrect, or at least too ambitious in its claims. On the idea that literacy inevitably produces more logical or "higher-order" thought, they write,

On no task—logic, abstraction, memory, communication—did we find all non-literates performing at lower levels than all literates. . . . We can and so claim that literacy promotes skills among the Vai, but we cannot and do not claim that literacy is a necessary and sufficient condition for any of the skills we assessed. (Cole & Scribner, 1981, p. 251; emphasis added)

Scribner and Cole argue for a more modest conception of what literacy "does," in keeping with their conclusion that "particular practices promote particular skills." They concluded that it was the process of education—or schooling—rather than literacy in isolation, that fostered new ways of thinking. It was, they concluded, *not* print literacy per se that led to "logical" thought, but rather schooling in the Western tradition that produced this result. Just being able to read and write, in other words,

How do we know how to measure <sup>logic</sup> outside of Western thought? Do we know what to look for?

doesn't equip you for "logic"—instead, learning, "logic" as a schooled practice is what equips you for these ways of making knowledge.

Scribner and Cole's findings led them to insist that an understanding of how literacy is used in particular social situations is essential to an understanding of literacy more generally, and that we should be careful of imagining that literacy operates in widely transformational or revolutionary terms. In other words: literacy might in fact change things, but it doesn't change things for everyone in the same way, and it's not always obvious what these changes are and how they work. As we'll see, the range of cultural variety in uses of literacy make it difficult to predict, with any real accuracy, what the precise social effects of literacy will be in a given situation—and also to make authoritative claims about how literacy changes thinking.

Interestingly enough, claims for the universal effects of reading and writing are best supported by claiming the same "consequences" in very different times and places. Such claims are provocative in thinking about how literacy operates as a technology—and now, in the age of digital communications, they are in wide circulation again (as we'll explore later, in Chapter Five). But where do they leave us in terms of understanding how literacy works in diverse locations and in real time? This is the question we'll take up in Chapter Three.



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