

Literacy Crises and Campaigns in Perspective

[T]o consider any of the ways in which literacy intersects with social, political, economic, cultural, or psychological life requires excursions into other records.

—Harvey J. Graff

“Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates” (Sheils 58). With this pronouncement, *Newsweek’s* “Why Johnny Can’t Write” created a national panic about the state of functional and cultural literacy in the United States in the 1970s. But in offering statistics that “grow more appalling each year” (58), Merrill Sheils did not mention that definitions of literacy are imprecise and literacy rates scarce. Nor did she acknowledge that literacy crises and preparatory instruction have long been features of American education and that this “scenario has gone on for so long that it might not be temporary” (Rose, “Language” 355).

Unlike Sheils, Carl F. Kaestle and his coeditors point out the inherent difficulties in discussing literacy statistics from a historical perspective. Because definitions of literacy are

confusing and imprecise, the data are incomparable over time. All in all, they conclude, "We know very little about the distribution and uses of literacy over the last century" (xiv). The shifting definitions of "functional literacy" provide a case in point. In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps defined functional literacy as a fourth-grade educational level; by 1947, the Census Bureau considered anyone with fewer than five years of schooling illiterate. Five years later, the standard of functional literacy had risen to a sixth-grade educational level, and by 1960, the U.S. Office of Education defined functional literacy as an eighth-grade educational level (92). In 1973, the "Report of the Committee on Reading, National Academy of Education" concluded that "a meaningful goal [of minimal literacy] would be the attainment of twelfth-grade literacy" (Carroll and Chall 8). Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman likewise note that "in the United States . . . completion of secondary school has become a kind of benchmark definition of functional literacy" (27). In general, they argue that literacy should be defined as

The possession of skills *perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups* to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' well-being; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements *they set for themselves* as being important for their lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives. (7-8)

Although this discussion of shifting definitions of literacy illustrates the difficulties of comparing literacy rates historically, a comparison of the origins of literacy crises and campaigns of the last half of the nineteenth century with those of the last quarter of the twentieth century is instructive, for it reveals that similar social, political, and economic

features underlie the crises and campaigns of both centuries. In fact, Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff contend that the initiation of literacy campaigns from the Protestant Reformation to the present “has been associated with major transformations in social structure and belief systems,” and that “key common elements”—“mission, organization, pedagogy, and content”—unite them “across time and space” (4, vii). Such has been the case in the United States, as Richard Ohmann points out: “Each time the American educational system has rapidly expanded, admitting previously excluded groups to higher levels, there has been a similar chorus of voices lamenting the decline in standards and foreseeing the end of Western civilization” (*Politics of Letters* 234). Analyzing the American economy in the context of long-term social moods in the country, economist Henry Gailliot draws parallels between the political and social distress brought about by the decline of the agrarian society and the rise of a manufacturing society in the late 1800s and the current political and social stress brought about by an economy where “employment skills and the employment locations do not mesh well with the demand” (6–7). Both periods are representative of the “parochial” phase in the country’s “social value cycle,” he explains, where divisive issues, often marked by moral overtones and driven by economics, dominate the social mood (4). Thus, the literacy crisis of the last quarter of the twentieth century (the divisiveness of which is detailed in Chapter 4) can be viewed as driven as much by economics as by a concern for students’ declining writing abilities. In the words of J. Elspeth Stuckey, the “high profile of literacy” is “symptomatic of a speedy, ruthless transition from an industrial to an information based economy” (viii).

FROM CRISIS TO CAMPAIGN (1840–1910)

From 1800 to 1870, literacy campaigns in the United States were inaugurated in response to growing tensions in an increasingly pluralistic society. By the middle of the nineteenth century, pluralism was regarded

as a threat to cultural unity. The polarization of Protestant and Catholic, foreigner and native, strained the belief in an essentially homogeneous and consensus-based social order. The public school offered a mechanism to overcome religious and ethnic diversity and to transcend the emerging tensions in the American social order. (Stevens 117)

Advocates of a public school system ostensibly sought to inculcate “fundamentals of literacy,” but the “common elements of American culture” they defined as “fundamentals” amounted to the imposition of the values of the “prominent in society” upon the rest (117).

The cultural diversity that led to the institution of the public school system also led to the growth of the universities from 1870 to 1910. Between 1870 and 1890 alone, student enrollment in the universities increased threefold, from 50,000 to 150,000 students; by 1910, enrollment had more than doubled again (Kerr xii). Laurence R. Veysey speculates that increasing cultural diversity fueled this growth, for it was during these years that numbers of immigrants from “new and less respectable sources” increased. Already-established American immigrants from northern Europe felt the need to distinguish themselves, and a university degree—“impressive, preeminently wholesome, and increasingly accessible to any family affluent enough to spare the earning power of its sons in their late teens”—became one “emphatic trademark” of the social mobility of these northern European immigrants (265–66). Of course, perception of a university education as a hallmark of success was not the only reason higher education expanded. Land-grant universities, specializing in “service to the productive elements of society—especially to agriculture and to industry,” proliferated during this time and needed to enroll a whole new population if they were to continue to grow (Kerr xi).

This new population of students led to a perceived decline in students’ writing abilities and a spate of *Newsweek*-like reports decrying them. In the 1840s, for example, the president of Brown University railed against incoming students’ poor grammatical skills (Rose, *Lives* 5). In 1871, the

president of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot, reported:

The need of some requisition which should secure on the part of young men preparing for college proper attention to their own language has long been felt. Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college. (qtd. in Daniels 51)

As a consequence of the perception that incoming students' language use was deficient, Harvard instituted entrance examinations for all incoming students whether "sons of the aristocracy or those few poor youths of demonstrated 'capacity and character'" (52). However, the institution of neither placement examinations nor freshman composition seemed to improve much the writing abilities of Harvard's young men. In 1885, Harvard Professor Adams Sherman Hill confessed,

Every year Harvard graduates a certain number of men—some of them high scholars—whose manuscript would disgrace a boy of twelve; and yet the college cannot be blamed, for she can hardly be expected to conduct an infant school for adults. (qtd. in Daniels 52)

In 1896, *The Nation* published "The Growing Illiteracy of American Boys," wherein the Committee of the Overseers of Harvard College on Composition and Rhetoric placed the blame for its students' growing illiteracy squarely on the shoulders of the preparatory schools. The Committee argued that

students came up from the leading preparatory schools in such a condition of unfitness, as regards their own tongue, that it was necessary for the college to spend much time, energy and money in teaching them what they ought to have learnt already. (284)

Harvard resented such expenditures as the words of Professor Goodwin make clear: "There was no conceivable justification for using the revenues of Harvard College or the time and strength of her instructors in a vain attempt to enlighten the Egyptian darkness in which no small portion of her undergraduates were sitting" (284). In fact, the angry members of the Committee decided to illustrate their concerns by publishing "deplorable" specimens of entrance examinations written by students of Boston Latin School, Mr. Noble's, and Roxbury Latin.

The principals of Boston Latin School, Mr. Noble's, and Roxbury Latin filed a protest with the Committee, shifting the blame for the growing illiteracy of Harvard's students from their schools to the sad state of literacy in the community at large. In terms that sound arrestingly familiar to twentieth-century ears, they complained:

While we regret the growing illiteracy of American boys as much as your committee does, we cannot feel that the schools should be held solely responsible for evils which are chiefly due to the absence of literary interest and of literary standards in the community. (284)

Subsequent issues of *The Nation* printed numerous letters in response to the report from Harvard, most sharing the principals' view that a general decline in literacy in society was to blame for the "condition of unfitness" in which so many of the nation's most academically privileged young men found themselves. Responses from Connecticut to California echoed the sentiments of William F. Brewer of Bozeman, Montana, who wrote,

The time [students] spent in the study of grammar or composition during their earlier schooling, even if well spent, has counted little in comparison with influences elsewhere. The home, the very cheap newspaper, the street have furnished them with their common speech. (327)

Edward G. Coy of Lakeville, Connecticut, concurred, pointing out that trying to teach children the language that Harvard

expected of them on examinations "is often as impossible of achievement as would be the effort to make a silk purse out of a pig's ear" (344).

But Elmer L. Curtiss, Superintendent of Schools from Hingham, Massachusetts, found a different reason for the boys' illiteracy, namely, the colleges' failure to respond to their increasingly pluralistic student body. As he explains,

The lower schools have responded to the needs of the time and have adapted themselves to the social and economic changes, while the high schools are still under the bondage of an educational system centuries old—a system, by the way, that the colleges perpetuate and force upon all schools sending pupils to them. (420–21)

It was just this increasingly pluralistic student body that worried the "California teacher" who wrote to complain about the growth of Berkeley and the relaxation of entrance standards at the University of California. Noting that Berkeley had increased its enrollment fivefold in just ten years and that the University of California had decreed that students from sixty-seven designated secondary schools could enter without having to take entrance examinations, the California teacher wondered in print what such actions might portend. Quoting in part from one of California's university presidents and from Edward, Lord Bulwer-Lytton, he laments,

"[T]he inevitable result [of] placing every fifty-cent boy or girl within reach of a two-thousand dollar college education" . . . must be to bring about a condition of affairs to which Bulwer-Lytton refers in one of his works with an almost prophetic pathos . . . : "It is not from ignorance henceforth that society will suffer—it is from over-educating the hungry thousands who, thus unfitted for manual toil, and with no career for mental, will puzzle wiser ministers than I am." ("How to Build Up a University" 494–95)

Despite this "California Teacher"'s concerns, the universities continued to expand. Their growth from 1870 to 1910 marked one of the two great transformations in higher educa-

tion in the United States (Kerr xi). (The other great transformation, which occurred from 1960 to 1980, I will address shortly.)

As universities grew in size and number and as their missions and populations changed, so, too, did the types of writing required of their students. Before 1860 the focus of the American colleges and preparatory schools was spoken language; writing was "merely an aid to memory" (Russell 4). Recitation was the preferred mode of instruction, and students were often required to memorize pages from a text and repeat them back to a teacher (Kitzhaber 2). However, as the American educational system expanded to include public high schools, land-grant universities, and trade schools, private as well as public schools began to view their educational mission in a new light. As James Berlin explains, both began to see themselves as "serving the needs of business and industry. Citizens demanded it, students demanded it, and most important, business leaders—the keepers of the funds—demanded it" (60). Writing, too, changed from oral transcription of speech to texts required of graduates preparing for careers other than the pulpit or the bar. New professions in business and industry required reports, specifications, and memoranda. Although this educational society now saw itself as a training ground for new professionals, David Russell contends that it "failed to adjust its concept of writing for the fact that both writing and education had been transformed," clinging instead to "the outmoded conception of writing as transcribed speech and to the vanishing ideal of a single academic community, united by common values, goals, and standards of discourse" (5).

One of the effects of this failure to adjust the concept of writing was the spate of Harvard Reports (1892, 1895, 1897) decrying the poor writing skills of students at Harvard. Another was Harvard's response: the institution of entrance examinations (whose list of required readings is the forerunner of E. D. Hirsch's) and the institution of freshman composition. Both Albert R. Kitzhaber and Berlin acknowledge the historical importance of Harvard's entrance examinations and freshman composition program. Kitzhaber

asserts that Harvard's English program established a pattern for almost all universities (33), and Berlin adds that its focus on superficial error "gave support to the view that has haunted writing classes ever since: learning to write is learning matters of superficial correctness" (62). Furthermore, Berlin contends, after the Harvard Reports, "the mark of an educated man" was his ability to use the dialect of the upper middle class. In order to secure entry into the upper classes, children of the lower classes had to demonstrate their mettle by learning this dialect. Composition teachers became the "caretakers of the English tongue" and the "gatekeepers on the road to the good things in life." Not surprisingly, composition texts of this time were devoted to superficial correctness, that most significant mark of educated prose. In short, Berlin notes, these texts "were designed to serve the professional aspirations of the middle class" (72-73). But for all their influence, neither the Harvard Reports nor the writing programs and texts that they engendered addressed, in Russell's words, the real problems: "Standards of literacy were no longer stable; they were rising, and more importantly, multiplying" (6). Many of these same situations and solutions are mirrored in the current literacy crisis, a crisis that occurred after the second great transformation in American higher education, the period from 1960 to 1980.

FROM CRISIS TO CAMPAIGN (1960-1993)

In 1983, the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education declared that declining test scores and writing skills threatened the nation's security; we had become *A Nation at Risk*. In 1986, in a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, Senator Edward Zorinsky testified that the "schools are creating illiterates" and that reforms could not be left up to the educators (Stedman and Kaestle 77). On the tenth anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that although "the school reform movement has galvanized business and government, leading

to dozens of blue-ribbon panels, widespread state reforms—and a new generation of jargon,” “professors on the front lines of undergraduate instruction,” like those professors quoted in the “Johnny” articles of the mid-1970s, contend that students “are not familiar with the written word,” and “spend too much time in front of the television” (Zook A19, A24).

Ernest R. House, Carol Emmer, and Nancy Lawrence deftly sketch the economic and social climate in which the literacy campaign of the last quarter of the twentieth century is situated:

The deteriorating economic condition of the United States, the development of a seemingly permanent underclass, and the entry of vast numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, legal and illegal, have created a situation in which many Americans feel threatened. . . . In addition, there is a pervasive sense of unease about the United States’ slipping economically, as reflected in rising trade deficits and a stagnant standard of living. All this concern begs for an answer. . . . (72)

Literacy became an answer, in much the same way that literacy had become an answer to the cultural diversity of the period from 1800 to 1870. In its “second great transformation” from 1960 to 1980, just as in the period from 1870 to 1910, enrollments mushroomed, and a new population of students provided much of the growth. By 1980, for example, 12 million students were enrolled in institutions of higher learning, an increase of 8.5 million students in just twenty years. Minorities represented 17 percent of the total enrollment in 1980, an increase of 7 percent from 1960, and women students, by the slimmest of margins, had become the majority (Kerr xiv).²

The University of California president who puzzled over the wisdom of admitting “fifty-cent” boys and girls to the universities in 1896 would no doubt have been awestruck at Mina Shaughnessy’s description of the students attending City University of New York in 1970:

[I]n the spring of 1970, the City University of New York . . . [opened] its doors not only to a larger population of students than it had ever had before . . . but to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting to its campus—academic winners and losers from the best and worst high schools in the country, the children of the lettered and the illiterate, the blue-collared, the white-collared, and the unemployed, some who could barely afford the subway fare to school and a few who came in the new cars their parents had given them as a reward for staying in New York to go to college. (1–2)

As the populations of the universities changed, so, too, did their missions. The percentage of students enrolled in traditional arts and sciences programs declined, while the percentage of those enrolled in preprofessional programs increased. From 1969 to 1976 alone, enrollment in the preprofessional programs grew from 38 to 58 percent. In the words of Clark Kerr, Chairman of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education from 1967 to 1980, “This was the last and conclusive triumph of the Sophists over the Philosophers, of the proponents of the commercially useful over the defenders of the intellectually essential” (xiii).

Writing instruction in the transformed university had a curious fate. In the 1960s, while higher education tended to the business of expansion, composition requirements were either dropped or reduced in one-third of all four-year colleges and universities (Russell 272). Those courses that were offered revived personal writing as a means of expressing support for political movements and challenging authority; political critique, however, remained largely implicit (Herzberg 111–12). But by the 1970s, as the expanded higher educational system brought about increased access, colleges and universities witnessed the “widest social and institutional demand for writing instruction since mass-education had founded composition a century earlier to solve the problem of integrating new students into academia” (Russell 275). With the arrival of such students as Shaughnessy describes, personal writing and the development of authentic voice became less

important. The goal of many of the new writing courses developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s was to initiate this new population of students into the conventions of academic discourse.

Shaughnessy's new students and their difficulties with academic discourse no doubt provided much of the impetus for *Newsweek's* reports of the declining writing abilities of American students and the calls for reforms. But much of the focus was on the writing of students at our most elite universities. "What makes the *new illiteracy* so dismaying," declared *Newsweek's* Sheils, "is precisely the fact that writing ability among even the best-educated young people seems to have fallen so far so fast" (59; emphasis added). But, as the foregoing discussion has illustrated, the level of writing skills among students in even our most elite universities had been dismaying their educators for more than a century before *Newsweek's* report. Furthermore, the remarks by Harvard's Hill and Goodwin belie Sheils's claims that the literacy crisis in 1975 was different from that reported one hundred years earlier, for in both instances the crisis focused on the inarticulate expression of students at our most culturally and educationally elite institutions.

Other similarities in the two crises are apparent as well. Like the earlier literacy campaign, colleges and universities sought to place the blame on students' high school preparation and a decline in higher-level literacy activities in a culture influenced by the popular media. Sheils quoted professors who claimed that by the time students reach college, "the breakdown in writing has been in the making for years"; in addition, they cited causes ranging from "inadequate grounding in the basics of syntax, structure and style to the popularity of secondary-school curriculums that no longer require the wide range of reading a student must have to learn to write clearly" (59). High school teachers who "have simply stopped correcting poor grammar and sloppy construction" were singled out for blame by Northwestern's Dr. Elliott Anderson (qtd. in Sheils 60). Just as Mr. Brewer blamed "the very cheap newspaper" for the decline in students' writing abilities in 1896, E. B. White and Jacques Barzun blamed

television for the decline in students' abilities in the 1970s. "Short of throwing away all the television sets, I really don't know what we can do about writing," said White (qtd. in Sheils 60). Barzun was even more morose: "Letting the television just sink into [our] environment," "we have ceased to think with words" (qtd. in Sheils 60, 58).

At the same time that these comments were alerting the general public to a new literacy crisis, A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University, published an article in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* that received wide comment in academic circles. "[M]any Yale students cannot handle English—cannot make a sentence or a paragraph, cannot organize a paper, cannot follow through—well enough to do college work," bemoaned Giamatti in language remarkably like that of Harvard's Eliot a century before. This deterioration of language skills could be blamed on "people for whom Zen, the occult, Indians, organic gardening, Transcendental Meditation, the 'I Ching'—the whole frozen dinner of the new primitivism—were superior to words" (qtd. in Daniels 206, 207–8). As with the literacy crisis of 1896, not all educators perceived the situation in the same light. When Shelby Grantham set out to investigate the literacy crisis at Dartmouth for its alumni magazine in 1977, she could not find one to investigate. David J. Bradley, a writing teacher, declared, "There has been no decline in literacy among Dartmouth students in the 11 years I've been here." The chair of the history department, who had taught at Harvard as well, concurred: "I don't think there's any new crisis in writing." When the chair of the English department, the dean of the engineering school, a spokesperson for the medical school, and the staff in the admissions office offered similar comments, Grantham was forced to confess, "I had not expected such an answer, and I certainly had not expected it so consistently" (20). Bradley and James Heffernan, director of Dartmouth's freshman composition course, explained. "'It's an autumnal rite, this handwringing about why Johnny can't write,' said the one, and the other concurred: 'The "crisis" isn't a crisis at all. These things have been said repeatedly before. It is a cyclical disturbance'" (21). With characteristic

sarcasm, Harvey Daniels interprets the inconsistencies in Dartmouth's and Yale's reports on students' writing abilities in this way:

Either the Dartmouth admissions boys have been aggressively out-recruiting Yale's, gathering in nearly all of the few remaining American teenagers who can speak and write, or else some element in the bracing New Hampshire air has helped the Dartmouth faculty to retain the perspective which teachers in other, more frantic locales have long since lost. (221)

Sheils's and Giamatti's views of the literacy crisis were not without critics. In "The Strange Case of Our Vanishing Literacy," Richard Ohmann called the literacy crisis detailed by *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Saturday Review*, the *Yale Alumni Magazine*, and others "a fiction, if not a hoax" (*Politics of Letters* 231). Countering the "quite varied evidence" found in these publications with evidence that reading scores for high school seniors between 1960 and 1970 had improved slightly, that Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test scores had twice increased between 1960 and 1972, and that the percentage of good writers among seventeen-year-olds had also increased, Ohmann confirmed what researchers from the Educational Testing Service and Office of Education had concluded: "We are now convinced that anyone who says he *knows* that literacy is decreasing . . . is at best unscholarly and at worse dishonest" (qtd. in Ohmann, *Politics of Letters* 232). But such critiques as Ohmann's did little to quiet critics of American schools and their students. Six years after *Newsweek's* "clarion call to literacy," *U.S. News & World Report*, in "Why Johnny Can't Write—and What's Being Done," used the parlance of war to describe the "counterattack" American schools were waging against the literacy crisis. *U.S. News* extolled their "weapons"—writing programs—which, Daniels contends, "taken as a group, reflect not a coherent and sensible national effort to upgrade student writing, but a fragmented, confused, and occasionally regressive collection of mixed-up schemes and tricked-up panaceas" (217–18).

Nevertheless, the United States was set to embark on another crusade for literacy.

CULTURAL VERSUS CRITICAL LITERACY

The "chorus of voices lamenting the decline in standards and foreseeing the end of Western civilization" has not been silenced (Ohmann, *Politics of Letters* 234). If one were to construct a continuum of current responses to the literacy crisis, E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s "Cultural Literacy List" might represent one pole and Paulo Freire's problem-posing critical literacy curriculum the other. Hirsch proposes to solve the literacy crisis, recapture the United States's economic preeminence, and eliminate the underclass by reinstating cultural unity through a shared national vocabulary or "cultural literacy." His cultural literacy list is composed of names, historical events, geographical places, and scientific terms that constitute "cultural literacy," that "middle ground" which "lies *above* the everyday levels of knowledge that everyone possesses and *below* the expert level known only to specialists" (*Cultural* 19). Although Hirsch acknowledges the political and economic side of cultural literacy, he insistently argues that cultural literacy is classless. On the one hand, he asserts that "illiterate and semiliterate Americans are condemned not only to poverty, but also to the powerlessness of incomprehension." Because they do not comprehend political issues, they seldom vote and become distrustful of the system "of which they are supposed to be the masters." Thus, the "civic importance of cultural literacy lies in the fact that true enfranchisement depends upon knowledge, knowledge upon literacy, and literacy upon cultural literacy" (12).

On the other hand, Hirsch counters objections that cultural literacy promotes the culture of the dominant class with the claim that "one of the main uses of a national vocabulary [which he defines as cultural literacy] is to enable effective and harmonious exchange despite personal, cultural and class differences," and he offers the standardization of public dis-

course in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England as an example of the "inherently classless character of cultural literacy" (*Cultural* 104). Just as the literacy campaigns from 1800 to 1870 employed the public schools to overcome the threat that religious and ethnic diversity posed to cultural unity by inculcating common elements of American culture, so too does Hirsch look to the schools to effect "harmonious exchanges" among cultures by the inculcation of cultural literacy. Although he acknowledges the roles of family and church, Hirsch argues that "school is the traditional place for acculturating our children into our national life" because "it is the only institution that is susceptible to public policy control" (110). Hirsch was primarily concerned with secondary education, but he hoped that his list of "What Every Literate American Should Know" would "create a sound education for later education in college" (275).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* represents the opposite end of responses to the literacy crisis. He contrasts his problem-posing education, with its "constant unveiling of reality," with what he calls a "banking concept of education," based on a "mechanistic, static, spatialized view of consciousness" (*Pedagogy* 68, 64). The difference between Freire's liberatory learning pedagogy and Hirsch's cultural literacy scheme is evidenced in Freire's rejection of pedagogies that ignore not only the social phenomenon of illiteracy but social phenomena in general. Unlike Hirsch, Freire argues that "merely teaching men to read and write does not work miracles; if there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them" ("Adult" 401). Moreover, in opposition to Hirsch's concept of a national vocabulary, Freire argues that "acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe—but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context" (404).

Two different but interconnected approaches to Freire's theories can be heard in scholarship in the field of composition studies. One approach has students examine their own

experiences in order to understand how their language use has been shaped by previously unexamined assumptions about class, gender, culture, and especially previous schooling. Once students become aware of these dynamics, they can, in theory at least, become critically literate and see the possibility of change. Thomas J. Fox's study, which I analyze at some length in Chapter 2, is an example of this approach. The other approach attempts to demystify the conventions of academic discourse, ultimately moving students to critical consciousness of the ways groups make knowledge for their own purposes (Herzberg 115).

Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae have advanced this second approach. Their concerns are with basic writers, those "strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them" (Shaughnessy 3). Bizzell claims that their "salient characteristic" is their "'outlandishness'—their appearance to many teachers and to themselves as the students who are most alien in the college community" ("What" 294). What makes these students strangers, Bizzell and Bartholomae argue, is their unfamiliarity with the conversations of academic discourse; in a sense, they need to be acculturated into "academic" literacy. As Bizzell explains, these students

might be better understood in terms of their unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps, with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. ("Cognition" 230)

To make academic discourse and its conventions more familiar to its strangers, Bartholomae suggests a "course of instruction . . . on a sequence of illustrated assignments [that] would allow for successive approximations of academic or 'disciplinary' discourse" (278). Similarly, Rose sees a university education as "an initiation into a variety of powerful ongoing discussions," and argues that underprepared students' initiation into it occurs "only through the repeated

use of a new language in the company of others" (*Lives* 192). But as the literacy crusade enters the last decade of the twentieth century, some compositionists have begun to question this almost Platonic idea of academic discourse (Elbow, "Reflections"), and others have begun to chronicle the "violence" (Stuckey, Gilyard) that may ensue as students attempt to join an academic discourse community (Stuckey). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this study explore class, gender, and cultural dimensions of these concerns.

Bizzell and Bartholomae are among the most influential voices in the field of composition studies, but for all their influence, it is Hirsch's scheme for cultural literacy that has earned the attention of the media and the approbation of high-ranking officials in influential, public education circles. Furthermore, for all the English profession's denigration of Hirsch's cultural literacy scheme, it would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy on the profession of English itself. Bizzell, for example, notes the "unprecedented decision" of the Modern Language Association to devote its 1988 yearbook, *Profession* 88, "not to reprints but to articles invited to address a single theme: the cultural literacy work of Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch" ("Beyond" 665). In addition, Chester Finn (who now heads the National Assessment of Educational Programs) challenged the sixty conferees at the English Coalition Conference: Democracy Through Language (1987) to "catch up with the general public" and come up with a list of fifty to one hundred "core works of literature" that American schools should teach, assuring them that cultural literacy is an educational reform movement that English teachers can trust (Elbow, *What* 16).

One rather predictable effect of such a charge was the conferees' response, reported by Wayne Booth:

Whether we were thinking of graduate students or of first graders, whether we had light teaching loads or heavy, whether we taught honors sections or remedial sections, whether our training was in linguistics, language arts, media studies, or critical theory, we knew that the last thing American educa-

tion needs is one more collection of inert information, a nos-trum to be poured raw into minds not actively engaged in reading, thinking, writing, and talking. Not only did we believe that abstracted lists of terms would not motivate our students to become spontaneous learners; we were sure that they would increase the tendency of too many of our schools to kill whatever spontaneity the children bring when they enter school. (viii–ix)

Another predictable response to cultural literacy was the tenor of the articles published in *Profession 88*: seven of the eight articles condemned Hirsch's (and Bloom's) work on cultural literacy for reasons similar to Booth's.

But this almost universal disaffection of teachers of English for Hirsch and his scheme for cultural literacy belies his influence on the profession of English. Let me explain my contention. Both Bizzell and Booth agree that Hirsch is right when he argues for background knowledge, for "in order for people to share language, they must share knowledge" (Bizzell, "Beyond" 662); Hirsch's "foundational" definition of background knowledge and his scheme for inculcating it into schoolchildren is what bothers most teachers of English. But Bizzell is concerned that such "anti-foundationalist" critics as William Buckley and James Sledd and Andrew Sledd offer "no positive or utopian" alternative to Hirsch's scheme in their responses in *Profession 88*. She fears that in the absence of such alternatives, they "end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural status quo" (667). In other words, by refusing to provide alternate "lists" of their own, if you will, critics of Hirsch's scheme unwittingly contribute to continuing calls from government officials and the "general public" alike for its implementation.

In describing his experience at the English Coalition Conference following Finn's and Hirsch's addresses, Peter Elbow makes much the same point. Trying to provide, in Bizzell's terms, a "utopian" alternative to Finn's demand, Elbow and Robert Scholes proposed a short list of no more than ten works that high school students should have read by the time they graduate from high school. With just ten works, they reasoned, a specific work's inclusion in or exclusion

from the list would not be "such a big deal." But, as Elbow reports, "no one would even nibble at our idea." "Such, perhaps, was the power of Hirsch's list and Finn's invitation. They put a hex—or we let them put a hex—on any possibility of leadership" (*What* 239–40). The refusal of the respondents in *Profession* 88 to provide alternatives to Hirsch's scheme on the grounds that they have no "authority" seems another instance of this hex. In the absence of leadership, calls for implementation of Hirsch's scheme continue, especially for underprepared students. In a recent article in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Donald Lazere, for one, argues for the implementation of Hirsch's cultural literacy because "many black and white students" have not stored up necessary background knowledge and thus find themselves "out of their element in the codes of academic discourse" ("Orality" 93).

LITERACY CRISES: LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

What lessons can be drawn from this short and admittedly selective comparison of literacy crises and campaigns in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? For one, the perception that literacy is in a crisis of never before experienced dimensions is simply inaccurate. To believe otherwise is to fall prey to what Rose calls the "myth of transience," the belief that "if we can just do x or y, the problem [of illiteracy] will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work" ("Language" 355). Worse, such a belief obscures the failure of those remedies that were applied in the past and encourages application of similar remedies to the present. Just as the features of writing that dismayed Harvard president Eliot in 1871—"bad spelling," "ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation"—were surface features to be remedied by college-level composition courses introduced in 1872, so, too, today's remedies for *no shared background* place a similar importance on the surface of things, in this case on the surface bits of knowledge and information which constitute a national vocabulary. Although Hirsch insists that "com-