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Assessing the History of Literacy: Themes and Questions

Histories of Literacy

The history of literacy is well established as a regular, formal, significant, and sometimes central concern of historians of a wide range of topical, chronological, and methodological inclinations. This is a far cry from the intellectual landscape I confronted with my first literacy studies in 1971. The pioneering 1969 essays of Carlo Cipolla and Lawrence Stone both dominated and largely occupied the then short shelf to which few historians or other scholars turned.¹ The active thrust and exceptional growth in historical literacy studies over the past two decades have propelled the subject to new prominence. Highlighting increasingly the spheres of reading and of writing, stimulating searches for interdisciplinary approaches (methods and interpretive frames), and probing relations of past to present stand out among the impacts.

The maturation of the historical study of literacy has been enormously beneficial, inside the academy and on occasion beyond its walls. Nevertheless, this significant body of scholarship demands attention more broadly, both in terms of what it may contribute to other researchers, planners, and thinkers, and in terms of its own growing needs for inter- and intra-disciplinary cooperation and constructive criticism. For example, historical literary studies were long marked by their attention to the exploitation of quantitative data and to issues of quantity, series, and measurement. As important as that has been to intellectual advances, that emphasis has also become a limitation on new conceptualizations and interpretations.

My principal concern in this chapter is the present state of historical literacy studies and their implications. For literacy's historians and others interested in that history, the present stands as an "awkward age" or stage of development. That I sense this aspect of the moment is perhaps not surprising, for historical studies in general after almost two decades of proliferating "new histories" are themselves in something of an awkward age. The seemingly ceaseless appearance of books and articles surveying the discipline, searching for trends, and sometimes proposing new emphases and directions underscore this condition.² As the history of literacy joins the historiographical mainstream, it suffers from similar challenges and questions. Literacy studies, though, may be an exceptional case. For example, the distinctions between quantities and qualities, or those between individuals and collectivities, to take two of the many central dichotomies, complicate all questions of interpretation and meaning, as well as source criticism and research design.

In reflecting on the "awkward age" of historical studies of literacy, I am tempted to conceive the field's development in terms of life courses or cycles, at least metaphorically, and to posit the present situation as one of late adolescence or even youth.³ A generational perspective is perhaps more accurate and resonate than a life course one. For the purposes of discussion and assessment, we might conceive of three modern generations of historical literacy studies.

The first generation includes principally the late-1960s work of Stone (1969), Cipolla (1969), and Schofield (1968), and was foreshadowed by the 1950s studies by Fleury and Valmary (1957) in France and Webb (1955) in England. Their contributions were several: to advance a "strong" case for the historical study of literacy—its direct study, that is, and for its import and significance as a historical factor; to review the general course of literacy's chronological trends and principal transitions and passages; to identify sources for fuller, systematic exploitation—primarily but not exclusively, numerical sources; to advance the case(s) for the utility of routinely-generated, systematic, and sometimes comparable and "direct" measures; and to posit, sometimes speculatively, the factors most closely tied to and responsible for changes in the course of literacy over time, its dynamics, distributions, impacts, and consequences.⁴

A second generation grew directly from and was clearly stimulated by the first, more sweeping and speculative students. Major studies of the second generation include Schofield's (1973) later work, Egil Johansson's studies (1977, 1981), and book-length reports by Lockridge (1974), Furet and Ozouf (1977, 1983), Cressy (1980), Stevens and

Soltow (1981), Rab Houston (1985), and myself (Graff, 1979, 1981). In addition, there were numerous articles, monographs, local and regional studies, and theses and dissertations, mostly unpublished, especially in Great Britain and France.⁵

The emphases became a larger, more detailed erection and exploitation of the quantitative record, usually but not always from signatory or census sources; greater concern for a more evidentially and sometimes also more contextually grounded historical interpretation of changing patterns, especially of distributions and differentiations in levels of literacy; relating literacy's trends to social and economic developments, institutional interventions, and state activities (especially factors like the availability of formal schooling and public school systems, political transformations and events like the French Revolution) and the ideological aspects of the subject; concern with class formation; attention to the uses of literacy in terms both of patterns of reading/writing and individual and group attitudinal and psychological changes; and an increased awareness of the contradictory nature of the subject and recognition of the difficulties in building historical interpretations upon a quantitative analysis of secular trendlines and patterns of distribution and differentiation. The value of comparative frameworks was also recognized, though comparative studies remained rare.

As a result of this rich second generation of work, we know much more about literacy's social patterns over time and the fairly systematic and patterned variations in its distributions over time and place. We are perhaps also more hesitant and cautious in explanation and attribution of meaning.

At the same time as this "second generation" matured, the subject of literacy was "discovered" by an increasing number of historians and historical social scientists, especially those employing quantitative methods and numerical sources which included some information on literacy (either on an aggregative, an ecological, or an individual level) or which were fairly easily linked to information sources on literacy. Thus, literacy increasing featured in studies of economic change, demographic behavior, cultural development and conflict, class formation and stratification, collective actions of all kinds, family formation and structures, and the like. The literature on these and related subjects now reflects this. Revealingly, in this sphere of studies, literacy tended to be conceptualized most often as an independent variable, presumably useful in the explanation of another, dependent variable which was itself the object of more direct and sustained study.⁶

In the growing numbers of studies that took literacy itself as the central object of study and discussion, literacy could be and was conceptualized as either or both dependent or independent variable. At once a source of analytic and conceptual flexibility, this could also be a problem and a source of interpretive confusion and weakness. Whether surprising or not, the nature of literacy as a (historical) variable is rarely examined critically.

Importantly, another group of historians, especially interested in cultural, printing and publishing, or literary questions, also tended increasingly to consider literacy within their purview. Although in early research they rarely studied directly or seriously took into account literacy's levels and patterns, they presumed it a central factor or parameter for their own work. Here one thinks of press and newspaper histories, *l'histoire du livre*, studies of popular culture which include new interest in oral culture and its interactions with the written and printed, and histories of print and publishing. Exemplary of intellectual trends with their mixed success is the work of Robert Darnton (1982, 1983, 1984), Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979), and Roger Chartier (1987, 1989). We have learned much from such work, too much and too complex to summarize. A great deal of it, unfortunately, remains relatively unconnected to work focused directly on literacy itself. (For interesting efforts, see Gilmore, 1989; in general, Martin, 1968-70; Allen, 1991; Burke, 1978; Carpenter, 1981; Chartier, 1987, 1989; Darnton, 1982, 1983, 1984; Davidson, 1986, 1989; Eisenstein, 1979; Engelsing, 1973, 1974; Feather, 1985; Febvre and Martin, 1958; Ginzburg, 1980; Hall, 1979, 1983; Hall and Hench, 1983; Joyce, et al, 1983; Kaestle, et al, 1991; Kaplan, 1984; Spufford, 1981; and Stock, 1983, 1990. See also the journals *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, *Publishing History*, and critiques by Davis, 1975; Darnton, 1972.)

Virtually all this scholarly work, it should be underscored, has labored under the specter and shadows of modernization theories with their strong assumptions of literacy's role, powers, and provenance: an issue that must be confronted critically. Some students have chosen to challenge the assumptions of modernization's links to and impacts upon literacy (or vice versa). Others have assimilated their work within the traditions of modernization theories, suffering conceptual and interpretive difficulties (which the empirical record alone seldom meets squarely and many of which remain to be examined critically). In some cases, the latter assumption actually substitutes for empirical, as well as critical research. Problems also include the persisting presence of such

obstructive dichotomies such as literate versus illiterate, print versus oral, quantity versus quality, cognitive versus noncognitive impacts, and the like, none of which are interpretively rich or complex enough to advance our understanding.⁷

Themes and Lessons in the History of Literacy⁸

Whatever their limits (further discussed below), two “generations” historiography of literacy, harvested carefully, yields a rich crop of emphases, themes, and lessons. Regardless of the terms of my offering—the menu is selective—they are fruits of hard, rigorous labors of historical research and interpretation. As that kind of product, they are contested terrain with much to argue. For me at least, the import of the cultivation only heightens the stakes.

Not only is the historiography of literacy sometimes an interpretive battlefield, but so too are large questions about the nature of the relationships tying literacy, on the one hand, to learning, schooling, and education, and, on the other hand, to developmental consequences for groups and individuals. Still common assumptions of simplicity, directness, and linearity fall quickly to the quagmire that obstructs the progress of the harvester. In the themes and lessons considered, we also find important parallels between historical foundations and developments and contemporary configurations and their “crises” (see also Graff, 1992).

The historicity of literacy constitutes a first theme, from which many other key imperatives and implications follow. Several decades of serious, often revisionary, scholarship and criticism join in the conclusion that reading and writing, whatever their requirements or consequences—they are hotly debated—take on their meaning and acquire their value only in concrete historical circumstances that mediate in specific terms whatever general or supposedly “universal” attributes or concomitants may be claimed for literacy. Ranging from “ancient literacy” to proclaimed “post-modern” literacies, this holds true for literacy’s “uses” both practical and symbolic, as studies of the past three millennia show. Awareness of this historicity, which gains support from contemporary research in anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism, is perhaps the single most significant contribution of recent historical scholarship, even if the point requires wider broadcast.⁹ Indeed, the conceptualization, assumptions, and expectations one brings to considerations of reading and writing are revised radically when literacy is revisioned historically.

Conversely, although seldom appreciated, present-day conceptions, arrangements, and practices of literacy as well as schooling and learn-

ing are historically founded and grounded. They are also strong and powerfully resistant to change. Ignorance of the circumstances in which crucial concepts, arrangements, and expectations were fashioned, the means by which they have been maintained, and their consequences together limit severely if not contradict directly contemporary analysis, diagnosis, prescription. (Use of the medical metaphor is itself part of this history.)

That subjects such as literacy, learning, and schooling, and the uses of reading and writing are simple, unproblematic notions is a historical myth, our studies reveal. Experience, historical and more recent, to the contrary underscores their fundamental complexity, practically and theoretically; their enormously complicated conceptual and highly problematic nature. The results of two “generations” of literacy’s historical researchers almost unanimously undergird this conclusion, whose acceptance opens or reopens a lengthy list of questions.

Long-persisting problems gain new import in this revision. Among them are the many “great debates,” for example, surrounding human language acquisition and usage; literate as opposed to oral, among other communicative modes—and their presumed “consequences”; relations of literacy to hierarchies of power and wealth as opposed to egalitarian democracy; literacy’s contributions to development economic, political, social; and the status of “texts.” Even elementary literacy as learned and practiced is quite complex physiologically, neurologically, and cognitively. Its social and cultural dimensions add on numerous layers of complex meanings—among them “continuities and contradictions,” as I term them (Graff, 1981, 1987a). How little we know about learning—and about teaching, too, especially respecting the level of literacy.

Especially prominent among the central complications of our traditions or legacies of literacy are a) the extraordinary frailty and fragility of conceptions and conceptualizations of literacy, and b) the contradiction of consequences expected from its acquisition. With respect to the first, presumption of literacy’s unproblematic simplicity accompanies “naturally” or “essentially” assumptions that emphasize its strong, uniform, universal, unitary, unwavering nature and impact. With respect to the second, “strong” notions or theories of literacy directly and linearly associate rising levels (in some versions, when a specified “threshold” is achieved) with large-scale impacts, especially the advancement of both individuals and societies. Termed in various formulations the “consequences,” “correlates,” or “implications” of literacy, the number and variety of imputed effects on individuals or societies are dizzying.

Literacy, it has been claimed, correlates with economic growth and industrialization, wealth and productivity, political stability and participatory democracy, urbanization, consumption, and contraception.¹⁰

These wholesale claims rarely stand up to either empirical or conceptual probing historically or contemporarily. The “strong theory” of literacy—despite its hold on popular and policy opinions—turns out to be much weaker, with literacy’s impacts seldom so direct, unmediated, abstract, or universalistic. Constituting much of what I call literacy’s central contradictions (discussed in detail in my books *The Literacy Myth* and *The Legacies of Literacy*), these legacies taken together constitute “the literacy myth,” a powerful force despite its massive criticism and rejection in some circles. The contradictions nevertheless give the lie not only to “strong” theories but also to proclamations of a “Grand Dichotomy” or “Great Divide” rhetorically erected between literate and nonliterate persons, societies, and civilizations. Such formulations or notions rest far more on expectations and faith than they do on ambiguous evidence of complex, usually context-dependent relations and more complicated, oblique connections, with which the newer historical literature is filled.¹¹ What is at issue, of course, is seldom admitted: it is the purpose of literacy, and other learning. Those issues are inseparable from their historical course.

Typical conceptions of literacy share not only assumptions about their unproblematical status, but also the presumption of their central value neutrality (which is itself often represented as beneficial, a “good”). To the contrary, historical studies repeatedly demonstrate that no mode or means of learning is neutral. Not only does all “knowledge,” however elementary, incorporate the assumptions and expectations, the biases or emphases of its production, association, prior use, maintenance and preservation. So too do the so-called “tools” or skills.¹² With them, there are biases with respect to their transmission—the circumstances of learning and practice—and quite likely fundamental biases in their very nature, for example, the newly appreciated textual biases of formal schooling—“school” literacy—and most reading and writing shaped by such formative encounters, tutelage, and generally restricted or regulated practice.

Studies of the “media” of literacy, from script to print and beyond, only begin to suggest the intricately interacting relationships; contemporary confusion about the “future of print” compared to the visuality and aurality of electronic media have an impressively lengthy set of precedents.¹³ The history, only partially studied and understood, challenges all presumptions of unmediated, linear relations and impacts.

Recent studies in cognitive psychology and anthropology demonstrate the consequences for literacy of the specific contexts or circumstances of acquisition, practice, and uses—and of its place in the culture (Scribner and Cole, 1981). Raising more questions than they answer and challenging the received wisdom, such research joins other cognitive, linguistic, and historical studies in pointing toward more refined conceptions of skills, abilities, competencies, and knowledge in relatively precise but flexible learning, social, cultural, and communicative contexts.

That alphabetic literacy is one, albeit exceptionally valuable, set of abilities and competencies, among others, with which it interacts, slowly influences thinking about schooling and learning, and much else. Here, for example, confusions between long-standing and theoretically touted all but boundless potentials of literacy when contrasted with more common levels of ability and everyday practices can be excessive. Here, too, we find contradictions in literacy's history, in part from traditions of overvaluing alphabetic literacy by itself and slighting (or worse) other "literacies." We neglect the extent to which "school" literacy is a very special use of literacy and language. Words are not only taken out of "the context for action," but they are also removed from other, nonschool uses, including much of oral language usage and writing (Olson, 1977). Historically, we locate the long-lasting structures of authority erected on these bases, as certain forms of literacy and language abilities support social differentiation, social stigmatization, reinforcement of inequality—and school failure among the young, and not so young—among these "literate biases."

Enormous implications for teaching and learning, for developing more effective literacies (conceived, that is, in the plural), follow from placing "traditional alphabetic" literacy within appropriate communicative contexts along with, say, numeracy and scientific literacy, oral and aural abilities, spatial literacy or graphicacy as some geographers put it, visual and aesthetic literacies, and so on. Historians of science suggest that invention and discovery may owe more to visual than alphabetic literacy. It may be difficult to formulate satisfactory notions of "functional" literacy(ies) without expanding our understanding of communicative contexts and channels. For such study, history provides a rich laboratory only partly used. The challenges of precise comparison across space as well as time loom large.

Historical studies amply document the damages, the human costs in domains developed and undeveloped, that follow from the long domination of practical and theoretical presumptions that elevate the

literate, the written—as opposed to the nonliterate—to the status of the dominant partner in what Jack Goody calls the “Great Dichotomy” and Ruth Finnegan the “Great Divide.” In part the arrogance of the imperial West but more the triumph of Goody’s “technology of the intellect” over the intellect and the human spirit themselves, traditions of narrowly construed intellectualism and rationalism rationalized their reification of light over darkness, civilization over barbarity, developed over primitive, formally schooled over natural, written over spoken, literate over oral.

Hand in hand with simplicity and superiority have gone presumed ease of learning and expectation of individual, along with societal, progress. Despite our tardiness in recognizing its implications, historical studies repeatedly reiterate the difficulties regularly, perhaps normally experienced in gaining, practicing, and mastering the elements of alphabetic literacy. Acquiring even basic elements of abilities that may—or may not—prove necessary and useful in acquiring further skills, information, knowledge, or mentalities is seldom easy—for reasons both obvious and devious. Learning literacy, and whatever lies beyond it, has always been hard work.

Only in part a matter of instructional media, technology, pedagogy, institutional setting, age, or social circumstances, motivation—the widest range of perceptions of need, sometimes defensively or fearfully, sometimes with great pleasure and satisfaction—our studies agree, is a great stimulus toward at least the effort to learn one’s letters. Sometimes this is a matter of individuals; sometimes it is collective. Unfortunately, scholars, like ourselves, who live by and depend upon our manipulation of the tools of traditional learning are not well placed to appreciate common experiences past or present.

Recent research also helps to replace the complicated historical and richly human images missing from our common operational and legitimizing myths: of multiple paths of learning literacy and much more, the employment of an extraordinary range of instructors, institutions and other environments, and beginning “texts”—and the diversity of sometimes conflicting or contradictory motivations pushing and pulling. We rediscover the informality and possibility of elementary learning without the lockstep enforced march of age-grading and wholesale psychologies of human cognition and learning based on simplistic presumptions of human aging. In this respect, both the early modern “discovery” of children and a “special” stage of “childhood,” and the last two centuries’ efforts to institutionalize them constitute more complicated relationships than usually accorded them.

In contrast to the variety of historical paths, the great reforming dream was formal, compulsory, mass public schools as expected sites for virtually universal transmission of a minimal level of literacy reciprocally disseminated with the tenets of secular morality. This was a literacy presumed nonetheless useful and also socially secure, as opposed to literacy gained without the proper leavening agents of carefully crafted learning environments with methods and materials created expressly for their employment. The first dreamers long predated the massive nineteenth-century efforts to construct school systems, which in turn awaited the present century for many areas. Distrust, even fear, of the unwashed masses united them, although for centuries the fear of schooled masses dominated over fear of the ignorant or those who learned outside the bounds of formal educational institutions. Before that reversal and the subsequent achievement of mass schooling, and long accompanying its development in many places, looser arrangements continued whose poor press was written by reformers who sought to destroy them. Those arrangements have much to tell us.¹⁴

While underscoring the relative recency and historical constructedness of the means of mass literacy provision and most of other education—as opposed to notions of their inevitability or destiny—caution and hindsight also demand that we not succumb to understandable and attractive reasons to romanticize nostalgically the “premodern” past. Mass public school systems, despite their failings, have undoubtedly increased opportunities and elevated educational achievement. The price paid has included culturally and individually restricted literacy, and other learning—in circumstances that led many pupils to disdain or undervalue literacy and other learning, their practice and use. It also included persistent inequalities of opportunity and outcomes, greater rewards for the well-off than for the poor, among much else. Limits of dependence on literacy, itself restricted and often poorly disseminated, set rigid constraints on the contribution from schools to polity and culture as well as economy. And of course, nearly universal elementary schooling never halted popular cultural practices that include “improper” use of literacy to read scorned or censured writing!

Among the prices paid and among those we now seek to redevelop with adult literacy programs has been the long standing condemnation, then obscuring and forgetting that for a great many persons, traditional alphabetic literacy of reading and sometimes writing was acquired in the widest variety of informal, as well as formal circumstances, and at a wide range of chronological ages. This included self-teaching and learn-

ing some level of ability in homes, dame schools, work places, fields, class and political domains, cultural settings, carceral institutions, and chance occurrences, sometimes at ages younger but far more often older than the limited span of childhood and early adolescence that came to be defined as the “critical period.” Modernization of schooling into mass systems rested in part on the denial of previously common courses or paths. Simultaneously, approved practices respecting institution and age hardened into expectations, policies, and theories, all with their authoritative guardians. Until recently, in the wake of these legacies, tutelage of adults attracted relatively little effort. Ironically, there are long traditions of adult education seldom called into play (Levine, 1985).

Expectations and common practice of learning literacy as part of elementary education—all the formal schooling that most common scholars experienced until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—are themselves historical developments, research shows. This presumption holds that given the availability of written texts and elementary instruction, beginning basic abilities of reading and writing are in themselves sufficient for further developing an individual’s literacy and subsequent education and their advancement. No serious obstacle to achieving a desired degree of literacy or additional learning need trouble those hungry for more. Learning and using literacy, the “foundation,” were easy. (No matter that the cognitive and psychological place of reading and writing as foundations is not well understood, or that reading has so long been poorly taught, or that debates over reading methodologies persist over centuries with much heat and little light.) Among the corollaries is that failure reflected overwhelmingly on the individuals—and their race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.—not on schools, society, culture, polity. “Blaming the victim,” this pattern is called.

Just as individuals followed different paths to literacy and learning, societies historically and more recently took different paths toward achieving rising levels of popular literacy. Despite massive expectations of one sure road to progress, inscribed in “strong” theories and “standard versions,” historical research emphasizes that there is no one route destined to culminate in universal literacy and its associated “modern” concomitants. Similarly, with respect to the contributions of literacy and education, there has been no one route to economic development, industrialization, political democracy, or other parcels of the “modernization” complex. In some cases, at some times, literacy worked as causal agent indirectly or directly. In others, it did not. In some circumstances, literacy was influenced by development, an effect rather than

a contribution. And in others, the impact on literacy and education was negative—in European early industrialization, for example. Sequencing and timing—chronologically and causally—are very important, say, in contrasting the nature and degree of social unrest during industrialization, or the adaptation of large numbers of immigrants. Still, those relationships vary widely. Literacy often has served noncognitively, attitudinally, behaviorally, and symbolically in furthering social and economic development. That is no small contribution; it is not, however, the one typically touted (Graff, 1979, 1991, 1981, 1987a; “Education,” 1981; Winchester, 1978, 1980, 1990).

The great danger today is one that twentieth-century education on all levels shares with literacy models: the simple presumption that economic growth and development depends simply and directly on investment in and high rates of productivity from systems of formal education. Quantity and quality are confused; educational purpose is distorted. The consequent fears of “crisis” and “decline” rigidly narrow the frame of education—including literacy—and all but guarantee disappointment and repetition of the cycle. The legacies of literacy stand close at hand.

A Future for the History of Literacy?

A “third generation” of historians of literacy awaits us. In part, I believe, discussion must now focus upon its “needs and opportunities”: questions, sources, methods. Recent studies begin to point the way. Not coincidentally, groundbreaking work in contemporary studies usefully demonstrates basic areas and aspects of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Two recent and original directions in the social scientific study of literacy offer novel leads. In particular, I think of the social-psychological work—sometimes brilliant and path-breaking in its implications—of the experimental, ethnographic and comparative cognitive psychologists, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, especially in their *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981) and in Scribner’s further studies of the skills, including reading and writing, required and utilized in different kinds of work settings and demands. I also think of the community-based ethnographies of literacy and education exemplified by anthropologist and linguist Shirley Heath in *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983). Together, this research underscores the import for literacy of context of learning and use, nature of acquisition, culture and traditions, and the like. Especially striking are the focus, in theory and in practice, on reading and writing in communicative and cultural

context, and on ethnography. By example and analogy and conceptualization, they contribute to an agenda for the “third generation.”

Several other recent studies underscore these directions as they also lead us into different and wider terrains. Jan Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984; see also Radway, 1986) proposes, and with a group of contemporary romance readers illustrates, that reading can be usefully and critically (and as her work in particularly evidences, sympathetically) studied in contexts social, cultural, and political economic. Her imaginative practice is informed by anthropological, feminist, and literary critical perspectives. Radway also hints at the possibilities for historical efforts at this direction. Creative research by David Vincent (1981) and Sally Mitchell (1981) shows potential for historical applications via autobiographical and literary sources, for working-class and middle-class women, respectively. The pioneering and idiosyncratic, if not always persuasive, writings of Carlo Ginzburg (1980) and Robert Darnton (1984), and more recently Roger Chartier and his associates (1987, 1989), suggest the depths and insights that close study of reading practices set into socioculturally informed communicative contexts may yield. In these examples, I add, the limits of the work are as rich as are the real achievements. (See also Scribner, 1981, 1984; Burke, 1978, 1987; Isaac, 1976a, 1976b, 1982; Stout, 1977; Kaplan, 1984; Goody, 1986, 1987; Thomas, 1986; Muchembled, 1986; Allen, 1991; Davidson, 1986, 1989; Gross, 1988; Gilmore, 1989; and Kaestle, 1991, for additional examples.)

The occasion for these reflections, happily, coincides with a significant moment for historical studies of literacy. If my surmises are at least partially accurate, the field of inquiry is today at a crossroads. We ask, not at all frivolously or lightly, “Whither historians of literacy?” If the second generation—having firmly established the field of the history of literacy—is winding down, and if my sensing a diminishing of new researchers and research projects focused directly on literacy is also an accurate reading, and if we presume that literacy deserves and demands further study, we then recognize that 1) many gaps in the record remain to be completed; 2) many questions—some only relatively recently posed—remain to be answered; and 3) key problems in conceptualization, interpretation, and explanation mark these efforts.¹⁵ Consideration of the outline and agenda of a hypothetical “third generation” may be of more than academic interest.

In part, we need to shift our dialogue from quantitative methods to critical questions asked of both quantitative and qualitative findings

and their relationships. We need to ponder further the links in terms of both continuities and changes between the second generation and my proposed “third generation.” We need not only to take stock and assess, but also to undertake those activities with an aim toward future studies conceived and designed in novel ways. These discursive reflections aim to stimulate that discussion.

The achievements of historical literacy studies are many and clear, we see. Persisting patterns of limitations also mark the field. We recognize limits of quantitative analysis alone, and of aggregative and ecological methods and research designs. In some ways, I aver, we are only now coming to the most important questions and issues. In addition to time series and patterns of variation, that perhaps will be deemed one of the major contributions of generations one and especially two. There indeed has been a shattering of “received wisdom” (as in “literacy myths,” to use my lexicon), expectations, assumptions—and that is no small accomplishment. The obverse, however, is the question of what will replace them—in part a theoretical issue. The “great debates” about literacy’s relationships all reflect this: from literacy’s relationships to economic (i.e., commercial and/or industrial) and social development, to political mobilization, religion, social mobility, social class formation, work and leisure life patterns, and social change more generally. Questions about method, such as those of dependent versus independent variables, levels of aggregation, problems of correlational analysis, follow. The demand for critical reflection now falls upon conceptualization, method, and interpretation.¹⁶

In one way, the path lies in moving beyond literacy as a dichotomous variable, perceived as either conservative and controlling or as liberating, as useful or not. This might constitute moving toward a historical cultural politics and a historical political economy of literacy. There are a number of possible avenues. Synoptically, I suggest some, with an eye toward setting an agenda for the “third generation.”

First and most generally, historical literacy studies must build upon their own past while also breaking away from it. The work of the “second generation,” such as that of Furet and Ozouf (1977), Cressy (1980), or Soltow and Stevens (1981), delineates parameters, baselines, and key interrelationships. Those relationships in turn offer opportunities to investigate more precisely the linkages and to seek refinements in specifying factors and their interactions. These range from literacy’s relations with class, gender, age, and culture to overarching themes of economic development, social order, mobility and stratification, education and schooling, actual uses of literacy, language and culture, and so on.

One demand falls upon much sharper contextual grounding, often in clearly delineated localities. Others encompass the completion of time series, among other quantitative analyses. Major opportunities for close, critical contextualization and connective interpretation exist in contemporary research into Kaestle's (1985, 1991) "history of readers and reading," *l'histoire du livre*, Chartier's (1987, 1989) history of "texts, printing, readings" (see also Gilmore, 1989; Allen, 1991). Despite sometimes brilliant openings, the potential of these scholarly practices is unfulfilled; their integration into histories social, cultural, economic, or political remains a major challenge.

Second is the advancement of comparative study. This requires a greater appreciation and emphasis on source criticism and recognition of the different meanings of different measures of literacy (as well as literacy's uses) among different populations as evidenced from varying sources. Contextualization here is also critical for comparisons, as Johansson's (1977, 1981, 1985) and Houston's (1985) work in particular illustrates. Also critical is the search for indicators of the levels and the quality of literacy, permitting us to advance beyond the constraining dichotomy of literate versus illiterate (compare, for example, Graff, 1979, with Kaestle, 1991). Novel approaches to combining records and to record linkage stand out on this agenda.

Third is the major need for new conceptualizations of context in the historical study of literacy. Recognizing that literacy only acquires meaning and significance within specified historical contexts does not in itself reduce the risks of abstracted analysis. Novel work in anthropology and psychology, like that of Heath (1983) and Scribner and Cole (1981), mentioned above, provides important suggestions and guidelines for historians. The tasks lie not only in defining and specifying contexts for study and interpretation but also in delineating the varying levels of context—vertically or horizontally, for example—and in experimenting with ways to operationalize them. Stevens' (1985, 1988) focus on illiterates in judicial settings and Johansson's (1977, 1981, 1985) perspective on church and community indicate two opportunities to probe more intensively. Carlo Ginzburg's (1980) study may provide another; so too may those of Radway (1984), Darnton (1972, 1982, 1983, 1984), Vincent (1981, 1989), and Mitchell (1981). Gilmore's (1989) localized case study reiterates the richness of records. For the recent past, oral histories, library use records, and participant observation, or ethnographies of communications, offer other possibilities.¹⁷

Contexts for analysis are many and diverse. They range from those of acquisition, use, and action, to those of individual, family, group, or community, gender, or social class. The scope for defined study is itself variable, but should include material conditions, motivations, opportunities, needs and demands, traditions, and transformations. In this way, linguistic forms, dialects, communication channels and networks, “pushes” and “pulls” from religion, culture, politics, the economy, and so forth, may be incorporated. Literacy’s relationship to personal and/or collective efficacy and activism or agency—a source of much debate—may also be explored further, in part in analysis of specific events and processes and in part in terms of patterns of communications and mobilization within defined contexts. Class formation and vital behavior are just two of the many key topics calling for examination.

Are “historical ethnographies”—conceptualized fully in terms of literacy among the many modes and relations of communications—of literacy possible? Recent work, such as that noted here, contains fascinating hints in that direction that merit fuller examination. A number of recent studies in popular culture—for example, those of Ginzburg (1980), Burke (1978, 1987), LeRoy Ladurie (1978), Scribner (1981, 1984), Wrightson and Levine (1979), Davidson (1986), Vincent (1989), Stout (1977), and Isaac (1976a, 1976b, 1982)—may prove stimulating beginning models. Clearly, the subject and its significance stimulate a fair test. The current interests (within anthropology and elsewhere) in an anthropology of communications in ethnographies of reading and writing at varying levels of context and generality are guides to follow. (See, for example, Heath, 1983; Tannen, 1982; Whiteman, 1981.)

On one hand, literacy may be viewed as one among other “media” and its roles and impacts evaluated. On the other hand, ethnographic and communicative approaches have the potential to expand perspectives while simultaneously grounding them more precisely for meaningful interpretation. Novel contextualization can also be a boost to the renewal and refinement of quantitative studies. Attention to context, in sum, offers both new and better cases for study, opportunities for explanation, and approaches to literacy’s changing and variable historical meanings and contributions.

A fourth consideration follows. This is the difficult but necessary demand for critical examination of the conceptualization of literacy itself. The “second generation” has taught us about the contradictions central to literacy’s history. It has also revealed the problems in treating literacy as an independent variable and the confusions that inhere in

treating literacy as either or both dependent and independent. Questions of contextualization may well limit analysis of literacy as independent; they will also, I think, stimulate new formulations of the nature of literacy as a dependent factor. In the process, new considerations about levels and quality of literacy must transcend the related limits of the tradition of conceptualizing literacy as a dichotomous variable. Psychological and anthropological studies promise to contribute here too. The body of work of the "second generation" collectively underscores the special complications whose resolution ranks high on any agenda. To transcend it requires excavation of other relevant aspects of cultural communications—including the oral and visual, along with the written or printed, and today the electronic—among which literacy, in shifting degrees and mediations, takes its place.

Fifth is the question of literacy and what might well be termed the "creation of meaning." Historical studies of literacy have been little influenced by recent debates in intellectual and cultural history, literary criticism and philosophy, cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology and ethnography, or critical theories of communication. To some extent, the origins of these current emphases stem from dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to "texts," their reading, understanding, and communication. More recently, the entire enterprise of grasping the "creation," maintenance, and communication of "meaning" has changed in major ways related to issues central to literacy. The parallels with literacy studies have not mandated a parallel course. (Chartier, 1987, 1989, and Hall, 1979, 1983, are the exceptions.)

Cultural and intellectual history are themselves, along with many areas of the humanities and the social sciences—the human sciences—in a significant time of ferment and exploration; so too are literary criticism, cognitive and cultural psychology, and some areas of philosophy. Concerns about interactions between readers and texts, reader responses to writing and print, shaping of individual and collective processes of cognition, and the ways in which "meaning" is created, influenced, transmitted, and changed are common, if not always clarified.¹⁸ Chartier (1989), for example, raises questions and advances hypotheses about modes and practices of early modern French reading, reading as active and creative, reception aesthetics and horizons, appropriation, interpretive communities, textuality and orality, printing and circulation. Kaestle (1991) confronts readers, readership, and readability in twentieth-century American society.

At least partly to its detriment, the history of literacy largely stands in isolation from interdisciplinary rapprochement. Questions about

literacy's contribution to individual, class, and collective awareness, patterns of cognitive (and also noncognitive) attitudinal formation, and cultural behavior more generally all underscore this need. The nagging issue of the uses of literacy, and their consequences, demands further new exploration.

The need for a sharper theoretical awareness of the relevance of the history of literacy for many important aspects of social, economic, and psychological theory, constitutes a sixth point. This is implied in the foregoing, and too frequently implied (rather than argued directly) in the literature. Historical studies of literacy provide significant opportunities for testing theories. In so far as their results continue to raise criticisms of "normative" theoretical expectations and assumptions, there may also be prospects for essaying new formulations. Both historical practice and historians' contributions to other interested parties can only benefit from this.

A seventh consideration, raised as a question of methodology, indeed of epistemology, links all of the above. Has the tradition, from two generations of studies, of taking literacy as primary object of analysis—"the history of literacy" per se—approached an end point? Should a "third generation" rooted at least in part in the foregoing refocus itself in terms of literacy as a significant—indeed a necessary—component of other relevant investigations? The question, simply put, is that of shifting from "historical studies of literacy" to "histories that encompass literacy within their context and conceptualization," from "the history of literacy" to "literacy in history."¹⁹ There is reason to argue, I think, that the limits of the second generation's conceptualization encourage the exploration of what that transformation would entail. To move in this direction is no simple task: I call for the reconceptualization not only of the history of literacy and the histories of reading and writing/printing within it but also the histories of culture and society.

Eighth, and finally, I call attention to the relevance of the history of literacy for a number of policy issues in societies developed and underdeveloped today, and to the contributions that reconceptualization might bring to them. Historical analysis can contribute to understanding and fashioning responses to deal with those problems that are sometimes deemed "literacy crises." In grasping that there are many paths to literacy, that literacy's relations to social and economic development are complex, that the quantity and the quality of literacy (and literacy's possession and its use) are not linearly related, that the consequences of literacy are neither direct nor simple, and that literacy is never neutral, historians

have much to share with their fellow students and to offer those who formulate social policies. That is no small contribution.²⁰

Consider for example the concept of multiple paths to the making of literate societies and states. The historical study of literacy shows clearly that there is no one route to universal literacy, and that there is no one path destined to succeed in the achievement of mass literacy. In the history of the Western world, we may distinguish the roles of private and public schooling in various configurations in the attainment of high rates of popular literacy, as well as the operation of informal and formal, voluntary and compulsory schooling. Mass literacy was achieved in Sweden, for example, *without* formal schooling or instruction in writing (Johansson, 1977, 1981; Graff, 1987, 1988). High rates of literacy have followed from all of these approaches in different cases and contexts. The developmental consequences are equally varied. This stands in stark contrast to dominant assumptions among policy-makers, planners, and social scientists.

The past provides a different set of experiences than those that might sustain these common expectations. Although neither all the research nor the balance sheet of historical interpretation is in, we may argue that historical experiences provide a better guide to such crucial questions as how and to what extent basic literacy contributes to the economic and individual well being of persons in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and under what circumstances universal literacy can be achieved. The costs and benefits of alternative paths can be discerned, and estimated, too. Thus, the connections and disconnections between literacy and commercial development, a generally positive relationship, and literacy and industrial development, often an unfavorable linkage at least in the short run of decades and half-centuries, offer important case studies and analogs for analysis. The data of the past strongly suggest that a simple, linear, modernization model of literacy as prerequisite for development and development as stimulant to increased levels of schooling will not suffice. Too many periods of lags, backward linkages, setbacks, and contradictions exist to permit such cavalier theorizing to continue without serious challenge and criticism.

Literacy's relationships with paths to economic development, mentioned above, present other cases in point. So, too, do the connections of literacy with social development. There too, we discover a history of continuities and contradictions, and of variable paths to societal change and development. From the classical era forward, leaders of politics and churches, reformers as well as conservers, have recognized the uses of

literacy and schooling. Often they have perceived unbridled, untempered literacy as potentially dangerous, a threat to social order, political integration, economic productivity, and patterns of authority. Increasingly, however, they came to conclude that literacy, if provided in carefully controlled, structured, formal institutions created expressly for the purposes of education and transmission of literacy and supervised closely, could be a powerful and useful force in achieving a variety of important ends. Precedents long predated the first systematic mass efforts to put this conception of literacy into practice, in Rome, for example, and in the visionary proposals of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christian humanists. For our purposes, the Reformations of the sixteenth century represented the first great literacy campaigns. They were hardly homogeneous efforts, as Sweden reminds us, in either design or degree of success. Nonetheless, they were precedent-setting and epochal in their significance for the future of social and educational development throughout the world.

With the Enlightenment and its heritage came the final ideological underpinnings for the “modern” and “liberal” reforms of popular schooling and institutional building that established the network of educational, social, political, cultural, and economic relationships central to the dominant ideologies and their theoretical and practical expressions for the past two centuries. Prussia took the lead, and provided a laboratory that United States, Canadian, English, French, and Scandinavian school promoters and reformers regularly came to study. North Americans and Swedes followed in Prussia’s wake, and, in time and in their own ways, so did the English, French, Italians—and more recently vast areas of the underdeveloping world.

Of course, other important uses of literacy—for personal advancement, entertainment, study, collective action, and the like—must not be slighted. The significance and potential of literacy to individuals and to groups throughout history, even if sometimes taken out of context and exaggerated, are undoubted. The role of social class and group-specific demands for literacy’s skills, the impact of motivation, and the growing perceptions of its value and benefits are among the major factors that explain the historical contours of changing rates of popular literacy. In other words, “demand” must be appreciated, as well as “supply,” stimuli from “below” as well as force and compulsion from “above:” in intricately reciprocal and dialectical relationships. Literacy’s limits, history emphasizes, and its roles in promoting and maintaining hegemony, merit emphasis too. Their deeper exploration and understanding may depend on the new approaches suggested above.

Especially with the transitions from preindustrial social orders based in rank and deference to the class societies of commercial and then factory capitalism, the integrating and hegemony-creating purposes of literacy provision through formal schooling only increased. Schooling, with its transmission of morally leavened and often qualitatively low levels of skills, became more and more a vital aspect of the maintenance of social stability, particularly during times of massive if confusing social and economic transformations—and a regular feature of the young’s life course. Many people, most prominently social and economic leaders and social reformers, grasped the uses of schooling and the vehicle of literacy for promoting the values, attitudes, and habits deemed essential to order, integration, cohesion, and certain forms of progress. The people’s acceptance of literacy’s import—not a simple process—forms the other dimension of this historical equation.

Recognizing the emergence of the history of literacy’s “third generation” and its relevance to nonhistorians is at once a first step and a paradigmatic one. We may then speak of the future of the past, and that of the present, too.

Notes

1. While not attempting definitiveness or exhaustiveness, the reference list for this text offers an overview of the major works in the field, older and more recent. For complete references, see chapter 9 Bibliography.
2. For example, Stone’s call for retreats from social scientific and quantitative studies and hopes for “new narratives,” the attacks on social history, among many others. See, for example, Abrams (1980); Darnton (1972); Higham and Conkin (1979); Hobsbawm (1980); Kammen (1980); LaCapra and Kaplan (1982); Rabb and Rotberg (1982); Stone (1979), among a large bibliography.
3. Readers, I hope, will agree that this frame of reference has some merit and usefulness despite the fact that it also reflects my present research and writing on the history of growing up! The overlaps with literacy’s history in fact are many and instructive. See my *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Harvard University Press, 1995).
4. See for example the works of Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and also Marshall McLuhan.
5. For bibliography, see Graff (1981a, 1987a); Houston (1983); Bartoli Langeli and Petrucci (1978); Bartoli Langeli and Toscani (1991); Furet and Ozouf (1977); Pelizzari (1989); Vinalo Frago (1989). See also chapter 9 below.
6. Examples of this enormous literature appear in Graff (1981a, 1987a). Graff (1987a) and Houston (1988) offered stock-taking summaries.
7. Compare for example Cipolla (1969) or Stone (1969), with Lockridge (1974). Graff (1979, 1981c, 1987a, 1988, 1992); Soltow and Stevens (1981), Houston (1983, 1985). See also Finnegan (1988), Heath (1983), Scribner and Cole (1981), Street (1984), Levine (1982, 1985), Bloch (1989). See also below.
8. In this section, I shall make no effort to provide extensive citations for the generalizations proffered. Readers may refer to the References as constituting one large segment of the body of research and interpretation on which I draw. See also Graff (1992).

9. Consider for example the range of revision in anthropologist Jack Goody's (1968, 1986, 1987, and with Ian Watt, 1968) stance on literacy's "consequences", in part from his familiarity with historical and related research. Walter Ong reflects the influence albeit to a lesser extent as does psychologist David Olson. Nevertheless, much contemporary thinking, even by some historians who should now know better, goes on as if a quarter-century's learning and debates had not occurred. Wider communication both inside and beyond the academy merits a higher place on our agenda.
10. The best-known "strong case" is Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 1968, originally published in 1963. By 1968, Goody withdrew from the language of causal consequences to looser formulations. For a critical discussion and bibliography, see Graff, 1987a, esp. Epilogue. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan's (1988) writings are very important among this literature.
11. For some of the human "costs" from such dominant notions, see for example Botstein and more generally "Literacy in America" (1990); K. Levine (1985); Kozol (1985); Katz (1988); Aronowitz and Giroux (1988). For historical and international comparisons, see Armove and Graff (1987). For seemingly unselfconscious but very influential sway of these presumptions, see Hirsch (1987, 1988).
12. The almost cyclical "debate" over "skills" versus "content," which spans the entire educational realm from literacy learning to graduate training is another version of this. Today's war over undergraduate "core curricula" in such terms is especially silly and wasteful of time and energy. Ian Winchester (1990) relates this issue to the philosophy of science and its revision. There is a large literature on vocational schooling, among the functional and/or utilitarian literacies. For recent years, see Levine, 1985; Katz, 1988, among others.
13. The works of Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, and Elizabeth Eisenstein provide starting points on these typically misunderstood and much debated issues. More generally, the research and interpretations of historians of classical and medieval literacy has been richer and more instructive than that of modernists.
14. Suggestive here, for example, are the studies of Galenson (1981), Laqueur, (1976a); Spufford (1979). The story of early modern Sweden where exceptionally high levels of reading but not writing literacy and of female literacy were achieved largely without mass institutional schooling is told by Egil Johansson (1977, 1981, 1985).
15. That the perception is not mine alone is confirmed by my correspondence with Armando Petrucci about this conference and my presentation.
16. Analogies with studies of printing and reading may be drawn in similar terms. The promise of both *l'histoire du livre* and the history of reading remains to be achieved despite some of the grander claims proffered. See relevant entries in the Reference list below.
17. On the possibilities from oral history, see the continuing work and the database developed by Paul Thompson (1974, 1978) at the University of Essex in England. See also Radway (1984), Cook-Gumperz (1986), Heath (1983), Tannen (1982), Whiteman (1981). See most recently Kaestle (1991).
18. This literature, actually several different bodies of it, is much too vast to cite here. See for introductions, LaCapra and Kaplan (1982); Higham and Conkin (1979); Rabb and Rotberg (1982); Allen (1991); Bauml (1980); Chartier (1987, 1989); Davidson (1986); Hebrard (1980), Kaplan (1984), among the References. See also such journals as *Critical Inquiry*, *New Literary History*, *Representations*.
19. As this presentation suggests, what I envision certainly includes but also goes beyond the usual lines of *l'histoire du livre* or the history of reading.
20. For a more sustained discussion, see Graff, 1992. See also Armove and Graff, 1987.