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The Literacy Myth

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Introduction

The Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility (Graff, 1979, 1987). Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it (Inkeles & Smith, 1974), literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring upon practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace” (Scribner, 1984). Such presumptions have a venerable historical lineage and have been expressed, in different forms, from antiquity through the Renaissance and Reformation, and again throughout the era of the Enlightenment, during which literacy was linked to progress, order, transformation, and control. Associated with these beliefs is the conviction that the benefits ascribed to literacy cannot be attained in other ways, nor can they be attributed to other factors, whether economic, political, cultural, or individual. Rather, literacy stands alone as the independent and critical variable. Taken together, these attitudes constitute what Graff (1979, 1987) has called “the Literacy Myth.” Many researchers and commentators have adopted this usage.

Contemporary expressions of the Literacy Myth are evident in cities’ sponsorship of book reading, celebrity appeals on behalf of reading cam-

paigns, and promotions by various organizations linking the acquisition of literacy to self-esteem, parenting skills, and social mobility, among others. Individuals are seen to be “at risk,” if they fail to master literacy skills presumed to be necessary, although functions and levels of requisite skills continue to shift (Resnick & Resnick, 1977; Brandt, 2001). In stark, indicting versions of the myth, failures to learn to read and write are individual failures. Those who learn to read and write well are considered successful, while those who do not develop these skills are seen as less intelligent, lazy, or in some other way deficient (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). These and other versions of the Literacy Myth shape public and expert opinions, including policy makers in elementary and adult education, and those working in development work internationally.

Such attitudes about literacy represent a “myth” because they exist apart from and beyond empirical evidence that might clarify the actual functions, meanings, and effects of reading and writing. Like all myths, the Literacy Myth is not so much a falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes (see, for example, Goody, 1968, 1986, 1987; Goody & Watt 1968; Olson, 1977, 1994; Havelock 1963, 1976, 1986); for contrasting perspectives, see Akinasso, 1981; Graff, 1995a; Collins & Blot, 1995; Graff & Street, 1997). For this reason, the Literacy Myth is powerful and resistant to revision. This article examines the scope of the Literacy Myth, considering its varieties, its meanings, and its implications for policymakers in education and other fields who would use literacy in the service of large-scale social and economic transformations.

Definition and Measurement Issues

Problems inherent in the “literacy myth” begin with confusions over the meanings of the word “literacy” and efforts to measure it. Literacy has been defined in various ways, many offering imprecise and yet nonetheless progressively grander conceptions and expectations of what it means to read and write, and what might follow from that practice. For example, literacy has been defined as in terms of standardized test scores such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the Armed Forces Qualifying tests; the completion of specified grade-levels in school; and a generalized form of knowledge (Pattison, 1982) such as “computer literacy,” “financial literacy,” “civic literacy,” neologisms as facile as they are inexact. In other contexts, literacy may be conflated with its desired ends, as when it is represented as “an agent of change,” a formulation that confuses relationships of cause and effect.

The vagueness of such definitions allows for conceptions of literacy that go beyond what has been examined empirically, thus investing literacy with the status of myth. Since mythos is grounded in narrative, and since narratives are fundamentally expressions of values, literacy has been contrasted in its mythic form with a series of opposing values that have resulted in reductive dichotomies such as “oral-literate,” “literate-pre-literate,” “literate-illiterate,” and other binaries that caricature major social changes. In such hierarchical structures, the “oral,” “preliterate,” and “illiterate” serve as the marked and subordinate terms, while “literate” and “literacy” assume the status of superior terms (Duffy, 2000). Such hierarchies reinforce the presumed benefits of literacy and so contribute to the power of the myth (for detailed examples, see Finnegan 1973; 1988; Ong 1967; 1977; 1982; Goody, 1986; 1987; Havelock, 1963, 1976, 1986).

We define literacy here not in terms of values, mentalities, generalized knowledge, or decontextualized quantitative measures. Rather, literacy is defined as basic or primary levels of reading and writing and their analogs across different media, activities made possible by a technology or set of techniques for decoding and reproducing printed materials, such as alphabets, syllabaries, pictographs, and other systems, which themselves are created and used in specific historical and material contexts (see Graff, 1987, 3-4). Only by grounding definitions of literacy in specific, qualified, and historical particulars can we avoid conferring upon it the status of myth.

Historical Perspectives

In contrast with its presumed transformative “consequences,” literacy historically has been characterized by tensions, continuities, and contradictions. In classical Greece, where the addition of characters representing vowel sounds to Semitic syllabaries is seen by some as the origin of the first modern alphabet (Gelb, 1963), literacy contributed to the Greek development of philosophy, history, and democracy (Havelock, 1963, 1986; Harris, 1989). Yet literacy in classical Athens was a conservative technology, used to record the cultural memories of an oral civilization in a society based on slavery. Though achievements in the development of popular literacy in fifth-century Rome were substantial, they resulted neither in democratization nor the development of a popular intellectual tradition (Graff, 1987). Neither did the invention of the printing press in fifteenth century Europe lead to swift or universal changes in prevailing social, political, and economic relationships. These came more slowly.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and North America, literacy was seen as a potentially destabilizing force, threatening the established social order. Conservative elites feared that the widespread acquisition of reading and writing skills by the masses—workers, servants, and slaves—would make them unfit for manual labor and unwilling to accept their subordinate status. Education for the popular classes was often discouraged, in fear it might lead to discontent, strife, and rebellion. In some settings, reading and writing instruction was legally withheld, as was the case with slaves in the United States south. Implicit in these views was the suspicion that literacy was a precondition of intellectual, cultural, and social transformation, by which individuals might redefine themselves and challenge existing social conditions.

The reactionary view of literacy was largely trumped in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century by reformers. These reformers grasped the potential of schooling and literacy as means for maintaining social control. In their view, education—whether in public or private institutions—was a means through which to instill discipline and prepare the working class for their places in an increasingly urban, industrial society. This meant that literacy lessons in the schools were offered not for their own sake, as a means for promoting intellectual and personal growth, but were instead taught as part of a larger project of instilling generally secular moral values and faith in commercial and industrial capitalism. The destabilizing potential of literacy remained, but it was moderated by education that emphasized discipline, good conduct, and deference to authority. In this way reformers seized upon literacy as a central strategy for maintaining social control.

The roots of this perspective are found in religious groups and secular reformers who competed to uplift and save the souls of the poor, and who also competed to influence expanding school systems. Religion, especially but not only Protestantism after the Reformation, was the impetus for learning to read. The bible served as both the repository of spiritual salvation and an important primer for new readers.

Building on the foundation of the Enlightenment, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a synthesis of major influences on social thought—idealism, scientism, evolutionism, positivism, materialism, and progressivism—that encouraged belief in the eventual if not inevitable improvement of human beings and society.

Literacy was seen to be intrinsic to these advances, a technology through which faith in the progress of civilization and human improvement might be validated. The preferred venue for managing literacy was mass popular education.

This association of literacy with ideology, values, and a stable social order provides a historical basis of the literacy myth.

Major Elements of the Literacy Myth

The Myth of Decline

In contemporary popular discourse, literacy is represented as an unqualified good, a marker of progress, and a metaphorical light making clear the pathway to progress and happiness. The opposing value of “illiteracy,” in contrast, is associated with ignorance, incompetence, and darkness. Advertisements run by the National Center for Family Literacy in the United States, for example, show an adult and a smiling child accompanied by text that reads in part: “Because I can read ... I can understand ... live my life without fear, without shame.” Given such sentiments, it is hardly surprising that discussions of literacy would be characterized by persistent fears of its decline. Indeed, much of the contemporary discourse on literacy evokes what John Nerone (1988, Introduction, *Communication* 11, 1 qtd. in Graff, 1995a, xvii), has called “a sense of the apocalypse.” In this discourse, the decline of literacy is taken as an omnipresent given and signifies generally the end of individual advancement, social progress, and the health of the democracy. Such associations represent a powerful variant of the Literacy Myth.

The narrative of decline extends beyond literacy to encompass the state of education generally, both higher and lower, as well as the state of society, morality, and economic productivity. In the United States, the decline of test scores in reading assessments is said to represent one “crisis”; the rise in reading “disabilities” another; the movement away from sound reading and writing pedagogy yet another (McQuillan, 1998; see also Graff, 1995a). Where the evidence does not support a decline in literacy rates among the general population, there is a perceived crisis over the kinds of literacy that are or are not practiced—for example, the crisis of declining numbers of people reading “good” literature, said to represent a threat to the ideals of participatory democracy (see, for example, NEA 2004).

That the myth of decline is largely unsupported by empirical evidence has done little to reduce its potency in contemporary discourse. Rather, the myth is argued by anecdote, often rooted in nostalgia for the past. Moreover, protestations over the decline of literacy are often a prologue for a more sustained argument for a “back to basics” movement in schools. If literacy has declined, it is because schools have strayed from teaching the fundamentals of reading, arithmetic, and other subjects defined, indistinctly, as “the basics.” However, as Resnick & Resnick (1977) illustrate, expectations concerning literacy have changed sharply over time, as standards have been applied to large populations that were once applied only to a limited few. It may prove difficult to go back to basics, Resnick & Resnick have written, if “there is no simple path to which we can return” (385).

The myth of decline also neglects the changing modes of communication, and in particular the increasing importance of media that are not wholly reliant upon print. Developments in computer technology and the Internet have combined to change the experience of what it means to read, with print becoming but one element in a complex interplay of text, images, graphics, sound, and hyperlinks. The bias toward what Marcia Farr (1993) called “essayist literacy,” or formal discursive writing characterized by strict conventions of form, style, and tone, both resists and fails to comprehend such changes. Such resistance and failures also have historical antecedents; changes in the technologies of communication have always been accompanied by apprehensions of loss. Plato’s notorious distrust of writing was itself a rejection of a technology that threatened the primacy of dialectic in favor of a graphical mode of communication (see, for example, Havelock, 1963).

The myth of decline, then, is an expression of an ideology in which a particular form of literacy is seen to represent a world that is at once stable, ordered, and free of dramatic social change. More than nostalgia for a non-existent past, the myth of decline articulates a conception of the present and the future, one in which specific forms of literacy practice exemplify an ideological commitment to a status quo that may have already past.

The Myth of the Alphabet

Perhaps the strongest claims concerning literacy have been those attributed to the alphabet, whose invention in classical Greece was said to herald a great leap forward in the progress of human evolution. The “alphabetized word” was said to release human beings from the trance

of tribalism and bring about the development of logic, philosophy, history, and democracy. To its proponents, the development of alphabetic literacy brought about profound changes in the very structure of human cognition, as the written word, liberated by its material nature from the “tyranny of the present” (Goody & Watt, 1968), could be objectified, manipulated, preserved, and transmitted across time and distances, leading to the development of abstract thought. Pictographs, hieroglyphs and other forms of representing speech were seen as prior and inferior to alphabetic literacy, which could more easily represent concepts—justice, law, individualism—and thus engendered the beginnings of philosophical thought.

The bias toward the alphabet resulted in what its proponents called a “great divide” (Goody & Watt, 1968; see also Havelock, 1963, 1976, 1986 and Olson, 1994, 1977), with rational, historical, individualistic literate peoples on one side, and “non-logical,” mythical, communal oral peoples on the other. Among other things, such conceptions led to serious misunderstandings of non-Western writing systems, such as those of the Chinese and Japanese, which were erroneously thought to be inferior to the Western alphabet (Finnegan 1973, 1988; Street, 1984, 1995; Gough, 1968). In the most extreme versions of the myth, the alphabet was seen to represent the beginnings of civilized society.

In the nineteenth century, the myth of the alphabet was an element of the broader narrative of Western history and worked to ratify the educational, moral, and political experiences of colonial Western powers with the cultures of the colonized, especially those that did not practice literacy. To the extent that the alphabet was identified with civilization, its dissemination to non-literate, non-industrial, supposedly “primitive” cultures was intrinsic to the larger project and rhetoric of colonial expansion. These attitudes were not confined to colonial contexts but applied, as well, to minority populations in schools, workplaces, and communities, all of which might be “improved” by learning the literacy practices of the dominant group. In this way literacy, and alphabetic literacy in particular, has served as what Finnegan (1994) called the “mythical charter” of the dominant social and political order. The great debates of the past two centuries over reading pedagogy and instructional methods—for example, phonics, phonetics, “look-see” methods, and others—continue to reflect questions about the uses and powers of alphabets. In contemporary debates, they reflected divisions over order and morality as well as pedagogy (Graff, 1979).

Recent Work

Literacy and Economic Development

The assumed link between literacy and economic success is one of the cornerstones of Western modernization theories. Literacy or at least a minimal amount of education is presumed to be necessary and sufficient for overcoming poverty and surmounting limitations rooted in racial, ethnic, gender, and religious differences. Implicit in this formulation is the belief that individual achievement may reduce the effects of social and structural inequalities, and that economic success or failure corresponds at least in part to the quality of personal effort.

On a collective scale, literacy is thought to be a necessary precondition of modernization, a cause and correlate of economic growth, productivity, industrialization, per capita wealth, gross national product, and technological advances, among other advances (Graff, 1979, 1987; Levine, 1986). Literacy in this view becomes a commodity to be exported by the developed areas to so-called “developing nations,” enabling individuals and nations to participate in the ongoing processes of globalization and partake of their presumed rewards.

Despite such expectations, there is little evidence that increasing or high levels of literacy result directly in major economic advances. Indeed, historical scholarship suggests that in the short run, at least, industrialization may be incidental to literacy development or vice versa, or even work to the detriment of opportunities for schooling. Literacy among the workforce was not a precondition to early industrialization in England and North America, for example. Schofield (1973) found that the literacy rates of textile, metal, and transport workers declined in the late eighteenth century, as these occupations did not require advanced reading and writing skills. Additionally, the demand for child labor disrupted education, as children in the factories had fewer opportunities to attend school. Industrial development may have depended on the inventiveness or innovativeness of a relative few, and thus stimulated their literacy development. It may equally have been disruptive to the lives of many other individuals, their families, their customary work and relationships, and their environments including arrangements for schooling (Furet & Ozouf, 1983; Graff, 1979; Levine, 1980).

It is possible that in nineteenth-century England and elsewhere to a significant extent, training in literacy was not so much for the purpose of developing skills to promote social, cultural, or economic advancement

as it was “training in being trained” (Graff, 1979, 230, paraphrasing R. Dore, 1967, 292). Schooling and literacy education were the first steps in re-ordering the values and customs of rural populations entering the Industrial Age, instilling in them the industry, thrift, order, and punctuality required for the successful operation of the factory and a new social order beyond it. Literacy was not primarily or by itself a vehicle for economic advancement, but rather a means of inculcating values and behaviors in the general population that made large-scale economic development possible.

Recent scholarship does not support the assumption that literacy leads directly to economic advancement. Brandt (2001), for example, found that the value of literacy to individuals in the twentieth-century United States was influenced by more general social, political, and technological transformations that sometimes elevated the importance of literacy skills but at times undercut or undervalued them. Farmers, teachers, and others in Brandt’s study, for example, found that literacy skills learned in the early part of the century were made less valuable or even obsolete by technological, institutional, and economic transformations of the latter part of the century. New forms of literacy training, specific to the needs to changing workplaces and communities, were required to advance or simply maintain one’s former status. Literacy, in sum, did not change society. Rather, literacy itself was changed—its forms, uses, and meanings—in response to its environment. Such observations make clear that literacy’s and schooling’s contribution to economic development merit further detailed study, and that the presumptions of the Literacy Myth demand ever more careful qualification.

Problems and Difficulties

Democracy, Literacy, and the Social Order

One of the central tenets of the democratic state is that an educated, informed, and participatory voting public is necessary for the functioning of democracy. In this perspective, one must be able to read and write to understand the issues of the day and think critically about the choices required in a democracy. Whereas that formulation is undoubtedly true, it is also incomplete. It requires the further recognition that literacy and education are necessary but not sufficient conditions of a functioning democracy, which also relies upon participation, debate, and a diversity of viewpoints. While literacy and education can and have been

used to stimulate democratic discourse and practices, it is equally true that literacy has been used to foster political repression and maintain inequitable social conditions.

History helps us to understand such tensions. Nineteenth century schoolbooks stressed the doctrines of order, harmony, and progress, while ignoring or justifying social conflicts and inequities (Graff, 1987, 326). Beyond the economic imperatives discussed previously, the purpose of literacy in these contexts was self-consciously conservative, a means for imposing morality, reducing criminality, lessening diversity, and encouraging deference to the established social order, especially in difficult times of change. Literacy was not a means for promoting democracy but rather an instrument for imposing social control. Yet literacy could be and was appropriated by groups and organizations promoting radical social change, for example among Chartists in nineteenth-century Great Britain and skilled labor organizers more widely. In the shop, meeting hall, and street, oral and written media came together. National literacy campaigns such as those in Cuba and Nicaragua also reflect the dialectical tensions of the literacy myth. Such movements propel literacy workers to action, raise literacy rates significantly, and allow for individual and group development. But literacy remains under the direction of political ideology and doctrine (Arnové and Graff, 1987). Only in the literacy myth does literacy operate as an independent variable,

The functioning of a mature democracy depends upon political structures and economic conditions that make participation possible for citizens. Literacy and education are important to the extent that they emphasize critical thinking, open debate, and tolerance for opposing views. Literacy by itself is not a cause for freedom and a guarantee of a working democracy. It is instead one of many important variables that influences the lives of citizens and their relationship to their governments.

Future Directions

Lessons of the Literacy Myth

Myths can be expressions of collective desires, of the many and the few, of their differential agency and power. Perhaps the Literacy Myth expresses a hope that literacy alone is enough to end poverty, elevate human dignity, and ensure a just and democratic world. A less benign reading is that the Literacy Myth is a means through which to obscure the causes of social and economic inequities in Western society at least

by attributing them to the literacy or illiteracy of different peoples. In such a reading, literacy is a symptom and a symbol. Either way, the consequences of accepting uncritically the Literacy Myth are continuing to misunderstand the nature of literacy, its development, uses, and potentials to foster or inhibit social and economic development.

To argue that literacy has been accorded the status of myth is not to discount the importance of reading and writing, or to suggest that these are irrelevant in the contemporary world. That is clearly not the case. However, we may contrast the Literacy Myth, and its seamless connections of literacy and individual and collective advancement, with the more complex and often contradictory lessons that are consistent with historical and recent literacy development and practice.

One critical lesson is that literacy is not an independent variable, as in the Myth. It is instead historically founded and grounded, a product of the histories in which it is entangled and interwoven, and which give literacy its meanings. Ignorance of the historical record, in which crucial concepts, notions, arrangements, and expectations about literacy have been fashioned, severely limits understanding. Related to this, second, we must grasp the fundamental complexity of literacy, the extent to which it is a product of the intersection of multiple economic, political, cultural, and other factors. This realization mandates rejecting the simple binaries of “literate-illiterate,” “oral-written,” and others which have been used to postulate a “great divide.” These constructs have been used to sort individuals and cultures in ways that are as damaging as they are conceptually inadequate. The legacies of literacy point instead to connections, relationships, and interactions.

In the Literacy Myth, reading and writing are a universal good and ideologically neutral. However, in a third lesson, the history of literacy and schooling demonstrates that no mode or means of learning is neutral. Literacy is a product of the specific circumstances of its acquisition, practice, and uses, and so will reflect the ideologies that guide these. School literacy, in particular, is neither unbiased nor the expression of universal norms of reading and writing; it reflects the structures of authority that govern schools and their societies.

Finally, despite the apparent simplicity of the literacy myth, the historical record points to a much richer and diverse record. It underscores the multiple paths to literacy learning, the extraordinary range of instructors, institutions, and other environments, of beginning “texts,” and of the diversity of motivations for learning to read and write. While mass public schooling today presents the most common route for individu-

als learning to read and write, the diversity of learners, including adult learners, in Europe and North America demands flexible understandings and pedagogies for literacy development. There is no single road to developing literacy. Different societies and cultures have taken different paths toward rising levels of literacy. This suggests that the presumed “consequences” of literacy—individual, economic, and democratic—will always be conditioned by the particulars of time, situation, and the historical moment.

Such reflections offer a more complex narrative than that of the Literacy Myth. They may also point toward new and different ways of understanding, using, and benefiting from the broad and still developing potentials that literacy may offer individuals and societies (Graff, 1995 a, b).

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