The Social Context of Literacy

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This essay, like most in the genre, has its roots in experiences--past, past continuous, and even future since anticipation works on one's mind. Past are seven years as an English Department Chairman; past and continuing is my work with the English Composition Board at The University of Michigan helping to develop a writing program for undergraduates; and in my future is a chairmanship of a Ph.D. program in English and Education. All of these, lumped together with reading that a sabbatical has allowed me to do, have provoked me to think about the topics addressed in these pages: how literacy functions (and does not function) in our society; how society influences what we do as learners and teachers of literacy.

It is important to discuss the social context of literacy for several reasons, some of them perfectly obvious. It is obvious, for example, that teaching--any teaching--takes place only in some one or another social context: We teach something to somebody some place at some particular time in some particular society. What we do is influenced not only by the what, but also by the where, when, and to whom. It is also obvious, when we think about it, that the teaching of literacy is especially sensitive to the pressures of social context. Language in all of its uses is an intimate part of human experience: Language is expressive of identity and personality, but it is also socially binding and expressive of collective values. Written language is peculiarly public, more so than speech, and as a consequence its forms are carefully scrutinized; reading and writing are highly valued activities and society monitors their acquisition--as we know from myriad articles in the public media about Johnnies and Janes who can't read or write. We teachers of literacy meet students in a charged atmosphere. We need to be sensitive to the prevailing currents, if for no other purpose than to avoid electrocution.

A compelling reason for talking about the social context for literacy is that our profession has usually avoided the subject in spite of its importance, leaving it to sociologists, sociolinguists, and social historians. Let me cite just one example, borrowed from an essay by Frank D'Angelo (forthcoming). Richard Ohmann, when he was Editor of College English, requested manuscripts for a special issue on the publicly proclaimed literacy crisis. This was his challenge to his colleagues:

> Is there a decline in literacy? in writing ability?
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> If so, what are its causes? To what extent is it accountable to changes in schooling? To changes in American society? What can--or should--college English teachers be doing about it? Are there college programs that successfully make up deficits in verbal skills? Is "bonehead English" an idea whose time has come again? Do competency requirements for graduation help? Should this be a problem of the English department, or the whole college or university? Can we distinguish between the traditional basics--spelling, usage, etc.--and some others that have more to do with intellectual competence? Can English teachers usefully shape the national concern with verbal competence, rather than simply respond to needs expressed by pundits, legislators, regents, and businessmen?
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> If, on the other hand, there has been no significant decline in read-

> ing or writing ability among college students, what explains the outcry? What can English teachers do to correct public misconceptions? Is our responsibility confined to the classroom, or does it include social and political action? (Ohmann, 1976, p. 819).

Ohmann asked us to look at the social dimensions of the literacy crisis and at the social meaning of the public's concern; to decide whether or not a crisis existed and to discover its causes; and only then to reach decisions about how to deal with it. But when the special issue of College English appeared, Ohmann published his disappointment with the contributions:

> A large proportion merely reiterated the public concerns and in terms very similar to those employed by the media. Others devoted most of their energy to suggesting better ways to teach writing. We might infer from these facts that the profession accepts not only the public assessment of the literacy "crisis" but also the blame for it. Our original call queries whether in fact there has been a significant decline in reading and writing ability among students. Yet not one contribution reviewed and analyzed in any detail the assumptions, methods, and statistics of the testing on which so much of the public outcry seems to be based. Are these assumptions, methods, and statistics as invulnerable to criticism as our professional silence suggests? (Ohmann, 1977, p. 44).

Nastier questions than Ohmann's last can be put: Does our profession's silence on such topics suggest that we are willing to let others tell us what to do and then develop methods for getting it done better or more efficiently? Does our silence imply contentment with the status quo? The world may well need a better rat trap, but does it really need a better sentence combiner?

A fact of life in our world is that the possession of literacy correlates almost perfectly with the possession of power and wealth. And in general, the more literacy one has or can control, the more power one can exercise--real power, not something metaphorical like the power of self-expression. Now I intend no causative implication in the statement; to achieve literacy does not necessarily earn one power, as we well know. But the powerful are usually themselves literate, or if not, they can purchase the services of those who are.

Another fact of life in our world is that the profession of literacy, as contrasted with its possession, correlates not with power and wealth but with relative powerlessness and relative poverty. English teachers do not exert much influence in the world of raw power, even though they live and work in it. The humanities, when compared with the sciences, the social sciences, or professional schools, are under-funded both within their own institutions and nationally, and humanists are under-represented both in academic governance and in government.

These facts of our own social existence are more than unpleasant, they are dangerous. The danger is not to our persons, yours and mine, nor even to our sense of personal worth. I for one get all kinds of mileage from claiming moral superiority over my greedy medical school colleagues--smooth driving mileage because I get paid a salary that keeps me quite comfortable. The danger is rather to our profession--to our collective sense of endeavor and to the ethics we apply in the teaching of literacy. We have or can claim to have two things useful to those who possess power--namely, the ability to make students literate and squatting rights in classrooms where literacy is assumed to be taught. But as poor cousins, we are particularly vulnerable both to the temptations of utility (we call it service), and to the temptations of the money that pays for our services. Methods can be endlessly adjusted to ends and aims, to the ends and aims of others as easily as to our own. And what if our academic discipline does not enjoy intellectual prestige? We can always try

to achieve status by borrowing prestigious theory and adapting it to the demand for new methods. But when we do, does the right brain always know what the left brain is doing?

I am oversimplifying and being facetious, and with issues that are neither simple nor funny. We do have a responsibility to the society that sustains us, and at least equal responsibility to students whose pragmatic needs must be met. But we can meet these responsibilities only if we understand at least something of the social context in which literacy presently functions.

What kinds of things constitute the social context of literacy in our time? More than I can mention, of course, but I will touch on these four: First, on inherited conceptions of literacy and the values we attach to them; second, on real and socially perceived needs for literacy; third, on ideal and ethnically conceived needs for literacy; and fourth, on some few of our institutions for the fostering of literacy.

(1) Inherited Concepts and Values

Practice is always rooted in concepts even when the concepts are unstated or even unstatable; and what we practice most energetically is that which we value most highly. The concept of literacy is highly valued in our own as in other western and westernized industrial societies. Historians, recognizing this special phenomenon, are now writing about "a literacy myth"--a configuration of generally held and privileged notions about literacy and about its functions in modern society. Harvey J. Graff, for example:

> The rise of literacy and its dissemination to the popular classes is associated with the triumph of light over darkness, of liberalism, democracy, and of universal unbridled progress. In social thought, therefore, these elements relate to ideas of linear evolution and progression; literacy here takes its place among the other successes of modernity and rationality. In theory and in empirical investigation, literacy is conceptualized—often in stark and simple fashion—as an important part of the larger parcel of factors that account for the evolution of modern societies and states (Graff, p. xv).

With its wide acceptance, the literacy myth benefits us poor cousins, of course. Foundations fund our programs, deans find money for English departments, enlightened school boards reduce loads for writing teachers (though rarely), and in general our public and professional stock rises. In the short run, we prosper; but we might be better off in the longer run if we try to find out how much truth the myth contains and then act on that. What we inherit is not always to our good.

Robert Disch, in his introduction to The Future of Literacy writes that:

> The twentieth century inherited a mystique of literacy born out of...two tendencies. One, essentially utilitarian, was committed to the functional uses of literacy as a medium for the spread of practical information that could lead to individual and social progress; the other, essentially aesthetic and spiritual, was committed to the uses of literacy for salvaging the drooping spirit of Western man from the death of religion and the ravages of progress (Disch, p. 3).

The utilitarian benefits of literacy, so goes the myth, are economic, social, and intellectual. Economic benefits include enhanced access to employment and to information leading to a better life (for example, information about birth control or about sanitation). Social benefits include a broadening of personal perspective beyond the tribal or local; acquisition of societal norms and values leading to public spiritedness; participation in democratic means of governance. Claims for the intellectual benefits of literacy have gone beyond the obvious ones of access to stored knowledge to stronger ones

asserting a causal relation between literacy and general learning as well as between literacy and full cognitive development.[1] How many of these claims correspond to established fact?

In fact, we do not know, but in some few cases we are beginning to find out. And what we are discovering, when the myth is tested, is that it proves to be mythical. For only one example, consider the following results of historical research into the correlations of literacy with liberalized social attitudes and with expanded economic opportunity. In a study of literacy in Colonial New England, Kenneth A. Lockridge (1974) found that Protestantism was a stronger impetus to literacy than secular school laws; that schools were dominated by conservative, not progressive, educational impulses; and that when literacy became nearly universal in New England near the end of the 18th century, attitudes toward society and the larger world were not discernibly modified. In another study, treating some 19th century Canadian cities, Harvey Graff found that:

> ...literacy—a phenomenon suggestive of equality—contributed regularly as an element of the structure of inequality, reinforcing the steep ridges of stratification, and also as a force for order and integration. It also served as a symbolic focus of other forces of inequality: ethnicity, class, sex, and age. Literacy, then, did not universally serve to benefit all who had attained it, but neither did it disadvantage all those who had not (Graff, p. 19).

Graff does not claim that literacy holds no potential for liberalization; rather he demonstrates that powerful, deeply embedded social forces can override its potential. Literacy can be an effective means of social control, when educational institutions use it for this purpose; or it can be a means of social liberation, when individuals are encouraged to think, read and write for themselves. Ohmann presses the pertinent question: Where do we stand as teachers when we emphasize means over ends or methods over purposes? In answering the question, we do well to be mindful that ours is a society that has sanctioned a back-to-basics movement, that is enamoured with competency testing, and that presently values vocational over liberal education. Few vocations in our society encourage an exercise of literacy that is liberalizing and liberating.

Even if all of our students were to achieve literacy, not all would benefit unless allowed and encouraged by society to put their competencies to use. Our aims and especially our methods have to accomodate to this brute fact of social reality. We need to know much more than we now do about the forces and institutions in our society that constrain literacy: Both those that inhibit its exercise and those that make it serve as an instrument of unconscious socialization to mores and values we would not endorse. Without such knowledge, we could well help create a reality more malignant than that figured in the literacy myth.

(2) Real and Socially Perceived Needs for Literacy

So far I have been talking about literacy as a "buzz word"--as a concept or a symbol incorporating notions of aspiration and value. Now I want to define the term, or at least to limit its reference. Let literacy mean functional literacy; and let functional literacy, for the moment, mean only this: the ability to read and write well enough to compete for economic sufficiency. Such literacy is essential for all students and for all citizens, and in so far as we are able and in so far as social circumstances will allow, we must help provide it. I quote some experts on the demographics of literacy:

> Ralph W. Tyler: In 1800, the unskilled in all categories [of employment] comprised more than 80 percent of the labor force; in 1900 they made up 60 percent and in 1980, about 6 percent. The rapid development of employment in the various services...has largely taken place since 1948. Now, jobs requiring no school-

ing are few in number while tasks requiring at least a high school education make up nearly two thirds of employment opportunities (Tyler, forthcoming).

Paul A. Strassmann: Since the 1950's our country has become predominantly occupied with the creation, distribution, and administration of information. By 1990 about fifty percent of the workforce will not be producing food or manufacturing objects; instead the workforce will occupy most of its time just communicating (Strassmann, forthcoming).

Arthur M. Cohen and **Florence B. Brawer:** Literacy is certainly related to success in nearly all community college programs: transfer courses demand proficiency in reading, writing and/or mathematics, and licensure examinations admitting students to practice after completing a technological progam typically demand the same. Many community college programs are closed to students who cannot pass an entrance examination that is based on literacy (Cohen and Brawer, forthcoming).

Robben W. Fleming: Meanwhile, it is estimated that there may be as many as 57 million adult illiterates in the United States (Fleming, forthcoming).

John Oxenham: In 1971, some 780 million people over the age of fifteen all over the world were classed as illiterate...by 1980 they will total perhaps 820 million (Oxenham, p. 2).

Functional illiteracy does correlate with poverty and powerlessness; the problem of illiteracy is as urgent as any in our society.

But ironically, the needs of the poor could well be forgotten because recently we have discovered other needs among the better off and the more influential. We have discovered that middle-class students don't write very well, not even those who enroll in prestigious schools; that businessmen don't write very well, or at least don't think that they do; that bureaucrats and lawyers write even worse; that the new information society requires a new kind of literacy--in software, rather than in ordinary printed language. The influential public is now more often asking "Why can't Johnny write?" than it is "Why can't Johnny read?" Yet as Edward Corbett so accurately points out, reading is far more important for economic sufficiency (even for survival) than is writing:

> ...writing will never be as crucial a skill for surviving or thriving in our society as reading is. Functional illiterates who cannot even write their names may suffer embarrassment because of their deficiency but they somehow manage to subsist in our technological society. But those functional illiterates who cannot even read street signs and simple directions are so severely handicapped that it is questionable whether they can survive, much less thrive, in our society. Thirdly, only a minuscule portion of the total population will regularly have to compose important, influential documents. The majority of literate people have to do some writing occasionally—letters, notes, fill-in-the blanks forms—but only a minority have to write regularly and seriously in connection with their jobs (Corbett, p. 47).

The present emphasis upon writing over reading doubtless reflects a bias in favor of the upper of our social classes, where needs take precedence. Such an emphasis, if not restrained or balanced against the need for reading, could well contribute to a widening of the gulf between rich and poor that now seems so permanent a feature of our national topography. As Richard Hendrix writes:

> The emphasis on writing clarifies the gap between a commitment in principle to universal opportunity and the fact of unequal opportunity. Writing ability is unevenly distributed in

> our society along class lines. Indeed, writing and access to writing improvement is as good an indicator of the difference between, say, white collar and blue collar career tracks as we are likely to find (Hendrix, p. 53).

Our problems are made more difficult to solve because just when we begin to recognize the number and complexity of them, the public develops an aversion to taxation and politicians a preference for bombs over books. How, then, are we to react to the perfectly legitimate demands placed upon us in our social role as teachers of literacy when we know that resources will be limited--perhaps severly.

We could, of course, take battlefield medicine as our model and practice triage on some principle of social utility, fitting our teaching to present social realities and comforting ourselves with some resigned but basically optimistic notion of social inevitability. Maybe only a minority do need to learn to write; maybe the masses need only to learn to read, and then only marginally; and maybe, because of technology, the masses don't even need to read. And maybe the socially disintegrating effects of such specialization could be avoided if some such vision of social interdependence as John Oxenham's is an accurate one:

> [F]or the masses to enjoy literature without literacy, a minority would need to be highly literate. The paradox evokes two reflections on technological change. One is that, as science and technology introduce new changes in production and services, a growing majority with decreasing skills seems to become increasingly dependent on a highly skilled but shrinking minority. The trend appears to lead to a dictatorship of technocrats. On the other hand, while a necessary consequence of the extension of specialisation may well be the dependence of majorities upon minorities, oppresive technology is not the necessary end. The reason is simply that the proliferation of specializations generates a net of interdependence and a homeostatic distribution of power (Oxenham, p. 131).

Perhaps a stable and healthy interdependence can result from a planned distribution of the assets of literacy. Perhaps we can focus our attention and concentrate our resources upon training a fully literate elite without oppressing the masses. Perhaps that is what we are doing anyway, without much thought for the masses.

There is nothing of the conditional in these two assertions: Resources will be limited as we seek to meet needs for literacy; priorities will be set--either by us or by others, either by intention or through thoughtless inertia. Policy should be at least as well-planned as good writing. Right now we need good policy more than we need better lesson plans.

(3) Ideals and Ethics

In June, 1980, the English Composition Board of The University of Michigan sponsored a conference on **Literacy in the 1980's.** A variety of experts from various occupations and professions were invited to the conference and asked to respond to this question: "What will be the needs for literacy in your field as we look from now toward the end of the century?" As I review the conference, two presentations stand out: one by a lawyer and professor of law; another by a scientist who is also Manager of the Central Research Division of the Mobil Research and Development Corporation. These two impressed me because they called not for more emphasis upon utilitarian writing (and reading), but for a more expansive and humane literacy.

James White, Professor of Law at The University of Chicago and the author of a distinguished book on lawyers' use of language, described what he calls "the invisible discourse of the law":

> unstated conventions by which the language [of law] operates;...expec-

> tations that do not find explicit expression anywhere but are part of the legal culture that the surface language simply assumes (White, forthcoming).

But White did more than describe. First, he enriched existing definitions of (functional) literacy:

> I start with the idea that literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances, but the ability to participate fully in a set of social and intellectual practices. It is not passive but active; not imitative but creative, for participation in the speaking and writing of language includes participation in the activities it makes possible (White, forthcoming).

Then he described a course in writing and reading that he teaches in The University of Chicago, which invites such participation. White helps his students to perceive how rule and procedure constitute social organization and govern social cooperation; how language is the means of such constitution; and how law is related to everyday social behavior. In so doing he demystifies the law, making it more subject both to lay understanding and to personal control. According to White:

> All this [can] be done with materials from the students' own life, without the use of legal terms or technicalities. It need not even be done in Standard English: the students' writing...should indeed reflect the way people actually speak in their own world. And one important lesson for us all might be the discovery that it is not only in the law, or only in the language of the white middle class, that community is constituted or that argument about justice proceeds (White, forthcoming).

Paul Weisz, a scientist and a businessman, called for clarity and broad comprehensibility in scientific language: for the development and use in science of a common language enabling more citizens "to benefit from the knowledge which abounds around us"; a language that will also serve to combat the socially and intellectually fragmenting effects of specialization. He sees the need as essential:

> The relationship between division of knowledge in our society and presence of social tension is clear. As knowledge and activity become more sophisticated, the bridges of understanding and interaction grow weaker and weaker. Now, more than ever before, such bridges are needed for both social and psychological survival (Weisz, forthcoming).

Weisz's concern echoes that expressed in the recent report of the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities:

> Our citizens need to become literate in a multiple sense. We all need to understand the characteristics of scientific inquiry and the repercussions of scientific research. We must all learn something about the use of the media and of new technologies for storing, transmitting, and expanding knowledge. Without this sort of literacy, our society as a whole will be less able to apply science and technology to humanistic needs, less able to measure the human effects of scientific achievements, less able to judge the information we produce and receive (The Humanities, pp. 18-19).

Our profession has begun to recognize that its own notions about needs for literacy do not always match day-to-day needs outside the classroom. But most who have argued for adjustment to the real world have addressed only economic needs. White and Weisz, both practitioners in the world of work, suggest other ways: White by linking language use with social behavior and to intellectual activity rooted in social practices; Weisz by linking the aims of writing to a democracy's needs for information and knowledge essential for the solution of human problems. Both programs are ethical in conception.

Caesar exacts his due, but we need not pay the tax-master so unthinkingly as to leave in his control all decisions about what social reality ought to be. Societies exist in the mind as well as in fact, in ethical standards for behavior as well as in behavior patterns. It is our particular obligation as teachers of literacy to recognize this, and with our students' help to frame ideals constructive of a world we would willingly inhabit. Ideals and ethics find their most permanent expression in public language.

(4) Institutions: Who teaches the what to whom?

Existing institutions, like inherited concepts and values, are part of the social context for literacy. As things are now established we English teachers are the ones customarily assumed to be responsible for teaching literacy (along with elementary school teachers, who can do anything). But given existing and shifting needs for literacy, it is not at all clear that we will continue to be held responsible or considered responsible enough to be so held.

In an article in a volume containing the proceedings of a conference sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Richard Hendrix--who, we should note, is associated with the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education--asks this question: "Who is responsible for improving writing?" He says this about English departments:

> Writing instruction was for years a stepchild of English departments, who have always dominated it. As recently as fifteen years ago many colleges dropped composition altogether--partly on the basis that the high schools were handling the job, and mainly to give still greater emphasis to literary study. That development should make us hesitate about trusting that English departments, as they are presently constituted, will solve the problem.
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> Now there has been a resurgence of active involvement by English faculty along with others. Writing instruction could be a boon for underemployed humanists, a large and influential group. But teachers trained in literature may not necessarily be well situated to work with beginning students, nor to prepare students for the kinds of writing tasks they will likely face after school. English professors are not even necessarily good writers themselves, and their commitment to specialization has been at least as strong as any other discipline's (Hendrix, p. 56).

There are grounds for Hendrix's suspicion. They exist in the prevailing attitudes of most college and many high school English teachers toward the teaching of writing; in the way composition teachers are treated in their own departments; and in the way composition programs are funded, staffed, and managed. And in the meantime societal needs are not being met, neither by instructional programs that address vocational needs nor by research programs that address the need for better understanding of the relations of literacy to society, to learning, and to the determination of value. Can and will English departments change enough to meet such needs? My own experiences as a teacher of writing, as a program planner, and as an English department chairman, give me grounds for doubt at least as strong as that expressed by Hendrix.

The trouble with literacy is that it enters all aspects of human life in literate societies. The trouble with questions about literacy is that the important ones are general in their application to human discourse and its functions. The trouble with our answers, when we are English teachers, is that we are all specialists. And it is possible--at the least arguable--that a specialization in literature is less adaptable than many to a broad understanding of literacy.

Raymond Williams, in a challenging critique of dominant trends in literary study, reminds us that the term litera-

ture once applied more broadly than to imaginative works of a certain kind and quality. In one of its earlier usages, "it was often close to the sense of modern literacy"; its reference was to "a condition of reading: of being able to read and of having read" (Williams, pp. 45-54). Histories, biographies, works of philosophy, political and scientific treatises were once all works of literature. In his argument, Williams traces the specialization of the term to the domain of "creative" or "imaginative" works, and the development of literature departments in academies as units concerned exclusively with this narrowed domain and with the practice of criticism.

The problem arising from this development is that it invites us, as inheritors of the tradition, to equate "literacy" with knowledge of a special kind of literature, without recognizing that such an equation is a socially privileged and economically self-serving one: more a matter of status and value than of fact. The study of imaginative literature may well contribute to the complex of abilities, capacities, and attitudes that function in good reading and good writing; but to claim that it necessarily and sufficiently does is patently absurd.

If departments of English continue to define themselves as departments of literature and mean by that term imaginative works only; if English teachers restrict themselves to reading only such works and commentaries on them, then there is need for new kinds of departments just as there is for differently prepared teachers. Harvey Graff gets to the heart of the problem:

> Discussions of literacy are confused and ambiguous—an ironic, and even startling, phenomenon, which contrasts sharply with the high value we assign to the skills of reading and writing. Vagueness pervades virtually all efforts to discern the meaning of literacy; moreover, there is surprisingly little agreement on or special evidence for the benefits of literacy, whether socially or individually, economically or culturally. Rather, assumptions preempt criticism and investigation, and agencies and specialists whose business it is to promote literacy shrink from asking fundamental questions in their campaigns to disseminate skills (Graff, 1979, p. 3).

Certain questions cannot be avoided any longer. Serious research is needed into literacy and its place in our present social context; such research should take precedence over concern with method. There is little profit in trying to do better what cannot or should not be done.

NOTES

[1]These last claims are now much in the literature, especially the literature justifying writing programs. Before believing them completely, teachers and administrators should read the very important book by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, The Psychology of Literacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).