

1

Introduction

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The essays in this volume, besides being contributions to different, ongoing discussions, come together to help place “literacy”—the state of being comfortable inside a sign-sharing community—within a broad context of perennial puzzles.

Not too many years ago a cartoon strip summarized a large chunk of the rationale for promoting literacy. Mr. Grimmis, an elementary school principal, is telling some obstreperous kindergarteners why they have to stay in school: “The law requires you to go to school, because we cannot have a generation of illiterates running the country in a few years. You **MUST** stay!” We are familiar with his argument; he speaks for the American Education Establishment. But the paradoxes and questions surrounding “the literacy issue” belie the simplicity of Mr. Grimmis’s self-satisfaction.

“Literacy” has become an increasingly important topic of discussion around the world. The year 1990 was declared International Literacy Year by UNESCO, which estimates that by 2000 the total number of illiterates in the world will surpass one billion, or about one-third of the adult world population, and that four out of ten children in the developing countries will not complete primary education. In the two most populous countries, India and China, the illiteracy rates are nearly 57 percent and 31 percent respectively. In addition, the illiteracy rate for females in the Third World outstrips that for men by over 20 percent.

Within the United States and other industrialized societies the number of absolute illiterates—those who cannot read or write in any language—is relatively low: less than 5 percent of the population. At the same time the literacy demands for most jobs exceed the level of education of a large proportion of the young adults. Less than a generation ago many entry-level positions called for a reading level of about sixth grade. In many industrial plants that are retooling, job entry requirements are jumping to a level higher than the twelfth grade. The American educational system is failing a significant portion of the population

who seem unable to read or do mathematics above a simple and superficial level. They can read the want ads but not the editorials in the daily papers. The gap most affects minority groups and immigrants or "guest workers." These people can get employment, but it is not steady and the wage is often substandard. The migrant group places demands on our social and educational institutions, demands which in some cases had not been encountered before, or anticipated.

This context of pressing global and national need makes the promotion of literacy look like a matter of highest priority. Such urgency, as perceived by development-devoted governments of the Northern Hemisphere, may occlude some of the paradoxes and potential errors that lie in wait to trip up smug evangelists.

Mr. Grimmis was lecturing to schoolchildren. For those mature, adult parents who pay his salary, his "insider" position is attractive. Knowledge is power, and inferiority accompanies ignorance. But, over at the other end of the cartoon strip, we onlookers are asked to reconsider the relationships between teacher and pupil, parent and child, member and aspirant: One of the precocious kindergarteners asks a co-conspirator at the back of the room, "NOW do you know what they mean by 'political prisoners'?"

As the fortunate possessors of the ability to read and write, our duty to those less fortunate looks transparently clear: help "the illiterate" learn to do what we can do. We think our life is better than theirs, and we want to share the specific ability that we take to be the cause of that betterness. When Mr. Grimmis's altruistic giving takes on a resemblance to Torquemada's earnestness, however, when the offer of assistance becomes the insistent war cry, "It's for your own good," when liberation is also obliteration, that transparent simplicity clouds over very fast.

Does the gain compensate for the loss? What motivates the givers? Are there unintended consequences? Are we, the literate, actually in the grips of an addiction and desperately trying to force others to join us? Is literacy an "absolute" concept, determinable once and for all, "where is and as is," or is it a slippery notion, varying in different locales and different circumstances? If it is not measurable on a universal scale, who is entitled to talk about "literacy" outside of its immediate context? Is the "literacy problem" actually a fraud being perpetrated by educationist xenophiles?

The phenomenon of irreversibility surrounds these complexities. Once one has learned to read and write, one cannot willfully erase the competence. Once we have learned to read we cannot "unlearn," and we "know" that knowing how is better than being ignorant. Having acquired the credentials, furthermore, we patronize the unfortunate who

have not qualified for membership. It is only natural that we should seek to share our good fortune. Yet it is these assumptions that deserve some consideration before we turn them into action. It is possible to allege that literacy is more curse than cure.

The monotype of such one-way journeys is *The Fall*, the drama of original sin played against the backdrop of Creation. Once innocence is lost, there's no getting it back. You can't go home again. Ludwig von Bertalanffy once hypothesized a specific connection between language use and the psychology of the fall. In his speculation, oral communication "beyond the grunt," so to speak, sparked the original sin. He wondered if Genesis dramatized the first opportunity say one thing while thinking another. Using language to lie, that is, is the essence of original sin, at least as crucial as disobedience or pride. It was after the fall that wise people made sure there was a third person in the room when an oral agreement was reached.

We can speculate, by stretching the analogy further, that the next stumble occurred when it became easy for a patent-medicine pitchman to *think* in terms of greed, *speak* to his audience in terms of cure, and provide exculpatory conditions only in the fine *print* on the label. Writing added a layer of complexity to the opportunities that voice had given us for role-playing. The "blind carbon," the copy sent "secretly" to a third party, became an instrument of conspiracy. Literacy compounded the corruptions of orality. This innocence-experience model is essentially one of instant corruption, of a fall away from gracious simplicity into (some would say) Western, capitalist, modernist materialism.

There is another model of irreversible change, a progressive version that emphasizes upward mobility and positive development. This cultural-evolution model generally associates "language" with memory, history, and culture—and aligns writing with science, credit, and constitutional governance. It connects written records with consistent measurement and calculation, with fractional-reserve banking, and with reverence for government by document. This thoroughly secular model, in which natural chaos and divine design are gradually nudged aside by calculations of likelihood and by long-range planning, leads to a set of assumptions about prediction and property and progress that look remarkably like materialistic, modern, Western capitalism.

In either model, the ability to record and use records—to write and to read—is implicated in the generation of significant change, whether gradual or sudden, whether for "the culture" as a demographic whole or for individuals one at a time. What is more, the transition cannot help but look oppressive and exploitative. In Jack Goody's words (out of a legal, marriage-registration context): "The written law is thus highly

partial in every sense of the word, favouring the literate few at the expense of the illiterate many" (158). Less obvious but even more important, the illiterate are absolutely prevented from knowing the consequences of literacy before they "give it a try"; "choice" is meaningless because experimenting with one alternative—writing and reading—makes the other alternative—illiteracy—impossible. There have been circumstances, to be sure, where a few elite have wanted to restrict the privilege of literacy for the same reason that a few others want to promote it—because it will lead to revolution. But neither the pushers nor the proscribers have pretended that the literate can choose to return to blissful ignorance any more than theologians can argue that the burden of making choices can be refused. From this point of view, it looks as if the literate Mr. Grimmisses have all the power, and are either tempting or forcing those without it to leave their innocence behind.

But this interpretation is misleading. It perverts the inevitable gap between knowledge and ignorance by portraying the older and more experienced dwellers on the "later" side of the gap as somehow conspiratorial, as selfish indoctrinators taking advantage of the less fortunate. The bridge across that gap runs in one direction: Those who "know more" cannot choose to erase what they have learned, and those who "know less," having become suspicious about the motives of their "superiors," will remain antagonistic until they too have gained the experience that takes them across the one-way bridge.

Neither being aware of the gap and the bridge, nor recognizing the theological fall and the secular transformation of culture, nor even being wistful about having left Eden, makes the preservation of apparent innocence a sensible goal, even for the most romantic idealists. Even if later is not better, if knowing more is not definitively superior, there is indeed no going back. The move to help others acquire abilities we possess is a sincere attempt to give power away, not a selfish attempt to indoctrinate and control the uncorrupted. The extension of Western standards of living and planning and controlling may not be entirely altruistic on the part of every participant, but at this point change is not a matter of choice: the globe is hurtling down a one-way street, and bringing ourselves together to learn to steer seems more sensible than trying to stop and find reverse gear.

All of this is little more than a backdrop for arguing that we who can read this volume have a responsibility to realize that we are all in Mr. Grimmis's position. We have been released from the relative "innocence" of oral acculturation through an initiation rite of schooling into a patronizing and mutually congratulatory oligarchy of literacy. We, of the Northern Hemisphere and Western civilization, ought to be con-

scious of what we think we are doing as we offer to share our power with—or impose our values on—those we perceive as less fortunate. The essays in this volume all help us stand back from unexamined immersion in the crusade, help us recognize the maelstrom of complexity lurking just behind pious policies.

There are those, for instance, who say there is a crisis in literacy and basic education. The problem and its potential solutions raise questions of language and cultural policy, economic planning, political and social mobilization, and materials production, not to mention issues of pedagogy, teacher training, and assessment. At the same time these various figures and programs make the issue of literacy seem a large and impersonal phenomenon. Yet again, we know that learning to read and write, or failing to be able to read and write in a literate society, are personal and human concerns. Literacy is not simply a statistic; it impinges upon and shapes the lives of individuals. Literacy programs see people in terms of groups and numbers and classes. For the person, however, it may be a matter of dealing with the local market or settling one's spiritual affairs.

Educational systems have long recognized but they have not reconciled this tension between the group and the individual. The goals of education as propounded in the Faure Report of UNESCO, *Learning to Be* (1972), suggest that developing the broader social polity through schools must be prior to and then be fitted with the development of individual potential. In regard to literacy, however, writers tend to look at the phenomenon from a broad demographic view—what is called the etic view—and not from the view that situates the individual within a particular social and cultural system—what is called the emic view. The same may be said to be true of educational systems that are primarily the instruments of the state or organized religion, and only secondarily comprised of individuals who seek to foster the growth of other individuals. Yet literacy for each person is—or may be—quite different from literacy for groups and subgroups. Literacy is situated in the present; it is not an abstraction.

Another way of viewing the dilemma is from a sociocultural perspective. Providing basic education for all may undermine the existing cultures of the society and move the society willy-nilly into a standardized society. In a recent article in *The Courier*, Federico Mayor wrote, “. . . culture should be regarded as a direct source of inspiration for development, and in return, development should assign to culture a central role as a social regulator. This imperative applies not only to developing countries, where economic extraversion and cultural alienation have clearly and sometimes dramatically widened the gap between the

creative and productive processes. It is also increasingly vital for industrialized countries, where the headlong race for growth in material wealth is detrimental to the spiritual, ethical and aesthetic aspects of life, and creates much disharmony between man and the natural environment" (1988, p. 5). The implication of such a statement for literacy education is that while it may be important to see education internationally as a race that will lead to monoculturalism and economic gain, such a single-minded approach may cause great harm. Education leads people away from their past and their family; it is the main cause of alienation as well as the main cause of acculturation. One set of questions some of the essays in this volume raise may help to determine which educational programs serve best to educate people for development without destroying their cultural heritage and cultural pride.

Education must meet the needs of society by fostering the broadest range of social communication, and education must be used for individual development and to foster freedom from the dominance of systems. In reading and literature education, these polar goals lead some educators to assert that there is a common, consensual, or correct meaning to a text that is to be learned, and lead others to claim that the critical response of the individual reader is to be fostered and to be seen as having ascendancy in educational life. In writing education, the goals are often represented by the slogans "product" and "process," with the former suggesting a conformity to certain text models and the latter implying the development of individual freedom in composition. Often the adherents of one or the other of the goals have couched the debate in political terms, as can be seen in the writings of Allan Bloom and *The Closing of the American Mind* on the one hand and Paolo Freire and *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the other.

This volume seeks to address this and other tensions and paradoxes by bringing together a group of distinguished authors who view literacy and schooling from the perspective of the individual or that of the social system, but who are acutely aware that their view is only a part of the whole. We hope that by bringing these views into juxtaposition we can help the reader recognize some of the complexities that envelop the multitude around the world who seek to promote literacy among its populace.

The tension is particularly apparent in schools. They are for the most part institutions of the state or of a religious group, yet their teachers must deal with individual children, not abstractions of public policy. The authors deal here with literacy in both industrialized and developing nations, for they see the differences between the two as differences less in kind than in degree.

Taken together, the essays in this volume answer almost as many questions as they ask. Yes, literacy is a complicated, paradoxical concept. Yes, it is self-righteous to utter the syllables "the illiterate." Yes, what goes on in Africa is pertinent to John Teacher and Jane Pupil in rural America and urban Paris. And yes, policy and reform and inertia in Norman Rockwell villages are good illustrations of global dilemmas.

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