19. Literacy

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The term *literacy* is so commonplace that few sources bother to define it. *Literacy*, in lay terms, means "the ability to read and write." The term *literacy*, according to David Barton (2007), did not appear in dictionaries until 1924; when it did, it was simply defined as "educated." Over time, the definition of literacy has evolved. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; 2005), an agency that has offered international literacy support for decades, offers this more complex definition:

> Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (p. 40)

For technical and professional communication—a discipline dedicated to goal-oriented, contextually relevant communication—literacy can serve as a powerful framework for understanding the practices of both technical communicators and their ***audiences***.

Literacy practices are embedded in social situations: "the meaning of literacy depends on the social institutions in which it is embedded . . . [and] . . . the particular practices of reading and writing that are taught in any context depend upon such aspects of social structure as stratification . . . and the role of educational institutions" (Street, 1984, p. 8). Similarly, Gerald J. Savage (2003) writes that "no set of institutional or social arrangements, no body of knowledge, values, or beliefs is an essence. All have ***histories*** and arise from historical exigencies" (p. 3). These statements are particularly true when discussing *literacy* as a keyword in technical and professional communication. This literacy story begins in a social setting: English departments, embedded in higher education, organizations themselves fraught with systemic imbalances.

Historical scholars suggest the origins of technical and professional communication ***pedagogy*** arose from engineering and agricultural students' need for better workplace writing and speaking skills (Connors, 2004; Kynell, 2000; Longo, 2000). Instruction was frequently outsourced to departments of English, where these students read and critiqued literature. This outsourcing came with its own problems. On the surface, these courses were designed to improve students' functional literacy—their abilities to read and write—but on English teachers' terms:

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"If engineers wanted English instruction, they would have to accept literature along with writing, because the English graduate schools of the time were not producing anything but literary scholars—who wanted work" (Connors, 2004, p. 7). Robert J. Connors (2004) documents several problems that ultimately led to failure in these early 20th-century classrooms: English faculty tended to focus on composition and critique of literature as a means of improving students' functional literacy; inexperienced, junior faculty were most assigned to teach these courses; and cooperation between English and engineering faculty was minimal, at best (pp. 7-8). Complicating problems, "academic literary professionals felt alienated from 'real world' matters, and indeed cultivated that alienation as a virtue, setting themselves apart from business and industrial concerns and upholding values they took to be higher than those of what they viewed as philistine commercial interests" (Russell, 1993, p. 86). Describing technical writing instruction occurring at the end of the 20th century, Mary Sue Garay (1998) depicts this attitude among English faculty as the "filthy lucre bias" against physical labor and applied workplaces (p. 4).

The "filthy lucre bias" not only impacted how technical and professional communication programs evolved in English departments over time, but it also affected how scholars in the field approached pedagogy. To an English department audience unconvinced of the value of the technical writing course, "the common opinion [is] that the undergraduate technical writing course is a 'skills' course with little or no humanistic value" (Miller, 1979, p. 610). Carolyn Miller (1979) counters this opinion and argues for technical writing as an acceptable humanities offering. Her argument concludes with this recommendation for technical writing pedagogy: Rather than focusing on writing skill sets, it should focus on contextualizing skills within social settings and considering the ethical implications of technical writers within those settings (p. 617).

Miller's ***rhetoric*** shifted the focus away from workplace skills to a more palatable English department goal: a literate study grounded in humanism. Her turn from "skills" to "literacy" provided a more solid foundation on which to build and ***assess*** programs in technical, scientific, and professional communication in the late 1980s and 1990s (p. 617). It was in these programs that scholars in the late 20th century and early 21st century began to explore and open the boundaries of literacy in technical and professional communication pedagogy. Among the scholars who pushed these boundaries was Billie Wahlstrom (1997), whose essay revisits traditional definitions of literacy and explores how those definitions must be expanded to include new configurations of community and the agency students possess within those communities:

> Too often . . . technical communication educators have abdicated the larger obligation to help students become responsible citizens and ethical workers in favor of focusing on smaller topics such as teaching the skill sets our graduates need to get successful jobs. We have opted for functional literacy instead of designing true

> teaching and learning environments that enable students to build layered literacies. Functional literacy may help our students to get jobs, but in this era only a broader set of literacies will enable students to develop fully as competent communicators, ethical agents of change, and engaged citizens. (p. 130)

Wahlstrom's (1997) concept of layered literacies inspired me to consider how best to articulate the layered literacies technical and professional communication students needed (Cargile Cook, 2002). Reflecting on Wahlstrom's (1997) call for "literacies [that] are not isolated but integrated and situated through a complex of classroom goals and activities" (Cargile Cook, 2002, p. 6), I wrote,

> Two problems face technical communication instructors as they construct learning communities with integrated, situated, and multiple literacy-learning opportunities. The first is the lack of a concise identification of literacies that technical communicators should possess. This problem does not result from lack of literature on the literacies that technical communicators should acquire; rather it results from the breadth of that literature. The second problem is the lack of understanding about how these multiple literacies can be integrated, situated, or, as Wahlstrom advocates, layered into programs, courses, and specific course activities. (Cargile Cook, 2002, p. 6).

My response to these problems is to synthesize the breadth of the existing literature into six "literacies" that could be "layered" into multiple configurations within varied lessons, units, and courses in professional communication. I identify the following literacies: basic, rhetorical, social, technological, ethical, and critical. These literacies, I argue, are important because they provide students with more than functional literacy: "By focusing on these literacies rather than on specific workplace skills, technical communication instructors may better prepare students for many workplaces and prepare them for lifelong learning, not learning for a specific vocation" (Cargile Cook, 2002, p. 24).

As opposed to this broad approach to literacies, Stuart Selber (2004) delves more deeply into computer literacy, calling for students to gain the "multiliteracies," which he places in three categories: "functional, critical, and rhetorical" (p. 24):

> The functional layer implies access to—and control over—technologies that can support the educational goals of students, help them manage their computer-based activities, and help them resolve their technological impasses. The critical layer implies access to computer technologies for the purposes of critique, and not just one platform. . . . And the rhetorical layer implies access to robust computer environments that can support the technical side

> of interface design, which includes the collaborative production of rapid prototypes and visual images, not to mention actual interfaces that function. (Selber, 2004, p. 192)

Although he focuses primarily on computer literacies, Selber (2004) proposes an extensive framework for literacy programs, beginning with students' introduction to the functional uses of computer hardware and software and extending to broader systemic change within institutional settings. Whether literacy instruction is combined into a single course or divided within a curricular series, Selber (2004) argues that his framework provides "direction and structure for teachers of writing and communication who work in departments of English" (p. 29).

However, literacies, even when defined as "layered" or "multi-," do not take into account multiple, tacit knowledges that simply reading and writing cannot encompass, such as those gained through extended practice within specific cultural settings. As examples of these practices, consider the challenges of learning to play a musical instrument, to lay bricks, fold a parachute, or weave a cloth with only the guidance of the printed word. Shirley Brice Heath (1980) notes that even print media themselves have had a paradoxical effect on literacy: While it opened literate practices for many, it "also made possible new kinds of control over the people" (Heath, 1980, p. 124). Furthermore, scholars like Cynthia L. Selfe (1999) warned that "federally sponsored literacy programs . . . can actually contribute to the ongoing problems of racism, sexism, poverty, and illiteracy in the United States" (p. 12). In UNESCO's Expert Meeting on Literacy (2005), this problem was further elaborated:

> Literacy may be a means of domination, for example when it is taught to promote particular ideologies or where new readers are served a diet of propaganda. More subtly, literacy promotion often serves to socialise learners into the dominant social discourse, rather than opening up new opportunities of expression and creative diversity. (p. 15)

Concerns about the use of "literacy" standards and measures to create and maintain institutionalized biases appear in other disciplines too. Literacy historians, such as Carl F. Kaestle (1985), have examined how historical assumptions about literacy have resulted in cultural biases used to disempower marginalized groups. Such beliefs include assumptions that upper classes are more literate than lower, that white people are more literate than people of color, that Protestants are more literate than Catholics, and that Northerners are more literate than Southerners (Kaestle, 1985, p. 22). These cultural stereotypes, frequently unquestioned and unrecognized by those in power, have had devastating consequences when they are enacted in educational and legal decisions (see Cook-Gumperz's [2006] discussion of the "ideology of literacy" in education, Prendergast's [2002] analysis of the "economy of literacy" in Supreme Court rulings, and Jones & Williams' [2018] analysis of literacy tests as "technologies of disenfranchisement").

Such critiques of literacy and literacy standards are especially poignant since 2020. In the throes of a global pandemic, protesters lined American streets decrying invidious discrimination and police brutality. Black, indigenous, and other people of color have asked the privileged among us to witness, to listen, to read, and to take note of their lives. Is it not time, then, to question our use of certain keywords like *literacy*? Is it time to retire this term, adopted originally in our field to appease literature faculty but used systematically in many disciplines to establish and maintain cultural superiority? Are we ready, as a field, to reassess our pedagogies and our programs in this light? And, if so, what is the new keyword that should take its place? The answer is as complex as the questions. Terms like "skills," "competencies," and "standards" have been used as frequently as "literacies" in technical and professional scholarship (Carliner, 2001; Gillis, 2006; Hart-Davidson, 2001; Pringle & Williams, 2005; Rainey et al., 2005; Whiteside, 2003). These terms, more situated in practical workplaces, do not carry the negative cultural and historical connotations of "literacy," nor, unfortunately, do they carry the positive connotations of an engaged citizen advocating change. Perhaps, a better term for the pedagogical aims is simply "***knowledges***," a word that connotes all the capabilities we desire for our students: the know-hows, know-whens, and know-whys of technical and professional communication as well as the know-whats it takes to be an engaged citizen and good human in the world.

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